

CD/DVD reviews: Philadelphia artists

Concerts at Carmel: Illuminations. Barta: Toccata Joyeuse. Brahms: Quintet for Clarinet and Strings in B minor, Op.115. Mager: Illuminations, a song cycle for soprano, piccolo, and harp. Messiaen: L'Ascension— III. Michael Stairs, organ. Nathan Laube, organ. Ricardo Morales, clarinet. Wistar Quartet. Janice Fiore, soprano. Lois Bliss Herbine, piccolo. Sophie Bruno Labiner, harp. Direct-to-Tape Recording Co. DTR605 (78:55) (<http://www.dtrmusic.com>)

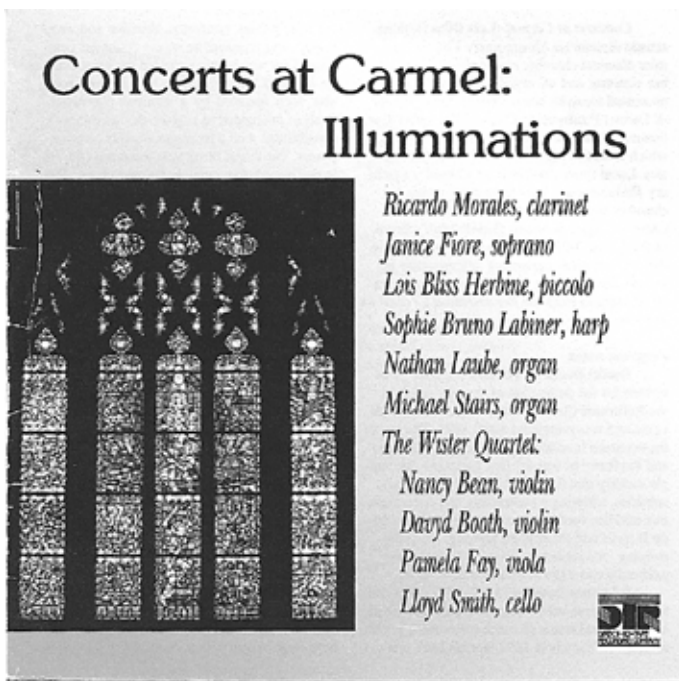
This CD, one hopes, will serve to further increase the visibility of Concerts at Carmel, which has just completed its tenth season at Glenside's Carmel Presbyterian Church. The four live performances offered here — three from the 2006-2007 season and one, *Toccata Joyeuse*, from 2000 — well represent the breadth of repertoire and high level of musicianship that characterize the Montgomery County concert series.

The program is framed by two short organ selections — Carmel's instrument is a favorite of area organists — played by a familiar experienced artist

and a young phenom. Michael Stairs, organist for the Philadelphia Orchestra and a respected choral conductor, performs Daniel Barta's *Toccata Joyeuse*, composed for the inauguration of a new organ installed at the Reformed Church in Willow Grove, PA. The *Toccata* is written in a solidly conservative mid-(twentieth) century style with loads of brilliant filigree reminiscent of French Romantic organ music. Stairs dispatches it confidently; an effective curtain raiser. The CD concludes with the glorious third movement of Olivier Messiaen's *L'Ascension*, "Transports de joie d'une ame devant la gloire du Christ qui est la sienne." Chicago-born Nathan Laube came to the Curtis Institute at age 15 and, though still a student there, maintains a busy performing schedule. His reading of the Messiaen may not be as grandly Gothic as some others, but the young player is firmly in control of the technical challenges of the piece, providing an ecstatic conclusion to the CD.

There's not a musician appearing on this program who isn't operating at the highest level, but the stars of the show are the two woodwind players. Ricardo Morales, principal clarinetist for the Philadelphia Orchestra since 2002 (he held the same position at the Metropolitan Opera previously) is joined by the four Orchestra members comprising the Wistar Quartet for a luminous performance of Brahms' Op.115 Clarinet Quintet. Morales possesses a warm and even tone, a fluent technique, and sure musical instincts. The second movement Adagio features one of those lovely Brahms melodies that's at once tender and noble: Morales spins out seemingly endless, perfectly shaped lines to create a meltingly beautiful reverie. Interpretively, the Wistar is with him every step of the way.

For *Illuminations*, from which the CD gets its title, St. Louis-based composer Stephen Mager sets texts drawn from 14th to 16th century Middle English sources, including Chaucer and Charles d'Orléans. The composer describes his song cycle as "a series of musical tableaux suggesting the lavish illustrations of medieval manuscripts" and the harp part, neatly executed by Sophie Bruno Labiner, creates an apt lute-like sonority. Soprano Janice Fiore has extensive experience with new music, having participated in over thirty first performances,



and she's clearly comfortable with the composer's idiom. Fiore never overwhelms these small pieces, scaling her voice back for the intimately communicative lyrics. Lois Bliss Herbine's piccolo is a second vocal participant, intertwining her song-like lines around the soprano's. Herbine produces a full and richly colored tone on her tiny instrument that, in lesser hands, can become wearily fife-like. A lighter-than-air Saltarello movement for piccolo and harp alone gives center stage to Herbine's virtuosity as she effortlessly shifts between passages of flutter-tonguing and regular articulation in the course of the movement.

The sanctuary of the Carmel Presbyterian Church is known for its flattering acoustic. Curiously, the organ pieces are recorded fairly close-up while the two chamber works are given a more distant sonic perspective with more of the room in evidence. Still, aurally as well as musically, this release is a winner — one that should get all of us to Glenside for Concerts at Carmel's 11th season.

Andrew Quint

Hindemith: *Klaviermusik mit Orchester* (for piano left hand). Dvořák: *Symphony No. 9 "From the New World."* Christoph Eschenbach, conductor; Leon Fleisher, piano; Curtis Symphony Orchestra. ONDINE ODE 1141-2 (64:18)

Paul Hindemith composed his *Klaviermusik mit Orchester* for piano left hand in 1923 in response to a commission from Paul Wittgenstein. The mini-piano concerto was never performed because Wittgenstein apparently didn't like it, but he retained exclusive performing rights until he died in 1961. The work was then "rediscovered" and received its world premiere in 2002 with Leon Fleisher as pianist and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Simon Rattle. It is now available for the first time on CD.

The *Klaviermusik* is fairly easily recognizable as Hindemith, but, truth be told, this is no rediscovered masterpiece. The sometimes obsessive, percussive rhythms resemble Shostakovich at times; Hindemith did it all better elsewhere. Fleisher has no problem with the work's technical demands, and the Curtis students accompany him with appropriately incisive impact.

If you already have Christoph Eschenbach's re-



recording of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony with the Houston Symphony Orchestra (Virgin CD), there is no reason to get this one except possibly for its sound. The two performances are very similar. Their overall timing is nearly identical, but there are subtle differences within the individual movements. Eschenbach's interpretation is, not surprisingly, quite subjective, with numerous tempo shifts (especially in the first movement) that will annoy some and please others. The second movement sounds gorgeous at just the right slow tempo. Eschenbach generates plenty of excitement in the fourth movement without over-driving it as some big-name conductors do. The timpani are fine and assertive at the beginning of the first movement, but they are dull and poorly articulated in a sluggish third movement. Eschenbach's approach sheds a refreshing light on a warhorse that too often sounds routine. The Curtis strings and brass are okay, but the woodwinds are surprisingly tentative and the French horn(s) in the first movement don't blend well with the rest of the orchestra.

The CD was recorded live in Verizon hall. The engineers present an excellent aural portrait of the orchestra with no distracting spotlighting of solo instruments. In fact, that French horn is a bit too distant. The relatively dark acoustics of Verizon Hall are captured accurately, and the high frequencies have marginally more presence than some of Ondine's Philadelphia Orchestra SACDs.

It is not a tough call comparing this and Eschen-

bach's preferable Houston "New World" Symphony: the Houston Symphony Orchestra clearly plays better. Ondine's sound may be marginally preferable to some listeners but the Houston version has a more substantial filler in Eschenbach's excellent interpretation of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*. In the final analysis, Eschenbach's "New World" Symphony is a worthy alternative or second choice behind the more conventional interpretation by István Kertész and the London Symphony Orchestra (Decca).

Arthur Lintgen

Smith: *Vespers*. Piffaro, the Renaissance Band, with The Crossing. Navona Records NVA 5809 (65:13)

It is something of an open secret that Philadelphia is home to one of the finest renaissance ensembles in the world, Piffaro. Founding directors Joan Kimball and Robert Wiemken have consistently devised

innovative and attractive ways of presenting their often-bewitching material, but this venture may be their boldest project yet. They have commissioned a contemporary composer, Kile Smith, to create a new work for their collection of sackbuts, shawms, lutes and other ancient instruments, in collaboration with The Crossing, a chamber chorus assembled by Donald Nally.

Utilizing older styles in new music is a well-trod conceit, with some especially fine work from Stravinsky (*Pulcinella*) and Ravel (*Menuet Antique, Tombeau de Couperin*) from the last century. Then there is the hugely popular *Carmina Burana*, the 1937 cantata of Carl Orff based on medieval themes. Smith's approach could hardly be more different from Orff, who fairly bangs you over the head with his fascistic pomposity. *Vespers* is almost preternaturally beautiful, presented with an apparent simplicity that reveals the timeless essence of musical expression. But it is not at all simple, as Smith subtly weaves contemporary figurations, pacing, and textures into an old fabric.

It is remarkable how seamless this effect is, and how utterly self-effacing is Smith's technique. A casual listener might miss the impact of *Vespers*, but not for long. The music seeps into the consciousness with gentle stealth and power, finally disarming any resistance. Smith was reared in the Lutheran liturgical music tradition, and so his texts are in German and Latin, as were those of that greatest of Lutheran composers, Bach.

This recording is one of those fortunate synergies of fine forces. Piffaro, as expected, plays with haunting beauty, and Nally's singers render their parts with elegant tone. Navona, a new label, has engineered ripe, lifelike sound. The sum of the parts is something magical. Don't miss this one.

Peter Burwasser

