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CD Review by Colin Clarke

RAMI LEVIN *Asas*.¹ *Saudade*.² *Three Songs*.³ *Reflections of Reflections*.⁴ *Caprichosa*.⁵ *Linguas Fraternas*.⁶ *Four English Songs*.⁷ • 1, 3, 6 Kuang-Hao Huang (pn); ¹ Mathias Tacke (vn); ⁶ Anthony Devroye (va); ^{5, 7} Eugenia Moliner (fl); ¹ Barbara Drapcho (cl); ^{5, 7} Lillian Lau (hp); ^{2, 7} Denis Azabajic (gtr); ^{3, 7} Alisa Jordheim (sop); ⁴ Qnt Attacca • ACIS 53875 (69:07 🎧)

Only a couple of Rami Levin’s pieces have previously made it to the *Fanfare* Archive, so it is good to see a whole disc. In *Fanfare* 21:5, a piece called *A New Leaf*, on a Koch disc titled *Dialogues with my Shadow* and featuring clarinetist John Bruce Yeh, sadly failed to impress my colleague Paul Rapoport. Rami’s *How Like the Sea* appeared on an Albany disc titled *Every Tiny Thing* (*Fanfare* 44:2), performed by soprano Michelle Murray Fierstek. My previous exposure to Levin’s music, however, has been through her 2019 viola and piano piece *Linguas Fraternas* on a disc called *Brazilian Women Composers*, performed by Rafaell Altino and Ana Lúcia Altino Garcia (strong music with a defined rhythmic profile), plus her 2002 *Passages* for piano, performed by the excellent pianist Konstantin Lifschitz on a North-South disc titled simply *Moods*.

But this is the first disc to come my way for full-on *Fanfare* consideration. The title *Asas* means “wings” and the piece explores the calls of two birds in two movements: “Bem-te-vi” (the Brazilian term for the Great Kiskadee, also known as pitogue in Paraguay) and the Sabiá (the rufous-bellied thrush, the state bird of São Paulo since 1986 and the national bird of Brazil since 2002). The movements are fairly extended (between four and five minutes each) and include a real sense of humor and lightness. While the first movement concentrates on one bird, the second foregrounds its titular avian as one of many. Barbara Drapcho is an expressive clarinetist, possessed of a fine tone; Mathias Tacke and Kuang-Hao Huang are excellent colleagues. The piece was premiered in 2015 by Trio Paineiras, who also recorded it for the A Casa Discos label. Their way with the first movement is slower, more laid-back than the current performers. I prefer the increased tightness of the present Acis account; the second movement is similarly over-decadent in the earlier recording. Also, the A Casa Discos recording is rather close. The pianist on the A Casa Discos recording is Marina Spoladore.

I previously enjoyed Denis Azabajic’s guitar playing on a disc of music by Laurie Altman (*Fanfare* 41:1). Levin’s 2017 piece *Saudade* (Longing) was written for the composer’s husband, Arthur Maciel. It succeeds as it sets up an expectation of a laid-back piece of longing and then subverts rhythmic expectations effectively.

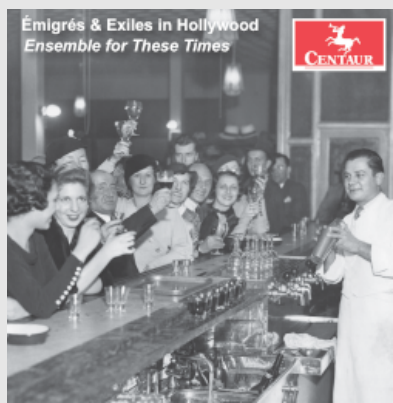
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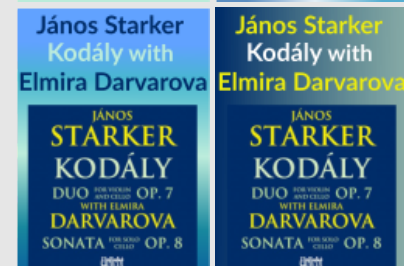
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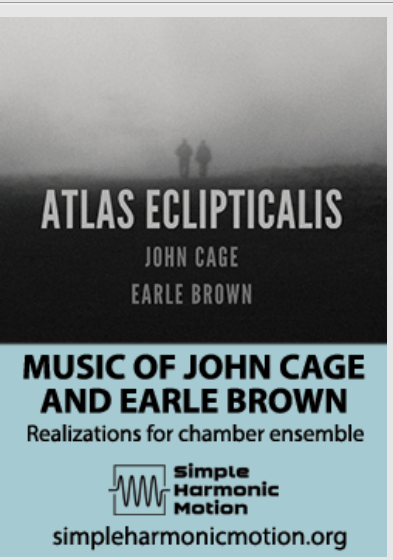
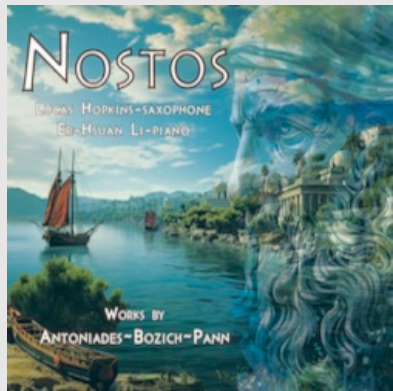
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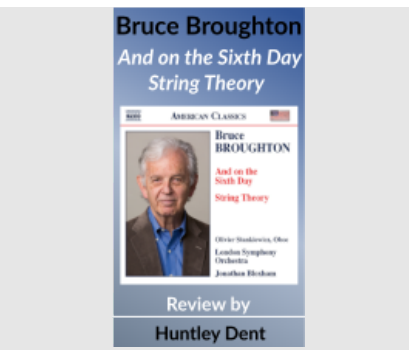


Huang is joined by soprano Alisa Jordheim in the *Three Songs* (“Três Canções”) of 2014. Commissioned by Brazilian soprano Veruschka Mainhard, the texts are by Mainhard’s daughter, Laura Mainhard Carvalho, who was all of seven years old at the time. Veruschka Mainhard died in March 2024, and this recording is touchingly dedicated to her memory. Translated texts are included with the release. The first song, “The Playful Monkeys,” has a slightly bluesy slant to go with a Brazilian base. The revelation is the soprano herself, Alisa Jordheim, who has a simply glorious voice: so firm of pitch, so pure of tone, with not a touch of unnecessary vibrato. There is wit here, too, including some Clementi exercise-like sparring between singer and piano. The first song is a story of the animals having a party, and imitating humans (among other acts of frolicking). The second, “The Little Boat,” which includes a literal sea change within its text (and which is reflected in Levin’s music), is delivered with a sense of palpable freedom: Jordheim’s voice positively flies (like a bird, one might suggest) in the melismas. Finally, in “Pigs,” piggies play in the mud instead of going to market. Both Jordheim and pianist Kwang-Hao Wang deliver wonderful staccato. It is important to acknowledge that for all their lightness, these songs are carefully considered compositions.

The Quintet Attacca comprises Jennifer Clippert, flute; Erica Anderson, oboe; Barbara Drapcho, clarinet; Colin Anderson, bassoon; and Jeremiah Frederick, bassoon. Commissioned by this group for a concert titled “Reflections of Paris,” Levin’s *Reflections of Reflections* is also an homage to a group called OuLiPo, a collective of writers that numbers among its members the composer’s son. The most famous product of OuLiPo is probably a 300-page novel by Georges Perec that does not contain the letter “e.” The composer’s restraint here is inspired by the palindromic date 11/11/11 and so is based on the number 11: It is cast in 11/8 time, with 11 sections; each section uses the total chromatic minus one (so, 11 notes; the only note omitted is “F,” for “France”). This is some of the finest wind ensemble playing I have heard: The sound is blended yet not for a second anonymous, and the players seem completely inside Levin’s score.

Scored for flute and harp, the 2007 piece *Caprichosa* almost acts as an interlude. Timbrally soft, it has an easy flow. The fairly close recording works well here.

I previously mentioned *Linguas Fraternas* (2019) in its performance by Rafaell Altino and Ana Lúcia Altino Garcia. The piece appears here also. It was actually commissioned by Rafaell Altino, and prompted by thoughts about language, accents, how languages might just sound to non-speakers, and juxtaposed languages. The first movement, *Leste-Oeste* (East-West), was the first result of these ponderings, and here the viola uses tropes from Afghani music (one of Levin’s language pupils as a teacher of English as a foreign language was an Afghan who spoke almost no English) against the more bluesy piano (representing America). The use of drone and glissandos in the viola part is very effective. There is actually more focus to the pizzicato opening in the new recording by Anthony Devroye, and I find Huang more bluesy, with the result that the two strata are more clearly



articulated (and therefore the friction between them is keener). This is underlined by Acis' more focused recording; the extra reverberation for the Altinos (released on Azul Music) lessens the impact somewhat. The second movement, *Norte-Sul* (North-South), takes the idea of two related but distinct ways of saying the same thing, which translates into rhythmic regroupings of the same succession of pitches. There are some lovely moments of planned disjunction here; Levin conveys exactly her aim perfectly. The new recording is substantially faster than the Altino one, and this emphasizes the sense of rhythmic play; it is more a celebration of differences than a forensic examination of them.

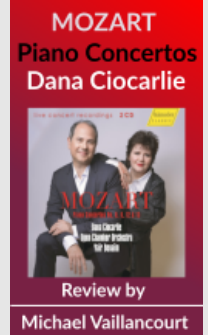
Finally, there comes the *Four English Songs* of 1997 for soprano, flute, harp, and guitar. Intended as a companion to Stravinsky's *Quatre chants russes* (Four Russian Songs, for the same combination), Levin takes four English nursery rhymes and sets them with lightness but also, as with the second, "Apple Pie," with some profundity. And if Alisa Jordheim's faultless way with phrasing (I haven't heard a legato as smooth as this since Jessye Norman) doesn't pull you in, I don't know what will. The flute and harp sections seem to harken back, in terms of the performed program, to *Caprichosa* (actually composed a decade later). The setting of "Hey diddle diddle" is held within a more adult wrapping. The longest setting is "The House that Jack Built," which continues (to a lesser extent) this distancing/enhancing via a dissonant vernacular that to my ears aligns Levin's pieces closer to Berio's *Folksongs* than to the stated Stravinsky. (The *Quatre chants russes* always sound close to *Les noces* to me, and Levin's mode of communication is somewhat removed from that.)

Although born in Brooklyn (in 1954), Levin has lived in Brazil, and indeed was resident there for the composition of five of these pieces. This is a most appealing disc, notable for the discovery of Alisa Jordheim as much as for Levin's music.
Colin Clarke

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By Joel Flegler

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