

Large Stage Live!

If it's a live performance, whether music, theatre, dance, or opera, and I attend it, I review it here. In the age of COVID-19, this description obviously includes live-streamed events as well. Occasionally, I will also review audio or video recordings of the arts which have attracted my interest.

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The Viola Revolution

Jokes about violas and viola players are legion in the musical world, as much so as jokes about altos, and for the same reasons -- perennially buried in the middle of the harmony under a wave of violins or sopranos, and frequently consigned to the third of the chord. Rarely does a viola get a chance to shine as a leading or solo instrument.

But now comes a startling new recording, *Mobili*, from Georgina Isabel Rossi (viola) and Silvie Cheng (piano) which is guaranteed to make you sit up and listen with newly attentive ears.

It's not just the relative rarity of a recital CD featuring the viola at front and centre, but also the rarity (to North American ears) of the programme -- an anthology of music by 20th century and 21st century composers mainly from Chile.

None of these composers have previously come to my attention, nor -- I suspect -- to the attention of most music lovers outside of their Chilean homeland. Apart from one piece, all the works on this album are receiving their debut recorded performances. And that is -- on both counts -- definitely a situation due for redress.

The album opens with two works by Rafael Díaz (b. 1962). The first, *¿Habr  alguien en sus manos sostenga este caer?* ("Will there be someone whose hands can sustain this falling?"), composed in 2009, is a visionary, almost otherworldly rhapsody for solo amplified viola. That quasi-extra-terrestrial atmosphere belies the traditional prayer music of the Pewenche aboriginal peoples of the Andes, which (together with birdsong figures) lies at the root of this intriguing composition.

The second work from D az, equally remarkable, is *Al fondo de mi lejan a se asoma tu casa* ("In the Depths of My Distance Your House Emerges"), written in 2013, which evokes a remote Chilean landscape through which the composer walked to school as a child. The music captures the haunting, impersonal air of the vast open spaces, and the piano now joins the viola in gentle trills which again evoke birdsong.

Next up is an early *Fantas a, op. 15* (1962) for viola and piano by Carlos Botto Vallarino (1923-2004). Botto's music was influenced by the European modernism of the mid-twentieth century, in particular the work of Luigi Dallapiccola, with whom he studied. In this work, the slower sections often conceal the harmonic disjunction between viola and piano by resorting to different registers which place the sounds of the two instruments on different planes. The faster passages emphasize the jagged contours of the viola part against quiet but firm piano chords.

Federico Heinlein (1912-1999) contributes a *D o, Op. 15*, for viola and piano, written in 1985. The title page of the work refers to Dylan Thomas with the quotation, "Do not go gentle." This music evinces nothing of rage against the dying of the light, but there is disquiet in plenty with the strange twists and turns of harmony, combining quiet dynamics with the most vigorous harmonic disruption. The work ends with an incomplete phrase like a quizzical question mark.

With the *Tololo* of David Cort s (written in 2011), we arrive in perhaps my least-favourite corner of contemporary composition -- the neighbourhood where a composer must produce detailed, even pedantic programme notes, to

make clear what he or she was doing and how it ought to be received and appreciated by the listener. I have long believed that the more a creative artist must explain in words what is being done, the less successful the created piece is in its own terms. This, for me, is a principle which applies equally whether we speak of music, of dance, of theatre, or of the visual arts. Call me old-fashioned, and perhaps I am, but I regard copious programme notes as -- at best -- a crutch.

The work which Cortés (b. 1985) has produced here consists of numerous piquant gestures, lacking a firm structural basis to hold them together. The composer himself, by the way, has referred to his musical elements as "gestural." The sounds are intriguing, to be sure, but here was the one place where I felt that the composer had worn out his welcome before the composition ended.

The anchor work of the entire programme, *Mobili, Op. 63* by Juan Orrego-Salas (1919-2019), was composed in 1967. It's an 18-minute suite of four movements, which bear the evocative titles *Flessibile*, *Discontinuo*, *Ricorrente*, and *Perpetuo*. *Flessibile* often uses the viola and piano independently, with each instrument taking its turn to present the material. *Discontinuo* presents a kind of scherzo with piano and viola darting hither and yon, with occasional tart explosions from one or the other highlighting the essentially quiet textures. *Ricorrente* presents a slow, meditative, even ponderous duet for the two instruments which suggest an examination of issues larger than mere worldly concerns. The final *Perpetuo*, as its title indicates, is a fast-moving stream of continuous melody, with numerous lightning-fast shifts of metre adding considerable rhythmic complexity. The movement, and the suite, end on three emphatic chords.

The album ends with a bonus track which is something of a cuckoo in the nest: an arrangement of *El Sampredrino* (1968) by Argentinian composer Carlos Guastavino (1912-2000). In contrast with the rest of the music, this is a setting of a lyrical melody. Guastavino was renowned above all as a composer of songs, and his output fuses nineteenth-century romanticism with a strong Latin-American sensibility. This song exemplifies his style.

Throughout this hour-long recital, violist Rossi and pianist Cheng present the most intriguing and sensitive textures, especially in repertoire which is predominantly quiet rather than loud and emphatic. Rossi plays with clear, unforced tone across the entire dynamic and tonal range of her instrument, creating fascinating variety of sound in a programme which might -- in other hands -- end up being too much of the same thing. Cheng creates a diverse, subtly varied array of sounds and textures on the piano, again avoiding any suspicion of routine.

This partnership of artists serves the music very well indeed, drawing us into the different sound worlds of these diverse composers and presenting a fascinating cross-section of contemporary composition in Chile. While it's challenging listening, this album is also rewarding and has many moments that will well repay the listener's attention.

The album, catalogue # fcr268, is available online from New Focus Recordings.

Ken Stephen at 21:09

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