

Dvořák – Symphony No.9; Copland – Billy the Kid
National Symphony Orchestra; Gianandrea Nosedá
National Symphony Orchestra NSO 001
(gianandreanoseda.com)



► This most enjoyable disc is the debut recording of a new label, NSO Live from the Kennedy Center, with the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington

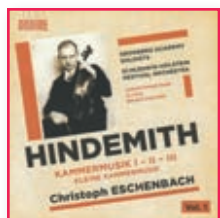
DC. The group is famous for having been directed by Rostropovich at one time, but now Gianandrea Nosedá is its music director. Nosedá heralds “new beginnings” and judging by this issue, he certainly delivers. The recording simply throbs with life and shows Nosedá’s love for America by selecting two works he says “on which American sound has continued to be built over the decades.” The two works come from vastly different backgrounds, yet the American spirit is unmistakable, and this makes this issue so exciting.

The first piece is by the venerable American composer Aaron Copland who was born in Brooklyn to a family of Russian immigrants, yet no other composer has been able to better evoke the frontier spirit of the Wild West. *Billy the Kid*, a ballet from 1938, is about an outlaw and gunfighter who murdered eight men by the age of 21, when he himself was killed. Copland’s score provides a vivid depiction of prairie life incorporating several cowboy tunes, Mexican dances and even a gunfight with explosions, certainly never heard before from a symphony orchestra. Nosedá has a lot of fun with it and it is catching.

And now an absolutely stunning performance of Dvořák’s *New World Symphony* where the musical material is “inspired by American folk songs, African-American spirituals and North American Native songs” all intermixed with tremendous compositional skill. Dvořák introduces new themes in each movement, but these then reoccur in different guises culminating in the magnificent last movement for an astounding conclusion. Demonstration quality sound, highly recommended.

Janos Gardonyi

Hindemith – Kammermusik I - II - III
Kronberg Academy Soloists; Schleswig-Holstein Festival Orchestra; Christoph Eschenbach
Online ODE 1341-2 (naxosdirect.com)



► Over the course of his lifetime (1895-1963) Paul Hindemith, increasingly ossified by his academic obsessions, underwent a peculiar reverse

metamorphosis. Born a butterfly, he eventually became a caterpillar. He was a world-famous composer, a consummate musician and an influential Ivy League savant, yet the 50th anniversary of his death in 2013 passed with little fanfare from the classical music establishment. In his early career he was considered an avant-garde miscreant, ultimately branded and banished as an “atonal noisemaker” by the Nazi regime. Noisy? Perhaps, but powerfully so. Atonal? Not in the least, though bracingly dissonant at times.

Hindemith’s astounding orchestral mastery (he was able to play any instrument he wrote for) is amply demonstrated in the adventurous *Kammermusik* series composed in the 1920s, from which we have on offer here the first three suites, with future volumes presumably in the works to complete the set of seven. The first suite is composed for 12 instruments in four movements, a provocatively satirical remodelling of the *Brandenburg Concertos* which receives a rollicking performance under Eschenbach’s direction. The second instalment, scored for piano and ensemble, is equally enjoyable and glitteringly dispatched by soloist Christopher Park. The third, cast in the form of a concerto featuring cellist Bruno Philippe, is less convincing due to sub-optimal tempos (perhaps the soloist’s prerogative) and an over-miked solo part which obscures the inner voices. Claudio Abbado’s lively 1999 EMI recording, some two and a half minutes faster, makes a far better case for this work. An enjoyable nightcap, the beloved *Kleine Kammermusik* for wind quintet, rounds out the proceedings.

Daniel Foley

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY

Jacques Hétu – Concertos
Jean-Philippe Sylvestre; Orchestre symphonique de Laval; Alain Trudel
ATMA ACD2 2793 (atmaclassique.com/en)



► A treasure trove of musical Canadiana awaits the steadfast listener who seeks a (Western) classical contemporary canon from true north shores. Despite the few

generations of composers who could claim such affiliations, an impressive array of works exist from the last 50 years, especially those written in Quebec. Among French Canada’s most distinguished 20th-century composers, the late Jacques Hétu is revered for his prowess as orchestral colourist. Formidably, he penned no less than 15 concertos for a variety of instruments. Hétu once remarked: “My taste for the concerto is directly linked to the genre of drama; the soloist is a singer, and

the concerto his or her stage.”

A recent all-Hétu recording spotlights the indomitable dream team of pianist Jean-Philippe Sylvestre and trombonist/conductor, Alain Trudel. Trudel brings his irrepressible artistry to the collaboration, setting the stage for a creative synergy. He wields a keen, razor-sharp sense of pacing, as he ferries the Orchestre symphonique de Laval from one striking Hétu work to another, brimful with devotion and panache. (The tone poem, *Sur les rives du Saint-Maurice*, Op.78, is also included, again proving Hétu’s mastery of orchestration, arguably his finest gift.)

The stalwart Sylvestre rollicks in a commanding realization of the second piano concerto. The keyboard writing that inspired Hétu seems a near-blood relation to music by Prokofiev. For the final work, Trudel conjoins baton and trombone, dazzling our ears with a golden, luscious reading of Hétu’s concerto for that instrument.

Adam Sherkin

Proxemic Studies Volume 1
Mike McCormick
Smeik SMKCD204 (smeik.no/en; mikemccormickmusic.com)



► It is not an obvious concept to combine technical guitar exercises you wrote for yourself with extracts of letters and emails from your former “romantic part-

ners” as a basis for an album of contemporary music. Yet this is what Oslo-based guitarist, laptop performer and composer Mike McCormick, originally from Yellowknife, has done with his *Proxemic Studies*. The album is both intensely personal (some of the quotations detail sexual intimacy, heartbreak and betrayal) and surprisingly clinical. Befitting our social distancing times, McCormick tells us “Proxemics [is] the branch of knowledge that deals with the amount of space that people feel it necessary to set between themselves and others.” McCormick performs his compositions with Laura Swankey (voice), Emily Denison (trumpet) and Knut Kvifte Nesheim (percussion). Swankey’s vocals are expressive yet measured and Nesheim provides a delicate palette of background accompaniments. One of the most beautiful pieces is *Alvorada*, on which Denison plays some floating and tasteful trumpet lines reminiscent of Kenny Wheeler, and the vocal intermittently glides between the musical lines. At the other extreme is *Madness* with fuzzed-out guitar and a series of accusatory and harsh statements vibrating with anger.

The album is intriguing, but one may wonder how McCormick’s former partners feel about their intimate notes being part of a public performance. The text ranges from poetic to banal (“Just got out of the shower,

you were kind of there too”) and this contrast may be one of the points being made about human interaction. *Proxemic Studies* is an uneasy intertwining of personal history with innovative musical expression.

Ted Parkinson

Mark John McEncroe – Musical Images for Chamber Orchestra (Reflections & Recollections Vol.2)

Janáček Philharmonic; Anthony Armore
Navona Records nv6269
(navonarecords.com)



► The Australian self-professed “easy listening” composer Mark John McEncroe has made a name for himself in the orchestral world with his audience-friendly

and pleasantly digestible output. In this latest release, several piano works by McEncroe have been orchestrated by Mark J Saliba – also an Australian composer – to comprise the selection of *Musical Images* heard on the recording.

This music is not trying to be anything other than what it is: gentle and welcoming. While some contemporary composers writing in older Romantic styles still feel pressured to insert some sort of newness into their music, resulting in a confusing clash of aesthetic commitment, McEncroe delivers a straightforward and unburdened nostalgia to the listener. Nevertheless, we still receive contrast throughout the 11 movements.

At times playful, foreboding, heart-warming, and reassuring, the music does in fact lead the listener on a journey – albeit a highly protected one. There is a filmic quality to McEncroe’s style, an attribute that is furthered by titles such as *Natalie’s Theme*, *Floating Lilies* and *A Rainy Summer’s Day*. This quality perhaps leaves the listener wanting to experience these missing images alongside the music; in contrast to profoundly written program music where the extra-musical elements are so deeply provided in the music, one does not require them in any other form. With that in mind, this disc is perfect for a rainy day with a book, or a relaxing afternoon by the fire.

Adam Scime

Vox Hearne Ensemble
Innova Recordings 040 (innova.mu/albums)



► What is a “test of time” measured against the universe’s, or even our planet’s? On the human scale, George Crumb’s *Vox Balaenae* for

three masked players performing on amplified instruments – flute, cello and piano – has stood up well over the half century since its composition. The Hearne Ensemble opens with this work, whose theme reminds humans of how tiny their lifespan is measured against that of the Earth. Even without the blue ambient lighting Crumb indicated for live performance, the music draws us into the depths: meditation and wonder, awe and exhilaration. Like Messaien’s *Quartet for the End of Time*, *Vox Balaenae* (voice of the whale) is a work of praise, threaded through with references to time and timelessness; the object of Crumb’s *louanges*, unlike Messaien, is the world itself, and his angelic voice is that of the whale. The performances are flawless, and the recording quality excellent; *Vox Balaenae* is a timeless masterpiece.

Next, *Bencharong* by Narong Prangcharoen depicts the five colours of classic Thai ceramics. The movements are brief, and while the composer makes no overt claim that he experiences synaesthesia, the musical colours are as distinct as the visual ones.

Silver Dagger, by Stacy Garrop, references an American folk song she researched and found to have three distinct variants and outcomes, almost a post-modern Romeo and Juliet. Like Berio in his folk song settings, Garrop is content to find mystery and beauty in the simplicity and power of the original. It’s beautiful Americana.

Melodies for Robert by Carter Pann is a celebration in memoriam of “an American war hero,” to quote the liner notes. There are two movements: *Sing* and *Listen*. I don’t find myself able to listen to them following the rest of the disc. I haven’t much room left for dessert, especially not one so sweet.

Max Christie

This is My Letter to the World
Kate Amrine and various artists
Innova Recordings 042 (innova.mu)



► It is almost too apt to be reviewing trumpeter/composer Kate Amrine’s new release in the COVID-19 era. Whatever new power music

has developed within our collective, it has always drawn us into shared experience. This message from a millennial asks all of us to please reflect on the harm we bring on ourselves. How can the tracks of this disc bend our path away from mutually assured destruction, one is forced to wonder. One supposes: through hope.

Amrine’s own piece, *What Are We Doing To Ourselves*, addresses climate change and degradation through a combination of electronic underlay made of the recorded sound of a forest fire, simple melodic fragments that join the voices of alto flute, trumpet, viola and

cello, and an almost childlike recitation of the text of a suicide note. This latter document was left for media by an activist lawyer who set himself on fire in an act of protest. Heavy stuff. Her very short title track eloquently quotes Emily Dickinson with a bucket-muted trumpet *nearly* overshadowing the text.

The next track, *Thoughts and Prayers*, by Kevin Joest, addresses gun violence. A single trumpet line accompanies all-too-familiar news chatter reacting to various mass-murders. *My Body My Choice* by Niloufar Nourbakhsh, uses the words of the title in a chant rising towards the final bars of a processional featuring trumpet and electronics.

Sandwiched in among the earnest messages is a clever and entertaining track (omitted in the liner notes): *Close Fight* sets up a funky dance number using a post-fight interview with a boxer whose cocky answers are chopped into rhythmic bits, and played to by the band. This is such an excellent antidote, it’s why we need to support these young creators like Amrine. I wanted it to go on. We all need it, to go on.

Max Christie

Song of the Redwood-Tree
Scott Pool; Natsuki Fukasawa; Stefanie Izzo; Gina Cuffari; Xelana Duo; Sunny Knable
MSR Classics MS 1749
(sunnyknablecomposer.com)



► American composer, pianist and educator Sunny Knable’s four works here illuminate the many sound possibilities that the bassoon produces as a lead instru-

ment and in ensemble. The three-movement title track *Song of the Redwood-Tree* for soprano, bassoon and piano is based on Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. *A California Song* opens with bassoonist Scott Pool’s beautiful held notes, pianist Natsuki Fukasawa’s contrapuntal lines and soprano Stefanie Izzo’s high pitches. *Death-Chant* is understandably more atonal with dramatic high vocal pitches, and *Golden Pageant* features more tonal cadences, and piano/vocal unisons.

Tango Boogie combines a bit of tango and swing in a surprising gratifying sonic mix played by the alto saxophone/bassoon Xelana Duo. *Double Reed* on Charles Wyatt’s poem *To the World’s Bassoonists* showcases Knable’s understanding of the breath control required to play reed instruments, as he performs on the accordion with soprano/bassoonist Gina Cuffari. Its second movement *Tragic Bassoon* is especially noteworthy with the solo bassoon melody above the left- and right-hand accordion-held chords and vocal backdrop creating a memorable sound. Lots of familiar true-to-life sounds in *The Busking*