

## CD Reviews

rhythmic sections for full quartet with single and double cadenzas. Saxofon Concentus immediately establish an astonishing sense of ensemble, the four instruments seemingly one when playing in rhythmic unison, yet able to define their individuality in the more conversational cadenzas. Dynamics are shaded beautifully and the tuning is faultless. Ness's *Phylloxera...* is another one-movement work which seems acutely intelligent, angular, at times whimsical; it is rather neutral emotionally but magical in its sudden dynamic and colour shifts. The remaining work, Thoresen's *Narrative*, was the longest and, for me, the most substantial of the programme: technically it is extremely demanding, calling for extremes of range, breath effects, slap-tonguing, pitch bending, and the like – yet never without a point. There is a sense of drama throughout, a feeling of poetic saga as the music ranges from dissonance to beautiful harmonies; lyricism too, with each voice taking a recitative during the piece, and when all four voices play together the music creates at times a feeling of a wildly folkish, unearthly choir. The ending is sublime, with rising lines seeming to create a floating, gliding sense of dissipation. I listened to it several times for sheer pleasure – comprehensible modernism indeed!

Overall this is an outstanding CD: well-recorded and presented with an attractive booklet which includes a translation into English. Saxofon Concentus are one of the finest quartets working in the world today. All of the members are individually excellent players, well-versed in contemporary techniques as well as the traditional virtues of tuning, tone, phrasing, and dynamic control. The group can sound by turn brilliant, hard-edged, meaty, dark, ethereal, but most impressive is the collectiveness of their playing – they really sound of one mind rather than four, which is perhaps the highest compliment I can pay a chamber music group. Aside from their playing I admire also the quality of their vision in encouraging composers to create a unique body of works for them while not forsaking the standard repertoire. This is a well thought out programme of often dissonant yet highly substantial music, brilliantly played – highly recommended.

Kyle Horch

## FOLIAGE

Riverdale Ensemble (clarinet, violin, piano)

Gál - Trio, Foley - *Hommages à Henri Rousseau*, Khachaturian - Trio

Furiant Productions FM DC 4619-2

Website: [www.riverdaleensemble.com](http://www.riverdaleensemble.com)



The swing of the pendulum between popularity and neglect is a trajectory of infinite imponderables. How much do we, as listeners, influence the popularity stakes, or just how much are we manipulated by the programme makers? Are we given what they think we want, or what they think we ought to want? One only has to consider the fall and rise of Sibelius during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the acceptance of Walton as one of our highly personalised contemporary composers, only to find him dubbed the arch-romantic within his own lifetime.

Two of the composers on this CD epitomise such aspects in the category of inexplicable neglect. The Austrian born Hans Gál fell victim to the Nazi regime, which dismissed him from his post as director of music at the Mainz Municipal College of Music and also banned his music. He eventually settled in Edinburgh in 1938, and became lecturer at Edinburgh University from 1945 to 1964. He was one of the founders of the Edinburgh Festival. A prolific writer of operas, symphonies and chamber music (including a Suite for Alto Saxophone and Piano) he was author of books on Brahms, Wagner and Schubert. Although his music incurred the Nazi's wrath he was far from being an avant-gardist, his music being imbued with post-Brahmsian romanticism. His trio for clarinet, violin and piano is in three movements, firmly in the German classical tradition, and ranging from sonata form through a lyrical caprice to a finale of theme and variations. The warm clarinet tone of Stephen Fox is a dominant feature, exhibiting delicacy of shading and phrasing to enhance this very attractive work. Considering Hans Gál's output, one cannot help but wonder why we hear so little of it.

In a slightly different compartment lies the Trio for the same instruments by Khachaturian. His ballet suites and concertos for piano and violin have achieved enormous popularity over

the years, yet his excellent cello concerto is rarely heard. The trio on this CD is an early work from 1932, but has never achieved the exposure enjoyed by his other larger works. Folk-song based, it leans heavily on the ethnic strains from Armenian and Uzbek sources. Free and improvisatory in character, it has an immediate appeal with its flavour of exoticism. There is not such a vast repertoire for this instrumentation, and again one can only wonder at the scarcity of performance for such a delightful work.

New to our ears is the *Hommage à Henri Rousseau* written in 1999 by the Canadian composer Daniel Foley and commissioned by the Riverdale Ensemble. A real winner in every sense (both from listener's and player's viewpoint) it is in four movements, each depicting a painting by Rousseau, and couched in a variety of styles from baroque, raga and folk tune to near jazz. Immediately appealing to the ear, it utilises many compositional devices. A hypnotic use of bass clarinet in the second *Dream* movement gives way to *Carnival*, based on *La Folia*, originally a Portuguese carnival dance. The final movement *Clemence* is a Gallic-inspired *tour de force* in the form of a *valse*, which should inspire all those seeking innovative new material. No publisher is given, but the source is given as manuscript. This is a work worthy of wider recognition than its manuscript status would imply, so investigation is recommended.

The Riverdale Ensemble is based at the University of Toronto, and features music 'from the other 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the romantic idiom that speaks both to the heart and the head'. It is their quoted intention of bringing neglected music to the fore, and pianist Ellen Meyer, violinist Daniel Kushner, and clarinetist Stephen Fox constitute a trio of elegant talent who make this CD of mainly unfamiliar work a worthwhile experience.

Gordon Lewin

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