

Cinemusical

Reviewing great classical and film music

Butterfly Effects and Other Works by Elizabeth Vercoe

Peter H. Bloom, flutes/piccolo. Mary Jane Rupert, harp/piano;

D'Anna Fortunato, mezzo-soprano;

Patricia McCarty, viola; Ellen Weckler, piano;

Boston Musica Viva/Richard Pittman

Records 6196 Navona Total Time: 66:06

Recording: ****/****

Performance: ****/****

Four chamber music works are featured on this release of music by Elizabeth Vercoe (b. 1941). Vercoe studied with Ross Lee Finney, Leslie Bassett, and Gardner Read and her work has been widely performed and recorded. This Navona release includes two more recently-recorded performances, a concert recording and another intended for radio. Broadcast.

The album opens with a multi-movement work for flutes and harp, *Butterfly Effects* (2009). Across the seven movements, Vercoe explores the qualities of different instruments in the flute family: alto flute, bass flute, concert flute, and piccolo. The music has a slight impressionistic quality to it, aided by the harp's material. Against this is first a rather dreamy, dark opening movement ("Mourningcloak"); a faster-paced flitting "Banded Blue Parrot"; a tango ("Common Jezebel"); intriguing effects like beat-boxing ("Question Mark") and blues riffs ("Karner Blues"); and a palindromic compositional technique ("Monkey Puzzle"). The flute lines allow for registral exploration and often features some sinuous lines. Some are sultrier than others, but it is as if these are all like watercolor brushstrokes that tend to be somewhat introspective in this often stunningly beautiful work. Recorded a decade earlier, *Elegy for viola and piano* (1990), is one of the composer's more acclaimed works. It is one of five introspective solo works and is a perfect counterpart to the early flute and harp work. The music here has a decidedly harsher edge with dark colors and dissonance that add to the devastation of the intense solo line.

This is my letter to the World (2001) separates the two instrumental works on the album. The song cycle uses six Emily Dickinson poems with texts addressing nature, loss, marriage, and the thrill of writing. Across these settings, Vercoe sets up the flute and voice in such a way that the former serves like an almost interior emotional connection to the words. It adds some text painting, but often serves as a bit of the poet's, and perhaps by extension the composer's, consciousness. The music shifts well from quietude to more declamatory and impassioned moments. The other song cycle here is one of several Vercoe has composed that focus on texts by women. *Herstory I* (1975) is the first of these collections that focuses on the expressive poetry of confessional poets (Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Pam White) that explore the modern woman's experiences. The six texts here moves us from madness and fear of safety, relationship, reaction to a child's nightmare, life stages, and a final lullaby. This fascinating work would win a competition sponsored by WGBH radio and was performed by the forces captured here for the radio broadcast. In many ways this is a perfect example of 1970s compositional style that blends a sense of the avant-garde styles of serial technique and vocal effects (not quite as extreme as say George Crumb). It is still not quite as experimental as some pieces already exhibiting Vercoe's strong sense of line, though here the music is a more intense experience.

Vercoe has an excellent sense of dramatic shape that comes through in each of these works spanning some 35 years of her creativity. The music maintains a more commonly tonal realm with extended, denser harmonies used for dramatic effect. Each line is shaped in such a way that the color it creates evolves with the accompaniment harmony. It blends aspects of impressionism, modernism, and a touch of new romanticism.