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CD Reviews

Elizabeth Vercoe: *Kleemation and Other Works*

Peter H. Bloom, flute; Mary Jane Rupert and Rosemary Platt, piano; Sharon Mabry, mezzo-soprano; Boston Musica Viva, and others. Navona Records NV5884 (2012). ASIN B00925TAAU.

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Kleemation and Other Works, a compilation recording of the highest quality from both an artistic and an engineering standpoint contains six of Elizabeth Vercoe's vocal and instrumental compositions composed from 1975 to 2003. Although four of the compositions were previously released on other recordings, it is a pleasure to find these six works assembled together here. Clear, extensive liner notes by the composer include song texts, facsimiles of the five drawings by Paul Klee that inspired *Kleemation*, and photographs of the composer and performing artists.

Kleemation for Flute and Piano, a five-movement, fifteen-minute work, is performed by "2" (Peter H. Bloom, flutes; Mary Jane Rupert, piano), a distinguished musical duo of more than twenty years' international standing. Vercoe musically renders Klee's drawings with all the humor, fear, and reality that make each one leap from its canvas and dance. The second movement, *Please!*, draws on swing music with its lounge-lizard-like appeal that Vercoe cleverly manipulates before returning to an echo of the easy-going opening of the movement. Vercoe composed *More Will be Marching Soon* as U.S. troops entered Iraq in March 2003. It incorporates the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" into both the flute and the piano parts in the anxiety-infused fourth movement. The composer indicates that the final movement of the work, "Woman Sowing Weeds," has "subversive intentions." Decidedly hopeless in character, it features a flickering flute symbolic of the woman's hand gesture as she scatters the seeds; a staccato piano represents "raining down tiny seeds." This eloquently reminds us that the seeds sown by war's atrocities have repercussions lasting for generations to come.

Fantasy, a ten-minute solo piano composition in six contrasting sections, is bold, free-flowing, and dramatic. It affords the pianist an opportunity to utilize the instrument as an orchestra, with a wide variety of color and timbre. The work explores rhythm and tempo and features effects such as strumming the piano strings, glissandi, arpeggios, and trills. Vercoe's musical directions on the score are minimal, leaving the pianist maximum latitude for personal interpretation. Rosemary Platt plays with bravura and broad sweeping strokes.

Irreveries from Sappho is a witty seven-minute song cycle in English for mezzo-soprano or soprano and piano, one of eight cycles on texts by women. Although Sappho, the Greek female poet, lived approximately 2,600 years ago, the poetry selections are appropriate and enduring themes for women today. From start to finish the writing is imaginative: traditional counterpoint and recitative are interspersed with musical "sleight of hand" (as Vercoe calls it in her liner notes). The composer's website states that *Irreveries* is "wickedly satiric and full of musical jokes and parodies" (including snippets of "Turkey in the Straw" and "Auld Lang Syne"). It asks the singer to use glissandi and Sprechstimme, and to take on the personality of each of the three women depicted in the three songs. The cycle requires expert technique on the parts of both singer and pianist, coupled with a good sense of humor and the ability to "sell the song" without

apologizing for it. Mezzo-soprano Sharon Mabry has a full, well-placed and well-controlled middle voice which fits the vocal requirements of these songs like a glove, and she is skillfully accompanied by Rosemary Platt. The songs can also be sung by sopranos, as long as the middle voice has enough full-bodied color and texture, and Vercoe also has an SSA arrangement for choir.

Herstory II: 13 Japanese Lyrics is a nineteen-minute English song cycle consisting of thirteen songs for soprano, piano and percussion. The texts, in a haiku-like form, are by medieval Japanese women poets. In *Lady Suo* or in *Lady Horkikawa*, *Lady Ukon*, the singer is asked to speak the text, and in *The Poetess Ono No Komachi* and *Lady Izumi Shikibu*, to whisper it. The vocal line is always dramatic and at times requires the singer to execute wide leaps, as in *Lady Akazome Emon*. *Herstory II* does not require a singer with a large voice, but welcomes a flexible and an exceedingly expressive one that can tackle the demands of the highly dramatic text. Both the piano accompaniment and the percussion part lend an exotic character to the cycle and imbue it with mystery and interest that is almost frightening at times, primal and raw. The over-all mood of the cycle is tense and the women depicted border on the hysterical, reminiscent of Richard Strauss' settings of Shakespeare's *Ophelia Lieder*. Members of the internationally acclaimed Boston Musica Viva interpret this cycle in a fashion that leaves the listener convinced that their interpretation is the only possible one.

To Music is a five-minute work for solo flute in four separately titled, contrasting sections inspired by the poetry of Russian writer Anna Akhmatova. The interpretation of *To Music* by flutist Nancy Stagnitta is imaginative, playful, clear, and virtuosic—a true listening pleasure. The multiphonics were especially enjoyable.

Despite Our Differences I is a thirteen-minute movement for piano trio composed in Paris in collaboration with Greek-American pianist Christine Paraschos, to whom the work was dedicated after the pianist's tragic death in 1997. The recording is a live and unedited performance that was premiered at the "Women's Music Festival/85" at Boston University. Alea III's performance with guest pianist Paraschos is a musical collaboration of the highest order, executing Vercoe's dramatic music with virtuosity and style.

Elizabeth Vercoe's *Kleemation and Other Works* is outstanding in every respect, an artistic masterwork that merits high praise. I cannot recommend it too highly. It seduces the listener down a path leading to a musical landscape that is abstract yet accessible. Both the audio CD and the MP3 download are available from Amazon, iTunes, and Spotify. I further recommend that the reader make time to visit the composer's comprehensive website (www.elizabethvercoe.com).

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