September/October 2004

Notes from Abroad

Bitsch, Schurmer, Tansman, Lussier, Hedges, Duclos, Schreck
Nadina Mackie Jackson, bn; David Swan, Aleks Schurmer, p
Odd Bird Studios—73 minutes
(14 Halton Street, Toronto, Canada M6J 1R3; www.nadina.ca)

A note from Ms Jackson tells me that all of this music is "very dear" to her, and all of it was conceived for bassoon. Well, perhaps all except *This is what happens when I care* by Aleks Schürmer, originally scored for bass clarinet. Never mind; it transferred well to the bassoon, and his other two works here, *Berceuse/Muzette* and *Three Melancholy Songs* are major discoveries. It is very rare to run across pieces of music on this sort of collection that strike the same emotional chords you normally experience when listening to your choice of favorite "greats", but this was exactly my response on first hearing—especially the latter work, with its inventive and highly musical use of glissandos between notes as an emotive device in one of the songs; it proves this young man (at 23 only a babe in arms) as someone to watch for many years. According to the notes he is a flutist and "self taught" composer. My advice to him would be to continue studying, for his is some of the most brilliant and exciting music to come my way. (But he should give up presented his name in all lower case letters—a needless and distracting affectation.)

Gustave Schreck (1849-1908) was a Leipzig-trained composer. I have yet to hear any music by him that is less than enjoyable and affirmative. His Oboe Sonata was covered in March/April 2002 on an album of romantic sonatas by Mark Weiger, and Kirstin Wolfe Jensen gave us a wonderful reading of this Bassoon Sonata in March/April of 2001. This one easily proves its equal, and both Jackson and pianist David Swan seem to exult in its fiery romantic spirit.

The *Sonatine* by Polish composer Alexandre Tansman is played by almost every bassoonist who can cope with its technical demands. Tansman spins a lot of notes, to be sure, but somehow he makes it work by not letting the piano compete with it. Stravinsky is felt everywhere in the percussive repeated chords of the piano, and most notably in II, where ghosts of *Le Sacre* haunt the bassoon melody; but where Stravinsky supplied tantalizing snippets of melody and was content to leave it at that, Tansman finishes the job and thereby makes himself more of an adherent to the school of Rachmaninoff. The last movement is a quick scherzo, fleet and nimble in harmony and melodic impulse, with some nasty tonguing problems for the bassoonist. A sonatine was never this tricky.

Opening this recital is the lovely Concertino by Marcel Bitsch. It is a sharp-witted, saucy piece that nevertheless contains some gorgeous French melody that reminds me of Ibert and some of Poulenc's more sober moments. The fluid and mellifluous *Fagottino* by Dukas student Ren, Duclos is another French work that sends one on an evening trip down the Seine, serene, relaxed, fleetingly spunky in it final nostalgic rondo.

John Hedges's *Blues for Laurie* was done for Laurie Altman, a dear friend of the composer, himself a student of Ned Rorem and Richard Danielpour at the Curtis Institute. As regular readers of this magazine know, I have little patience for the integration of jazz styles with serious music, feeling that both lose in the process, but this work is simple and forthright, using the form only as a springboard, and shorn of any outright "bluesiness". To me it sounds more like a primitive but very effective pavane.

31-year old Mathieu Lussier contributes two fine works to the program, *Le Rèvede L'Opritchnik*, and *Four Love Songs*. The former is a real tour de force, a rhapsody of tremendous emotion and turbulence, based on a book about 16th Century Russia and the brutal horror of Ivan the Terrible's secret police. Though his crimes were horrible, he did a lot of good for Russia in his earlier years, and this was also the time of the emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church as a factor in Russian life, thanks to the efforts of the saintly Metropolitan Makari. This piece is an effective fantasy gleaned from feelings found in the unnamed book, and is quite the stunner. The *Four Love Songs*, written for the composer's wife, are lovely things, melodic to a fault and harmonically gracious—a fine way to close this recital.

Ms Jackson is superb here, completely secure in her wide-ranging technique, presenting these varied pieces in appropriate style. Her sound is warm and clear (and Mr Swan plays with equal conviction), and this record must surely take its place with Kirsten Wolfe Jensen's as the two finest bassoon recitals I have been lucky enough to review. In my review of Jackson's album *Ever After* (Sept/Oct 2003) I was somewhat critical of the microscopic print in the notes and the short playing time. Well, she has rectified those problems in this release. The notes are evocative and informative and *readable*, and there's plenty of music.

RITTER