

Sorting Them Out

The Clarinet

The New Music Connoisseur

Barry L. Cohen

RICHARD NUNEMAKER

GOLDEN PETALS, Music of Stravinsky, Misurell-Mitchell, English, McKinley, Shaw, MMC 2005

‘MULTIPLICITIES’, Music of Rockmaker, Colson, Lennon, Lavenda, Red Mark CD 9213.

... "Brilliant, technically amazing, and fearless as well.

“Nunemaker: ‘Vibrant and Alive’”

Richard Nunemaker is a member of the Houston Symphony, a top-rated solo performer on clarinet, bass clarinet, and sax, and a musician with lots of premieres and commissions to his credit. Like many a single-reedist, he explores the jazz lit unashamedly and is willing to share that fondness with his CD audience.

The album ‘Golden Petals’ offers five compositions so different from each other in style and substance the wonder is their juxtaposition makes any sense at all. And, although, we’ll accept only one of the selections as bona fide serious new music, the whole album is refreshing just for that alone.... The title piece (date 1985) is another one of McKinley’s no-holds barred essays in tension and release, a 22-minute work for bass clarinet, saxophone and percussion that some will find absorbing, others painful—that’s McKinley. On another level, his status as the brains behind MMC Records once again assures his being the star of the show, at least the compositional one.

...The arrangement of the Shaw (Clarinet Concerto) by Newton Wayland, on the other hand, lets the sunlight of strings into the big band mix and gives the work some added class.

Though we should really save the sax for a more appropriate survey, we’ll mention that the text for Alone Together is by William Bolitho Ryall, a South African. It’s an homage to the instrument that sounds sincere if a bit corny, helped a lot by the smooth and polished narration of Dr. Chris Steele. Also noteworthy, besides Nunemaker’s precise, yet always energetic playing (often when time seems to be standing still), is the nimble work (jazz and arco) of jazz bassist Peter Herbert, especially in the McKinley, and the all-around fine effort of the Pierrot Plus Ensemble, associated with Rice University.

If ‘Golden Petals’ shows off Nunemaker’s versatility, his ‘Multiplicities’ album focuses on his impressive virtuosity. The disc also seems more serious in intent, all of the compositions, for good or bad, emerging from abstract ideas with, perhaps, one exception—John Anthony Lennon’s Spiderdance of 1995, a 5 1/2-minute piece for clarinet

and piano (Scott Holshouser). Mr. Lennon offers no comments on the composition other than this wry verse.

the spider laughs
the spider dances
the spider stalk
with only seven legs

Thus what we get is a happy, but quirky, jerky little dance in a mostly septimal (or triple-square, triple-square, etc.) meter.

We find the title selection, by Jody Rockmaker, hard to grasp in two or three hearings. It begins with spaced, clearly audible morsels for the soloist — swells, brief motives using techniques like flutter-tonguing, multiphonics, etc.—that are later expanded into longer riff-like cadenzas. But much of it contains plumbings in the lower register that are not fathomable to these faltering ears and are heard as virtual rests. We're all for experimentation, but before making that compositional plunge composers ought to ask themselves more often "why?"

David Colson's Dragon Music is a multi-stylistic sextet for clarinet, piano (Sylvie Beaudette) and four percussionists (Jay Harper, Kemoki Bunting, Brian Fruechtenicht and Scott Cummings). There are several exciting passages for all six forces that come out of jazz, Latin music and rock, but they last only briefly so that the clarinetist can shine in a variety of moods. The work ends on a strangely quiescent note. Mr. Colson leads the forces.

Most ambitious is Richard Lavenda's 33-minute Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet (1997). With so many chamber forms now long fossilized, it is a wonder this combination, going back to Mozart, has endured over the centuries. Don't expect Mr. Lavenda's opus to sound like Mozart; the underlying spirit, however, is there — the sense of apartness and togetherness, the exploring of timbral possibility, the moodiness within the more or less disciplined structure. Typically, it is in three movements with the middle "Serenade" a bit freer than the outer two (marked "Blaze" and "Dynamo"), but also excursive of the push and pull character of this combo, Mr. Nunemaker is beautifully supported by the T'ang Quartet.

Overall rating:...Mr. Nunemaker's credentials are firm and his musicianship quite alive and often daring...