

## CD Reviews

### The New Music Connoisseur

Barry L. Cohen

### Winds Dancing Across the Fields

BLC ©2006

**'RICHARD NUNEMAKER: THE LOUISVILLE PROJECT.'** Jody Rockmaker: *Rothko Landscapes* (2000) λ Marc Satterwhite: *Clarinet Quintet* (2002); *Las Viudas de Calama* (2001) λ M. William Karlins: *Just a Line from Chameleon* (2001); *Improvisation on "Lines Where Beauty Lingers."* (2002) λ Meira M. Warshauer: *Shevet Achim* (2001). Mr. Nunemaker, B♭ and bass clarinets; members, Louisville [wind] quartet; guest artists. Arizona University Recordings, AUR CD 3127. (TT=not given)

A challenge to those who posit that liner notes are not needed to understand new music: don't try that with this CD! How can you even begin to judge the opening work of Jody Rockmaker until you are made aware that its seemingly mysterious murmurs and sudden multiphonic shrieks have a visual theme underlying the piece and a commissioner's special intentions in terms of its scoring? Maybe the latter fact will prove merely incidental to the listener, but the reference to paintings by a major American painter has to arouse the imagination. There is a long tradition behind this creative choice, encompassing the likes of Granados (Goya)

and Mussorgsky (Hartmann) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Gunther Schuller (Klee), Einjuhani Rautavaara (Van Gogh), Morton Feldman (Pollock), Pink Floyd (Dali) and surely many others in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Occasionally, the individual phenomenon of synaesthesia (the mental appearance of colors produced when hearing specific musical tones) asserts itself, leaving the non-participant in the dark, so to speak. But for the most part composers have successfully created works with musical contours out of their impressions of an inherently static art form. So perhaps in that sense Mr. Rockmaker's landscapes are unsuccessfully drawn. On the other hand, if his intention was simply the evocation of a mood, that is perfectly valid. Unfortunately, we confess an ignorance of these paintings, which disqualifies us from making a reasoned judgment.

Except for Mr. Satterwhite's *Clarinet Quintet*, the remaining selections on this program are also inspired by cross-aesthetic ideas. But even the quintet, after two movements with dynamically contrasting sections, becomes in the end an elegiac statement with an emotionally rich and fully melodic part for each instrument, especially the bass clarinet, leaving one to wonder whom the composer might have had in mind. He does not say.

The quintet is an ambitious 19-minute work. There is a struggle in the first movement between polite and brash elements that remains unresolved. The second movement is deli-

cate and scherzo-like. We think the third movement ends this work satisfyingly, and that Mr. Satterwhite wisely chose not to go on to a previously planned fourth movement. This decision brings to mind Schubert's two-movement "Unfinished Symphony," which many critics consider one of the most complete works ever written.

*The Widows of Calama* is based on a poem by Marjorie Agosin. From the excerpts quoted and translated into English, we sense it is a touching and perhaps painfully beautiful statement dedicated to the women whose husbands were taken from them ("disappeared") to be slaughtered in the desert by a cruel Chilean dictator. The stanza that grabbed us by the throat is this:

The widows danced with a feather  
of the silent sand  
That is what the desert widows did  
They made paper flowers  
To fill the empty shoes  
One of them gave me the hand of  
a dead child  
And as I took it, it changed  
Into a flower of the wind.

The dance she refers to is the *cueca sola*, which these widows are said to perform in their anguish in the town's central square as they cry out for justice. It is the major section of this near-ten-minute work. The dance is designed as a *valse triste*, and it is terrifyingly grotesque music which is not at all in three-quarter time. When it cannot be played out any longer, the pleading, the awful

distress of the dance seems to subside and the dance simply comes to an end. Injustice has prevailed.

We have criticized composers before for venturing into territory that should not be trespassed, i.e., the very personal ideas expressed in poetry whose vocal music is already there. But to underline the sentiments of poetry with instrumental music is quite another matter, and we can see that Mr. Satterwhite was truly moved to write such music. It most powerfully commemorates a horror and the poetic chronicling of that horror, and we applaud him for it.

There is another work on this disc that grows out of strong and timely political roots. It follows the "Widows" and ends the CD. *Shevet Achim*, by Meira Warshauer, is translated from the Hebrew as "Brothers Dwell" and implies an ironic observation which the composer has seized on. It is that Israelis and Palestinians are descendants of Isaac and Ishmael respectively, the sons of Abraham, the patriarch of both Judaism and Islam. And she backs that up with the words of Psalm 133: "May these brothers and sisters, these two peoples, soon dwell together in harmony and the unity of peace." The music follows that notion faithfully, the two bass clarinets at first in a serious musical confrontation, brandishing their weapons – multiphonics, quarter-tones, flutter-tonguing, tremolos, extreme register leaps, raspberries that seem to shout profanities – before finding the overtones in the low end [sic] of the instru-

ment so that the struggle comes to an end and the music transcends into a harmonious mode. Ah, were it so that music could resolve our political dissonances.

The titles of the two compositions by Mr. Karlins are actually drawn from other musical compositions of his. *Just a line from Chameleon* derives from a piece called *Chameleon* by Karlins. It has two contrasting sections, one more or less slow and long lined, the other much more staccato and rhythmic. The music has a few nice touches.

We found his other piece far more interesting, however. The "Improv" starts out with music that has no vibrato or rubato, a kind of blah prelude to the jazzier section to come. Although the composer makes it clear he wants everything to be played as written, he also throws in a sort of mixed signal, that the player is free to stylize his passages. With the music getting very rhythmically quirky this gives Mr. Nunemaker an opportunity to really shine and then some. This is not solo music for someone seated comfortably on a bandshell; this is music for a tightrope artist, for a world-class player who knows only too well that the slightest slip will send him crashing down into ignominy. None of that! Nunemaker's bass clarinet playing here is simply breathtaking.

And so was his playing elsewhere, as well as that of all the musicians. We should cite the on-target piano performance of Krista Wallace-Boaz in "Widows," the unwavering partnership between Nunemaker and

Timothy Zavadil in the Warshauer piece, and the playing of the Louisville Quartet in the *Clarinet Quintet*, especially in those final soft solo turns.

It is a worthy project that Mr. Nunemaker has undertaken with his longtime associate Paul English and should be recognized by every devotee of contemporary American music as such. Some will no doubt contend that documents like the Louisville Project come much too late in the game, that the musical elements and styles used here are now passé. But wasn't it Beethoven who brought Classicism to its highest art? Weren't the Romantics pretty much wrapped up in themselves until Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler and the Gurrelieder of Schoenberg brought the movement to its ultimate lofty state? If they say it's time to move on we may agree. But move onto what? We happen to believe that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century dodecaphony, atonality, dissonance, multiphonics and those other modern practices were not the problem at all but rather how they were misused. Listening to this disc should convince that those approaches have been resurrected to great effect, and we heartily recommend this CD.