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CD Reviews

The Lotus Pond: Exotic Oboe Sounds

Cynthia Green Libby, oboe; Scott Cameron, percussion; Jeremy Chesman, harp; Peter Collins, Wei-Han Su, piano; Susanna Reichling, percussion. MSR Classics. MS1421 (2013)

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From meditative yoga centers to the habitat of an aquatic plant sacred to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism to a small, environmentally sheltered body of water in India, the lotus pond suggests reflective beauty and oneness with self and nature. Oboist Cynthia Green Libby presents six works that merge the timbre the performer identifies as “meditative”—the light, plaintive Josef oboe—with the similarly introspective timbres of harp, tam-tam, tom-tom, and piano to present works that lead us forward and away from the Germanic canon of two centuries ago. Thank you, Cynthia Libby and colleagues from Missouri State University, for the challenge and richness of this recording. The credentials of all the performers are exemplary, yet Libby’s do stand out: a doctorate in performance with performer’s certificate from the Eastman School as well as a background in teaching performance, women and music, world music, and the healing arts. The six composers represent a polyglot of musical languages, drawn together here by the oboe’s tone color: Egyptian Gamal Abdel-Rahim, Welsh Hilary Tann, Vietnamese Do Hong Quan, Peruvian-French Marcelle Soulage, and Americans Elizabeth Vercoe and Derek Limback.

Hilary Tann’s *Shakkei Diptych* for oboe and piano is a transcription (also for solo flute or solo soprano saxophone) of an oboe concerto commissioned by oboist Shannon Spicciati for the 2010 International Double Reed Society Conference in Oklahoma. The two movements reflect Tann’s visits to Japan, Korea, and China, her private study of the shakuhachi (a Japanese end-blown flute), and her appreciation of traditional East Asian musics. The composer (b.1947) explains that Shakkei is a term used in Japanese landscape design; it means “borrowed scenery.” The first movement is “inspired by Mount Hiei as viewed from Shoden-ji, a temple with a dry landscape garden,” and the second, “by the hills of Arashiyama as viewed from Tenryu-ji, a temple with a lush stroll garden.” Tann translates the former inspiration into a “sparse” musical landscape, the latter an “overgrown” one, each borrowing a smidgen of Debussy’s *Nuages*, according to the composer’s notes. Although the more sumptuous orchestral accompaniment in the concerto version is compellingly “overgrown” at times, this arrangement has its charm and, on the practical side, is more widely performable.

Head of the composition department at the Hanoi Conservatory, Do Hong Quan (b.1956) contributes *Bon buc tranh* (Four Pictures). The contrasting moods are unified by Vietnamese folksong and contemporary European harmonies. The percussionists are asked to add cowbell and bass drum to the exotic setting in addition to the tam-tam and tom-tom, sounds more idiomatic to the lotus-like theme. As a product of the American 1960s, I admit that hearing alluring music from Hanoi performed by Missourians on a CD available throughout the world gives me a bracing sense of hope and affiliation through music with the global community.

Egyptian educator, pianist, and composer Gamal Abdel-Rahim (1924-88), who in 1971 founded and then headed the first composition program in the Arab world at the Cairo Conservatory of Music, composed a flute concerto two years later, and arranged the second movement, *Bohayrat Al-Lotus* (The Lotus Pond), for flute (also oboe or violin) and piano. The

Lotus Pond movement performed here is constructed on four-note scalar patterns invented by the composer, rather than modal scales of Egyptian derivation typical of his style. The result melds ancient Egyptian with contemporary Western-European musical styles to create an evocative Eastern-centered sound. It demands considerable control from oboe, percussion, and piano, who ably comply—particularly Libby.

Marcelle Soulage (1894-1970), a student of Nadia Boulanger at a time when female composers were literally unheard, composed *Pastorale*, op.15, for oboe and harp as a two-mood shepherd's pipe piece, first tense and then lushly beautiful. The more traditional musical context of Soulage's *Pastorale* never intrudes on the lotus-pond theme of the recording; rather, the work underscores that the theme has made its way intuitively into even European music, often French rather than German, often chamber music rather than symphonic, at times natural and ephemeral rather than structured and *höhergestellt* (superior).

Derek Limback, currently a band director-teacher in Missouri, contributes the three-movement work *Ripple Effect: Three Pieces for Neon for oboe and harp*, a tribute to a deceased student. The movements—*Resilience*, *Beauty*, *Joy*—contrast in style and mood from a rather dissonant energy through a slower and more melodic middle movement to an almost whimsical ending. The programmatic association with the loss of a student brings a poignancy to the work and the performance.

Elizabeth Vercoe's *Butterfly Effects*, premiered as two movements in Bangkok in 2009 and then in 2010 in Illinois as a full seven-movement work for flute and harp, is recorded here in a five-movement version for oboe and harp arranged especially for these performers. The movements—*Mourning Cloak*, *Common Jezebel*, *Question Mark*, *Monkey Puzzle*, and *Psyche*—carry the American names of butterflies. The composer was first inspired by a Taoist dream: "Am I a human who dreamt of being a butterfly or am I now a butterfly who dreams of being human?" (Zhuangzi) Each of the five movements is as miniature as a butterfly, less than a minute long, carrying its distinctive character in sound evoking color, shape, and temperament. Together they act much like a suite of contrastingly nuanced sound and space. *Butterflies* fittingly ends a recording that is breathtaking, fresh, and an emotional point of arrival, simply home. I breathe it in and reflect, as if embraced by lotus blossoms floating in a meditative pond.

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