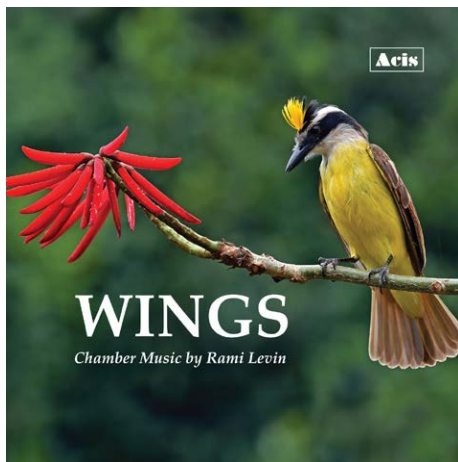


RECORDING REVIEWS



*Wings: Chamber Music by Rami Levin*

**Rami Levin: *Wings: Chamber Music by Rami Levin***

Barbara Drapcho, clarinet; Mathias Tacke, violin; Anthony Devroye, viola; Kuang-Hao Huang, piano; Denis Azabagić, guitar; Alisa Jordheim, soprano; Jennifer Clippert, flute; Erica Anderson, oboe; Collin Anderson, bassoon; Jeremiah Frederick, horn; Eugenia Molinar, flute; Lillian Lau, harp. Acis APL53875 (2024)

DEON NIELSEN PRICE

*Wings* is an enticing album of well-composed, exuberant chamber works which provided this listener with multiple enjoyable hearings. The album is well-integrated with nearly all of the impeccable artists performing in at least two of the ensembles that range from solo to duo, trio, quartet, and quintet. Some of the tracks have a Brazilian energy and flavor, informed by Levin's semester at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) in Brazil as a Fulbright award recipient, and her subsequent residence there from 2010 to 2017 as a Portuguese-speaking teacher and accomplished composer. The music exudes the composer's own confident, individual compositional style and craft, as well as her readiness to absorb and assimilate the spirit of her surroundings or of a text she sets to music.

The first work, *Asas (Wings)* for clarinet, violin and piano explores the calls of two birds common in Brazil. The first

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movement is inspired by the call of a bem-te-vi (great kiskadee in English), which the composer heard constantly singing outside her window while she was composing the movement. Levin writes in the program notes: "...the bird almost seemed to be monitoring my progress, constantly reminding me of its presence. Once the piece was finished the bird vanished, as if to say 'my work here is done.'" Indeed, the perky long-short-long rhythm of a mi re do motif in all its assorted keys, instrumental colors, and registers permeates the entire movement in a delightful and humorous fashion. The image of the yellow-breasted *bem-te-vi*, with its yellow crown and black and white striped head and wings, makes a stunning cover for the album. The composer describes the second movement, *Sabiá* (Track 2) as "...a depiction of many birds chirping at once with the *sabiá* (rufous-bellied thrush in English) emerging as a dominant voice..." The fidelity is superb throughout the album, which was recorded in 2023 at the Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago. I found, however, that, on tracks 1 and 2, the violin lacks the same presence as the clarinet and the piano.

Composed for solo guitar and dedicated to Levin's husband, *Saudade* creates its feelings of longing and nostalgia through graceful arpeggios in A minor from which a emerges. This culminates in punctuated quartal chords that lead to the varied return of the arpeggio pattern in C# Minor and a closing phrase on a low E-string pedal point with a tender final extended quartal chord rolled in pianissimo.

*Três Canções* (Three Songs) (2014) was commissioned by Brazilian soprano Veruschka Mainhard, who passed

away suddenly in March 2024. Levin has dedicated this recording to her memory. The texts, with titles *Os Macacos Brincalhões* (The Playful Monkeys), *O Pequeno Barco* (The Little Boat), and *Porcos* (Pigs), were penned by Mainhard's daughter, Laura Mainhard Carvalho, who was seven years old at the time. Set for soprano and piano, the musical styles, as well as the clear and authoritative vocal renditions, are true to the character of each imaginative story, such as the party planned by the monkeys to which all the animals were invited, and the five pigs, who left one by one until the last pig went to sleep. As a composer of art songs and a collaborative performer of them, I appreciate the fact that the complete texts in both Portuguese and English are included in the printed program.

Perhaps the most fascinating work on the album is *Reflections on Reflections (11.11.11) for Wind Quintet* (2011). Quintet Attacca, who recorded it for this album, had commissioned the work for a concert titled "Reflections of Paris." The composer has a connection to Paris through her son, Daniel, who lives there and works with the OuLiPo, a group of writers who create constraint-based literature. He was the second American ever to be elected a member of the group in 2009. Her piece pays homage to the OuLiPo and the idea of constraint. Levin is fond of palindromes and was particularly delighted by the once-in-a-lifetime occurrence in 2011 of the date 11/11/11. She writes, "The piece has eleven sections, each containing eleven measures, and is in 11/8 meter. Each section uses eleven of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale; the missing pitches begin with C in the first section and follow the circle of fifths in each subsequent section.

The only pitch never eliminated is F, for France. The metronome marking is eighth note=275, a multiple of eleven. By sheer chance (?) the score is eleven pages long." The composite meter, consisting of three groups of three eighth notes and one duplet to total 11 eighths in each measure, occur in varied patterns. Levin's melodic lines are often intervallic, and especially so in this lively, mostly polyphonic work. *Caprichosa* (Capricious) (2007) for flute and harp features a joyful angular melody and sprightly irregular meter in 5/8.

The first movement of *Linguas Fraternas* (Fraternal Languages) (2019), "Leste-Oueste" (East-West), commands our attention with its juxtaposition of two musical languages: the drones and glissandi of Afghani music played on the viola while the piano plays in an American blues style. Gradually the styles mix and merge into a rich blend. The second movement, "Norte-Sul"

(North-South), musically represents different ways of saying the same thing. Levin explores the idea through rhythm and musical accents. For example, we hear a measure of six eighth notes grouped 3+3 in the viola while the piano plays the same six eighths grouped 2+2+2. The composer is attempting to musically express her own life experience of living in a foreign country and speaking the new language, but with the accent of her native tongue.

*Four English Songs* for soprano, flute, harp, and guitar date from 1997, and were a commission from Duo Atipico, who wanted a companion piece to perform with Igor Stravinsky's *Four Russian Songs*, which are settings for soprano, flute, harp, and guitar of Russian nursery rhymes. In keeping with the theme of nursery rhymes, the Four English Songs are "Sixpence," "Apple Pie," "Hey, Diddle Diddle," and "The House That Jack Built." The expert interweaving of flute, harp, guitar, and voice effectively creates

the programmatic characterization for each nursery rhyme. All of the artists in the quartet are excellent. The soprano deserves special mention because of her lovely, unwavering voice, her phrasing, and her clear diction as she projects through to the end of the last syllable in every phrase.

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Deon Nielsen Price, D.M.A., is a commissioned composer, conductor, pianist, author, and founding member and former President of IAWM and of NACUSA. During an event-filled first month of 2025, her "War Ends, Song Endures" for Flute and Piano was performed at Carnegie Hall in New York City; "Becoming Screenland" for Clarinet and String Quartet was premiered in Scarborough Toronto, Canada; "Kizuna" (Empathy, Friendship) for saxophone and chamber orchestra was premiered at The Clark Center for Performing Arts in Arroyo Grande, California; and "Agápe kai Chará" (Love and Joy) was recorded by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in Glasgow, Scotland. "War Ends, Song Endures" is on a Navona digital release, *In the Company of Music*, that was awarded a Bronze Medal in the 2024 Global Music Awards. Her *Oratorio CHRISTUS*, on the Cambria label, is soon to be released by NAXOS. Her books, videos, sheet music, scores, and albums are catalogued and available at <https://culvercrest.com/>.

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