

STORYTELLER: CONTEMPORARY CONCERTOS FOR

TRUMPET • Mary Elizabeth Bowden, David Dash^{1,2} (tpt); Yvonne Lam¹ (vn); Allen Tinkham, cond; Chicago Youth SO • ÇEDILLE 229 (68:15)
reviewed from MP3 files, 44.1 kHz

STEPHENSON ¹*The Storyteller. Scram!.* **CLARICE**

ASSAD *Bohemian Queen: Concerto for Trumpet and String*

Orchestra. VIVIAN FUNG *Concerto for Trumpet and Chamber*

Orchestra. TYSON GHOLSTON DAVIS ²*Veiled*

Light. SNIDER Caritas. ESMAIL Rosa de Sal

To say I was impressed by Mary Elizabeth Bowden's playing in her previous release, *Reverie*, on the Summit label (*Fanfare* 42:6) is an understatement. This time, the first note we hear is not stratospheric, as was the case with *Reverie*, but it is similarly perfectly placed. Here we hear the chamber version of James M. Stephenson's *The Storyteller*, originally commissioned for Richard Stoelzel by Grand Valley State University. *Storyteller* also holds an offstage trumpet part (played by David Dash) and a solo violin (here Yvonne Lam; the composer's wife was the inspiration for this idea). A second inspiration is the trumpet playing of Adolph "Bud" Herseth (1921–2013) of the Chicago Symphony, to whom the work is dedicated, and specifically a performance of Mussorgsky's *Pictures*. Yet another inspiration is the trumpet part of Stravinsky's 1917 *Song of the Nightingale* (again, specifically, in Reiner's stunning 1956 Chicago recording). The use of the offstage trumpet is inspired, and the work is poignant indeed. The "storyteller" of Stephenson's title is of course Herseth (again there is an external inspiration, in this case an article that spoke of Herseth's storytelling abilities). This is a musically rich *in memoriam* of great emotive power; and do read Stephenson's own notes, as they too are a powerful tribute to Herseth. The Çedille recording is exemplary. Every detail of the string parts is laid bare, and the perspective is perfect, as is the placement of trumpet and violin soloists. The music is lush, so the analytical aspect of the recording allows inner processes to be clear. I referred to Çedille's all-Stephenson disc as a "must-have" in *Fanfare* 42:1; this continues the trend.

The piece *Bohemian Queen* by Clarice Assad is inspired by the art of Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–77), an artist whose output puts me in mind of the paintings of Leonora Carrington. Abercrombie was known as "the queen of bohemian artists," hence the work's title. It was written for Bowden and the Chicago Youth Symphony. The openness and sometime bleakness of the first movement clearly

reflects its inspiration (and its title), “Girl Searching,” a painting by Abercrombie from 1945. While Abercrombie was very much inside the jazz scene of her time, this movement is more classically oriented. There is an ease of flow that is beautifully mirrored in Bowden’s florid delivery. The second movement is inspired by “The Stroll” (1943). It might depict a subject walking with her pet, but this is a nocturnal setting, and a somewhat disquieting one. The artist seemingly seeks to distance us, the viewers, from the subject, and initially that seems to be Assad’s script, too. But the music warms via the string harmonies, and Abercrombie’s love of jazz wins out at last. The finale is marked “Hyde Park Jam” (I assume the South Chicago neighborhood and not *confiture*). Indeed, a walking bass and clicked fingers take us to party time. Assad chooses to depict an imaginary party instead of a specific painting here, and what fun it is. There is something, too, about music of this ilk being performed with razor-sharp ensemble, as it is here. The upper strings of the Chicago Youth Symphony have a unanimity up high that is most commendable. All have a good go at swinging; Bowden plays with her usual consummate ease and tremendous style. Notes bent via the lip are particularly impressive, as is her rapid tonguing (triple-tonguing, I assume). I have come across Clarice Assad before: Percussion works on Third Coast Percussion’s disc *Archetypes* (also on *Çedille*, reviewed by myself in *Fanfare* 44:5) spring to mind, and in very positive terms. For the more lyrical side of Assad, try her Violin Concerto on a disc entitled *Concertos in D Major* on the NSS label, where violinist Nadja Solerno-Sonnenberg is joined by Marin Alsop and the Colorado Symphony. The first movement, simply marked *Molto espressivo*, glows radiantly; the second movement, *Andante espressivo*, does so hardly less; while the finale, *Con fuoco*, brings back that rhythmically infectious side of Assad. (Salerno-Sonnenberg is a fabulous violinist, too; that disc was reviewed by Robert Maxham in *Fanfare* 30:1.)

Written in 2019 for both E♭ trumpet (as opposed to the more usual B♭ instrument) and flugelhorn, Vivian Fung’s Concerto for Trumpet and Chamber Orchestra initially focuses on a soliloquizing trumpet against dissonant, sliding gestures from the orchestra. This is harder-edged than anything so far. Perhaps that dissonance has to do with the inspiration: not only Bowden, but her striving to survive in the male-dominated field of the trumpet. One can hear the tension in such moments as, almost exactly halfway through, the almost Shostakovich-like momentum of lower strings and the percussive outbursts create a wall of sound against which the trumpet must squeal and rail. This offers a new spin on the traditional solo-versus-tutti dynamic that characterized in particular concertos of the Romantic era. Demands on the soloist are high indeed, and Bowden seems to exult in them. All

credit is due to conductor Allen Tinkham, too, for instilling the feeling of a live performance into this recording.

Although I personally have not reviewed any of Vivan Fung's music before, there is a fair amount in the *Fanfare* Archive (look under both "Fung" and V. Fung") One thing is for sure: I do need more music of Vivian Fung in my life. Strangely, the notes in the Çedille release for Fung's work are short, and one is directed to a URL which, from paper product, one then has to copy out. It's a bit clumsy, really, and the link tells us little else apart from premiere details (Bowden with the Erie Philharmonic on March 7, 2020, at the Warner Theater in Erie, PA). The weblink does quote a review, which posits that this must surely be the first concerto written by a female North American composer for a female trumpeter.

Scored for two trumpets and string orchestra (Bowden is once more joined by David Dash), *Veiled Light* (2021) by Tyson Gholston Davis is once more inspired by a painting, this time Whistler's *Nocturne: Black and Red—Back Canal, Holland* (c. 1883–84). The first movement is (pardon the pun) a reflection of the way the buildings are reflected so perfectly in the waters, as if the water is not moving. Musical stasis is achieved by icy string chords, while the two trumpets, nicely spatially separated in the recording, soliloquize. Bowden and Dash seem equally matched. In a live performance, they would be seen to be at opposite ends of the stage. It is amazing how much power shrill upper sting dissonance can achieve. The second movement (of two) is marked "Skittish, marcato"; despite the "skittish" indication, it is the "marcato" that is more prevalent. The trumpets, spatially separated, indulge in dialog, like two good friends who can finish each other's sentences. This is a fascinating piece.

My previous exposures to the music of Sarah Kirland Snider have all been positive. Her *Caritas* (after Hildegard von Bingen) is no exception. Immediately more palatable than the Davis, and played on flugelhorn with strings and harp, the piece is an arrangement of a song with a text that Snider fashioned from Hildegard's writings about "caritas" (charity). The original song appears on Emily D'Angelo's debut DG album *enargeia*, where the singer is joined by the Matangi Quartet. While in the DG recording one can hear almost a "hocketing" effect from the strings, that feeling is blunted in the transference to string orchestra. Bowden "sings" just as effectively as D'Angelo, though.

The composer Reena Esmail has impressed on multiple past occasions, with her *The Light is the Same* in its trio version by the Aglow Trio (*Fanfare* 47:3), her *Rang de Basant* (Nicholas Phillips' disc *shift*, 42:6), and her *Project W* (Çedille, 42:6). Her *Rosa de Sal* (2023) is linked to a written text, Pablo

Neruda's *Love Sonnet XVI*, which is reproduced in the booklet in a translation by Mark Eisner. Again, this was originally a song, and the music is based on a raga, *Puriya Dhanashree*. That was a love song, so here is a "love vocalise," expansive and overtly Romantic, but with its Romanticism tinged by the sounds of the Indian subcontinent. Bowden here is as near to vocal as a trumpet can get; this is a piece, and a performance, to go on immediate repeat on the player. Finally, we are back to Stephenson for *Scram!* (2018). Designed as a crazy sort of encore, it is the perfect helter-skelter *moto perpetuo* to close the disc. Virtuoso for all concerned, it fizzes with life.

Mary Elizabeth Bowden is one of the finest trumpeters in front of the public today; she gives her all for these composers, as do her colleagues. There is no way I could tell this was a "youth symphony orchestra" as opposed to a fully professional one. The age range of performers is 14 to 18. This disc is an astonishing achievement all round. **Colin Clarke**

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