

Fanfare Magazine – Contemporary Voices

Nov/Dec 2020 Issue, Colin Clarke

This disc exemplifies many aspects of how contemporary music should be presented so it can shine: superb recording standards (achieved by producer James Ginsberg and engineer Bill Maylone), expert annotation, and performances of a standard up there with the likes of the Arditti Quartet. This showcase of three Pulitzer-winning composers is utterly remarkable.

The Third String Quartet by Israeli-American composer Shulamit Ran is titled *Glitter, Gloom, Shards, Memory*, a title that comes from an art exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2006/7 celebrating the work of artists of the Weimar Republic, *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*. Taking the glitter and doom parts, Ran fashions a tribute to the artist Felix Nussbaum (1904–1944), a German-Jewish painter who died in the Holocaust at Auschwitz. The painting reproduced in the booklet so evocatively and effectively is that of the 1943 *Self-Portrait with Jewish Identity Card*. Each of the four movements has a title. There is a feeling of remembrance and isolation to “That which happened” (it is telling the way a single voice at the beginning is joined, as if in support, by the other instrument). The intertwining of lines is impeccably realized by the Pacifica Quartet, with all four members equally in control of their instruments. As the music becomes more animated (the title is derived from Celan’s “das was geschah,” a phrase he used to refer to the Holocaust), it is their prowess as an ensemble that comes to the fore. “Menace,” the second movement, is a spooky dance, deconstructed and perhaps even manifesting Cubist tendencies while occasionally bursting out into foot-stomping exuberance, all in a sort of post-Bergian envelope. Emphasizing the visual-sonic link here, the third movement is entitled “If I perish—do not let my paintings die” and includes some of Ran’s most fascinating writing, creating textures that sound fresh and new. (Again, the performance is astonishing: the high, scampering violin figures sound perfectly judged, yet must create the most advanced challenges). There is here, perhaps, an element of Angst that links most closely to the string quartets of Janáček (even to the sustained high pitches), but this music is no sense derivative. The quote here comes from Nussbaum himself, before “*Shards, Memory*,” and the movement leads to the work’s final panel. Here the title refers back to the title of the work as a whole. Silence between phrases speak as eloquently as the phrases themselves; single lines reflect desolation. Memories of tragedy are of course intermingled with those of dance and of what life has to offer positively. The sheer accuracy of those lines is remarkable, as is the sense of unanimity when two voices speak in parallel intervals, as one. This is an astonishingly powerful piece

If the writing of Ran’s seems to fit the players like a glove, it is no accident. She became acquainted with the Quartet’s playing when they were in residence at the University of Chicago (Ran was Professor of Composition at the time, although she is now emerita). The Quartet’s members spoke of a special interest in art of the early 20th century, especially between the two World Wars. The piece was co-commissioned by a variety of organizations, one of which was Wigmore Hall in London, where the piece received its UK premiere by the Pacifica Quartet in March 2015; the encore to that concert (which also featured works by Beethoven and Mendelssohn) was the second movement, “Menace.” The present disc presents the world premiere recording of Ran’s Third Quartet.

I have praised the music of Jennifer Higdon before: her Naxos disc *Sky Quartet* shines out (Fanfare 37:3). It's time to do so again, for her *Voices* (1993) is a piece of stunning power that she dedicated to the Pacifica Quartet in 1997 after working with them on it (with both the composer and the quartet being early in their careers), four years after the work's composition. The first movement, "Blitz," positively blazes and pulses with energy. It benefits from a performance of ultra-tight rhythms, and this is one such account. Even the trickiest ascent up to the top of the violin holds no perils for first violinist Simin Ganatra. But maybe it is in the quiet backgrounds of "Soft Enlacing," the central panel, that Higdon impresses the most. This is truly impressive music, pulsating with the very essence of life itself. The finale, "Grace," put me in mind of a slow movement from a late Beethoven string quartet, as peaceful in a highly spiritual way. "The quiet presence that exists in a being's soul" is how Higdon puts it; that quiet spot within us that remains calm no matter what vortices of drama goes on around it. A performance of *Voices* on Naxos (Nicolas Kitchen, Melissa Kleinhardt, violins; Hsin-Yun Huang, viola; Wilhelmina Smith, cello) offers very close competition. It is perhaps even more energetic than the Pacifica Quartet in the first movement, but cedes to them overall for a sheer grasp of Higdon's expressive canvas.

Finally, the haunting sound of an alto saxophone joins the Quartet for Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's 2007 Quintet. That singing quality is augmented by what the composer describes as the sax's "sassy" nature. (Is that a distorted soft-shoe shuffle in the first movement?) Rhythmic dance continues to haunt the music in the second movement, the sax giving a splendidly unexpected quality to unison passages with the strings. The finale moves from a sax melody that really does penetrate the soul in its melancholy to more active waters, but throughout there seems to be a core of melancholy.

This phenomenally interesting music is performed to the very highest standards and recorded in fine sound.