Ever After.

American Record Guide, Sept-Oct, 2003, by Ritter

SCARLATTI: 3 Etudes; BACH: Etude after WTC Prelude 6; LUSSIER: 5 Caprices; PROKOFIEFF: Bassoon Sonata Nadina Mackie Jackson, bn; David Swan, p Ball Media 1809--47 minutes (www.nadinaanackiejackson.com)

Ms Jackson is a noted Canadian bassoonist who spent 10 years with the Montreal Symphony and currently enjoys a career as a soloist, teacher, and visual artist as well (her work graces the cover). My first acquaintance with her was via the extraordinarily talented Caliban Bassoon Quartet, the finest such ensemble that I have had the opportunity to review (Nov/Dec 2001 and "best of the year").

But a solo recital is a different animal indeed, and I approached this with great anticipation. I am happy to report that there is only a little to complain about, but duty binds me, so let's get the negative out of the way.

The total time is stingy. The notes are printed in absolutely the tiniest font size I have ever seen in a CD booklet, and I had to spring for some reading glasses to decipher them. Even my wife couldn't read them, and her eyesight is much better than mine. There is room in the booklet for larger print, so I don't understand who was thinking what. You can find the notes verbatim on her website, but that won't help the web-less very much.

On my large system, the sound in the solo works had a nice ambiance that also served to blur the edges of the tone. On a smaller system the sound became more focussed. I don't know if it was my listening room or the recording. This isn't really a complaint so much as an observation, since the sound otherwise is fine, especially in the Prokofieff.

We start with three "etudes" after the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, arranged in imaginative fashion by Michael Sweeney. These can't have been easy to play, and Ms Jackson is a fine Scarlattian, though these versions will not efface memories of the genuine article. The same holds true for the WTC etude--interestingly done, and very musical, but it sort of leaves you hankering for the real thing.

The Five Caprices by Mathieu Lussier are something else altogether. These are cannily crafted works, done over a period of several years, and therefore lacking a unifying theme of any kind. But each is a self-contained entity with its own internal logic and structural basis. The five movements, or pieces, are 'Rapsodie', 'Elegie', 'Tarantelle', 'Lamento', and 'Fantasie'. Each exercises different aspects of bassoon technique, and most are around 2 minutes long and superb. They are wonderfully accessible, and I would be sweating bullets if I were a bassoonist faced with this gymnastic challenge, but Ms Jackson takes it all in stride and makes it sound easy.

But the last piece, and the best here is the violin-flute-now-bassoon sonata by Prokofieff. Though composed for flute, David Oistrakh premiered it on violin in 1944, and the two instruments have been fighting over it since. The lower parts never quite sound right on most flute recordings, but it doesn't seem especially idiomatic for the violin, either. Now we can add a third contestant, and I think we have a winner. It sounds like it was composed for the instrument, and that is more than we can say for the other two! The jaunty, tongue-in-cheek banter between soloist and piano fits the bassoon perfectly, and in fact Prokofieff's entire lyric-combative idiom is tailor-made for this range and sound. Ms Jackson and Mr Swan have a real feeling for how this music should resound, and I can't imagine a better performance.