

# THE CLARINET

March 2004

## CD Reviews

By Michele Gingras

**Magical Place of My Dreams.** Richard Nunemaker, clarinet and bass clarinet; with Christie Vohs, clarinet and bass clarinet; Ray Dillard, percussion; Janice Misurell-Mitchell, flute, alto flute and voice. John Eaton: *Concert Music*; Jody Rockmaker: *Magical Place of My Dreams*; Richard Nunemaker/Ray Dillard: *Improvisation IV*; Janice Misurell-Mitchell: *Profaning the Sacred*; Daniel Kramlich: *For 2 Bass Clarinets*; Steve Reich: *New York Counterpoint*. ARIZONA UNIVERSITY RECORDINGS AUR CD 3118. Total time 64:03. (available from Arizona University Recordings, The Pine Grove Studios, 2961 N. Avenida De La Colina. Tuscon, AZ 85749 / Web site: [www.AURec.com](http://www.AURec.com))

Experimental music enthusiasts are well served with this compilation of historically important contemporary repertoire from the 1960s, mixed in with more recent experimental compositions, including one noticeable gem by Jody Rockmaker with the title track *Magical Place of My Dreams*, as well as a "new" old favorite, *New York Counterpoint* by Steve Reich.

Richard Nunemaker has been clarinetist, bass clarinetist, and saxophonist with the Houston Symphony since 1967. As soloist with the Houston Symphony, he has given the orchestra's premieres of works by Ingolf Dahl, Pierre-Max Dubois, Alexander Glazunov and Heitor Villa-Lobos. In addition, he is very active in both jazz and new music and is a member and president of Houston Composers' Alliance (Music by Living American/Houston composers). Nunemaker is a founding member of Airmail Special, a quartet of Houston musicians who perform original material for student and family concerts in the Houston area. During its 12-year existence, the ensemble has presented approximately 250 live performances in the greater Houston area schools. Nunemaker is a graduate of the State University of New York at Fredonia and the University of Louisville.

This is Nunemaker's third new music recording in recent years. He previously recorded **Golden Petals and Multiplicities**, both including music from composers featured on this CD, Janice Misurell-Mitchell and Jody Rockmaker. Like his earlier recordings, **Magical Place of My Dreams** features Nunemaker's remarkable love and ability for performing new music and it includes music he commissioned.

John Eaton was called "The most interesting opera composer writing in America today" by Andrew Porter in *The London Financial Times*. Through his work in a variety of mediums, he has received international recognition as a composer and performer of electronic and microtonal music. Eaton is presently Professor of Composition (retired) at the University of Chicago. His *Concert Music* for solo clarinet was composed for contemporary clarinet pioneer William O. Smith, and must have been considered an extremely daring piece in 1960. Historically, it certainly deserved the top extended techniques pecking order spot for many years. By today's standards, however, it simply contains an array of contemporary techniques brilliantly executed by Nunemaker. It is nice to see a rarely performed piece emerging back from quasi oblivion.

On the other hand, the title track *Magical Place of My Dreams* for two clarinets by Jody Rockmaker (1998) deserves to claim its place as the new history-making composition that marked the clarinet duet repertoire. What a clever piece for an often-challenging combination. Rockmaker manages to intertwine both clarinet sounds in a wonderfully skillful, almost ground breaking way. At times, it is as if the clarinet sounds become synthesized and virtually imitate electronic sounds. All this is done with beautifully played melodies and perfectly blended dialogue by Nunemaker and his former student, Christie Vohs.

Clarinetist Christie Vohs is an active orchestral and chamber musician in the greater Chicago area, and is currently the artistic director for Mostly Music at Northwestern Illinois University, and a presenter of chamber music concerts and educational outreach programs in the Chicago area. She earned her music degrees from the University of Houston and DePaul University. Her teachers also include Larry Combs and Gregory Smith. She is Lecturer of Clarinet at Northwestern Illinois University.

*Improvisation IV* for bass clarinet and percussion (1997) is composed and performed by Nunemaker and Ray Dillard. The title, *Improvisation IV*, definitely holds true. This recorded version is live in front of an audience, and both performers kept secret which instruments they would play on stage before the concert, or even what music they would perform (they eventually settled on bass clarinet and percussion, including piano). The number "IV" reflects that this is their fourth collaboration as musicians. The audience appears to be delighted and amused by the idea, although the audience sounds are a little distracting at first. I'm guessing that visuals were also part of the

overall effect, and this makes me wish I had attended the performance. The music seems ideal for a concert venture, but as a recording, I found it beyond my comfort level initially. After I read the record jacket, however, I became much more curious and glued to the headphones.

Janice Misurell-Mitchell's *Profaning the Sacred* for clarinet/bass clarinet, flute/ alto flute/voice (2000) is, to say the least, an experimental piece. Written at the request of Nunemaker, and according to the composer, the work is oriented around the ideas of the sacred as profane, and vice versa. Misurell-Mitchell performs the flute/alto flute/ voice part, and she does so quite ingeniously; she speaks through her flute while playing, and the words are perfectly recognizable, making the effect reminiscent of synthesized voice sounds one may have heard in popular or commercial music. Nunemaker's experience in both legit and jazz genres serves him well throughout the piece. Often times both parts seem to be randomly exchanging ideas, although multiple listenings prove otherwise. Besides this, I must confess, I found the piece a little out of my reach, although experimental music fans may very well feel compelled to perform it at their next event.

*For 2 Bass Clarinets* (1999) by Daniel Kramlich was commissioned by Nunemaker for a series of performances throughout the United States in 1999, as well as for this recording. The work involves a number of extended techniques such as pitch slurring and multiphonics, and both performers (Nunemaker and Vohs) again blend perfectly well together. The work has interesting and gorgeous, however brief, melodic points between improvisatory sections.

*New York Counterpoint* by Steve Reich has to be my favorite contemporary piece for clarinet. Published in 1985, I still remember standing in awe after listening to it for the very first time. The work is written for 11 clarinets, including three bass clarinets. Ten clarinet parts are recorded by the soloist who then performs the eleventh part "live" with the recording, although it can also be performed by a group of 11 performers. I find that performing this piece with a recording is very exciting both for the player and the audience. Reich wrote the piece in three continuous movements, each more riveting than the other. He writes in his signature Minimalist style, with a climax that suddenly comes to an end, leaving the listener breathless. Melodies go on and on, and suddenly change to another in a seamless and beautiful fashion. Paul English, sound producer extraordinaire, spent four days working with Nunemaker to layer the 11 tracks. Both did a

superb job, which makes this rendition of *New York Counterpoint* particularly distinctive.

Although at first I wouldn't label this CD as a "multi-spinner" candidate, I do recommend its acquisition for the little but fantastic treasure it contains: Rockmaker's *Magical Place of My Dreams*, as well as the impeccable and tight *New York Counterpoint*. This recording is yet one more testimony to Nunemaker's important contribution to new music. Indeed, he has commissioned more than 25 composers for more than 50 original works or arrangements. Richard Nunemaker is a stellar performer, and clever composers already know to actively seek him to put their new clarinet music to life.