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OCTOBER 01, 2020

(+++) IN SEARCH OF THE NEW

Music for Viola and Piano from Chile—works by Rafael Díaz, Carlos Botto, Federico Heinlein, David Cortés, Juan Orrego-Salas, and Carlos Guastavino. Georgina Isabel Rossi, viola; Silvie Cheng, piano. New Focus Recordings. \$16.99.

Richard Carrick: Chamber Music. New Focus Recordings. \$16.99.

Max Richter: Voices. Decca. \$19.98 (2 CDs).

Here I Stand and other vocal music. iSing Silicon Valley. Innova. \$15.

Social consciousness, international focus, a rethinking of what music is and what it means and how it is made - these and more are the ingredients of new recordings that aim to explore our current troubled times while giving listeners chances to hear sounds, both unconventional and traditional, produced in ways intended to evoke a strong emotional and/or intellectual response. These approaches represent a kind of new focus in music, which makes it appropriate for New Focus Recordings to be the name of a primary provider of discs of this type. World première recordings of Chilean chamber music are the specific focus of a CD featuring violist Georgina Isabel Rossi and pianist Silvie Cheng. The two works on the disc by Rafael Díaz neatly encapsulate two elements of contemporary seekings after new forms of meaning and expression. *Will There Be Someone Whose Hands Can Sustain This Falling?* (that is the English translation of the title) is for solo but amplified viola and is based on prayer-songs of indigenous Andean people. It sounds, however, like a great deal of modern music in the way it works against the basic tonal qualities for which the viola is designed and known - its greater warmth and resonance compared with the violin - and extends the instrument's sound into regions in which it is not fully comfortable, no matter how well-played. This is quite intentional on Díaz's part, because in his other piece here, *In the Depths of My Distance Your House Emerges* (again, the English translation of the title), he skillfully uses the viola's natural tonal beauty to good purpose, and juxtaposes it with the piano in ways both effective and moving. This work is intended as a throwback - a sound-image of an old memory of walking to school - so its more-old-fashioned aural quality is surely deliberate. And it comes across better in its six minutes than does the amplified-violin work at almost twice that length. Carlos Botto's *Fantasia, Op. 15*, also for viola and piano, is more modern-sounding in its treatment of the viola and in its many stylistic, rhythmic and tempo changes. Still another viola-and-piano

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piece, *Dúo “Do not go gentle”* by Federico Heinlein, is determinedly dissonant and difficult to grasp structurally or emotionally - with the result that it sounds like a great deal of contemporary music created more for the composer’s benefit than for that of the audience. Also here is *Tololo* for viola and string orchestra, by David Cortés as arranged by Miguel Fariás. This is a work intended to reflect specific external, geographical sounds and landscapes but coming across - like Díaz’s amplified-violin work - mostly as an exercise in sonic combinations without apparent reference to anything in particular. The only multi-movement piece here is *Mobili, Op. 63*, for viola and piano, by Juan Orrego-Salas. It strikes a better balance between overtly modernistic sound and the inherent warmth of the viola, allowing some of the more-discordant material to be handled by the piano instead of the stringed instrument. Singing qualities keep appearing in the first movement, “Flessibile,” and are quite absent in the second, the scherzo-like “Discontinuo.” The third and longest movement, “Ricorrente,” is slow-paced, mostly quiet, and pays homage to the concept of lyricism without ever quite producing any overtly lyrical thematic material. The finale, “Perpetuo,” is the sort of *perpetuum mobile* implied by its title, the viola here largely disjointed-sounding while the piano perpetuates a degree of continuity beneath it. The disc concludes with *El Sampedrino* by Carlos Guastavino, as arranged for viola and piano by Kim Kashkashian and Robert Levin, and this is a surprisingly effective conclusion in its warmth, beauty and moderate pace. It is a gently insistent reminder that no matter what today’s composers may choose to explore sonically, the inherent qualities of an instrument such as the viola are ultimately more involving than any extension or alteration to which the instrument may be subjected.

If all the composers on the Rossi/Cheng disc draw inspiration, one way or another, from Chile, another New Focus Recordings CD works in the opposite way, with a single composer pulling inspiration from multiple sources and using a wide variety of instruments to communicate his explorations. There is no doubting the cleverness of Richard Carrick’s chamber works on this disc, but being clever does not equate to being communicative: a lot of the music is of the “look how interesting this is” variety, calling attention to itself through approach or instrumental combination but not offering enough substantive content (in emotional or pure-musical terms) to repay multiple hearings. *La touche sonore sous l’eau* for piano is vaguely French Impressionistic in sound. The violin duos *Phosphène* and *Natural Duo* focus on ascending and descending glissandos, respectively - Carrick is fond of glissandos - and are repetitive enough to seem drawn-out even though each lasts only two minutes. At that, they are longer than *une*, which juxtaposes flute and piano and, of course, lasts *one* minute. The flute solo *lanterne* is seven times that length but wears out its welcome rather early, since again it is largely driven by repetition. *Sarang Ga*, for bass clarinet and piano, is conceptually more interesting, using various Korean influences in a progression from the woodwind’s higher reaches to its lower ones. It has an “experimental” feel to it, as if Carrick is trying to see what he can do with this sort of material using instruments of this type - without paying any particular attention to whether the piece conveys anything meaningful to listeners. *La Scène Miniature* is a more interesting instrumental blend, using flute, piano, bass clarinet, and cello. It is supposedly inspired by Camus’ *The Stranger*, but does not seem to be trying to extract anything in particular from that work. Then there is more Korean influence in three pieces for various players: the very short *Danga* for cello and piano, the much more extended *Seongeum* for solo

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violin, and the oddly titled but very interestingly scored *sandstone(s)* for an ensemble that includes both Western and Korean instruments and mixes them in some intriguing ways and to good effect. This is the most distinctive work on the disc and the one in which Carrick appears to show the greatest interest in audience communication, since he is at pains to blend and contrast the different instruments and their distinctive sounds in ways that will make listeners think about, and feel, the very dissimilar but equally expressive nature of Western and Eastern musical thinking. The final work on the disc is quite conventional in instrumentation. It is *Space:Time - String Quartet No. 2*, for the usual four string players. But the music once again delves into experimentation that is likely of interest to the performers, at the expense of producing audience involvement. The movements are called "Claustrophobia," "Gravity," "Space Travel," and "Coda - 'into the light,'" and each offers its own form of compositional cleverness: lots of Carrick's favored *glissandi* in the first, counterpoint at various registers in the second, a palindrome in the third, and slow motion beneath swelling sounds in the fourth. Listeners who bother to discover, before hearing the quartet, what Carrick is intending to do, will find it far more interesting than those who simply want to listen to it as music. In fact, that is the case for much of the material here.

Max Richter's intent in *Voices*, available as a new two-CD Decca release, is concerned with audience involvement - in fact, to so great a degree that the material is something of an "auditory advocacy pamphlet" rather than music in any traditional sense. Richter would likely be pleased to be told this is not "traditional" in musical terms, having said that he uses music as a place that gets the audience to think. But in fact that is scarcely unusual: at least as far back as Gregorian chant and its intent to connect humans with divinity - and probably much, much further back in time than that - music has had, as one of its purposes, the forging of a connection between listeners and some higher ideal. Think only of Beethoven's Ninth or *La Marseillaise*. Richter, however, places the pamphleteering aspect of music in the forefront: there is little reason to listen to this release *except* to be guided (and presumably inspired) by it. The 10-movement work is a collection of crowdsourced readings of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an 1800-word United Nations document from 1949 that, in Richter's view, is so inspirational that it can point the way toward the solution of many of the problems the world now faces. Whether that naïve belief suffices as the foundation of nearly an hour of voices-plus-instruments - that is what Richter offers in *Voices* - will be up to each listener to decide. Richter complements the various words of the Declaration, spoken in multiple languages, strictly with Western instruments, mostly strings - an odd decision if one is seeking universality. Some sections of *Voices* get considerable instrumental accompaniment and backup; others, such as the concluding "Mercy," are much more lightly scored (in that case, for violin, piano and keyboards). It goes without saying that the project is extremely well-intentioned and is intended to bring people together to solve problems that affect all residents of Planet Earth. Richter's sincerity should not be gainsaid. But his thought process can be. The United Nations has 193 member states, and every single one has ratified at least one of nine treaties that have been created on the basis of the Declaration. That includes North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, and China (now under Communist rule - but it was a diplomat from what was then the Republic of China who helped draft the Declaration). Furthermore, the Declaration has been criticized since its inception as attempting to enshrine Western

notions of rights and impose them on the entire world - scarcely a recipe for comity in the 21st century. Thus, Richter's selection of this document as his basis for creating cooperative musical advocacy is at best questionable. In terms of *music*, Richter's *Voices* is simply not very interesting or compelling. It is a concept in search of an effective means of expression. What is particularly intriguing about the recording is that the second CD offers the same 10 movements *without* the voices - presenting just the musical material. Listening to this disc proves to be a very odd experience. Much of it sounds like "space-movie music" of the György Ligeti kind, and the rest sounds like the simple accompaniment of something-or-other. There is nothing captivating or even, in truth, particularly interesting on the "voiceless mix" CD, which comes across as nothing more than minimalist background music. Nothing in this two-hour presentation, with or without voices, is likely to have even an iota of the effect of four words by Schiller that Beethoven set: *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* - "all men will become brothers," or as we would now say, "all people will be joined as a family."

This certainly does not mean that voices lack the musical power to communicate ideas skillfully, or that music itself is inevitably ineffective in bringing people together. Like Richter, a choral group called iSing Silicon Valley has the avowed purpose of changing the world - but for this chorus, the way is gentler, less dogmatic and far more musically attractive than Richter's material. The group's first recording, an Innova CD, is a short (49-minute) collection of 11 works by composers of all sorts, from the distinctly classical (Claude Debussy) to the definitely popular (Pinkzebra). Five pieces here are iSing commissions and world première recordings: *In Your Light* and *365* by Daniel Elder, *Never Shall I Forget* by Adam Schoenberg, *Birds' Lullaby* by Sarah Quartel, and this specific choir-and-piano arrangement of the 20-year-old Debussy's *Salut Printemps*. The overall sequencing of the CD is well-thought-out - the juxtaposition, for example, of Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo's *Ave Generosa* with Elder's *In Your Light* enhances the effectiveness of both pieces, and the charm of Bob Chilcott's *Like a Singing Bird* is increased by following it with Quartel's bird-focused piece. There are pleasantries throughout the recording, which also includes *Only in Sleep* by Ēriks Ešņvalds, *Here I Stand* by Karen Linford, *Sing* by Pinkzebra, and *Grow Little Tree* by Andrea Ramsey. The Ramsey piece is the last on the disc and in some ways the point of the whole thing: from little things, including the excellent vocalizing of a chorus such as iSing Silicon Valley, much greater ones can grow. The singing is in fact quite fine, and the accompanying instruments (pianos, string quartet, percussion and harp) are well-played and skillfully used to color the vocal lines, never to overwhelm or compete with them. The music itself is all attractive, and all of it sounds refreshing and sincere, even though some of the topics sung about (or hinted at) are on the darker side. But "change the world"? It is hard to see how this lovely set of performances holds the key to change beyond the cooperative endeavor that choral singing itself inevitably is. Just as Richter's *Voices* is an overreach, almost a sort of well-meaning propaganda piece masquerading as a musical experience, so these effectively sung and mostly pleasant offerings by iSing Silicon Valley are just that - mostly pleasant - without coming across in any meaningful way as change agents. The *members* of iSing Silicon Valley, on the other hand, *could* become change agents - if they can bring the same camaraderie and focus to other aspects of life that are much in evidence in their performances here.

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