

ANDREW ADAMS

Composer Alex Shapiro enjoys an enormously successful career: the recipient of numerous commissions, fellowships, and awards, she has also produced over a dozen of her own recordings. First released in 2007, *Notes from the Kelp* is a compilation of eight chamber works written between 1996 and 2006. Shapiro wrote of her inspiration, “All of the music...in this collection was composed in Malibu, California, with the Pacific Ocean undulating in the background.” Anchored by three major works and including five shorter pieces, the album displays an extraordinary range of emotional intensity and instrumental color.

The most extended work on the disc, the three-movement *Current Events* for string quintet, is given a moving performance by the artists responsible for its premiere: Miwako Watanabe and Connie Kupka, violins; Victoria Miskolczy and David Walther, violas; and David Speltz, cello. The composer noted of the piece, “*Current Events* ponders the ocean’s tides as well as waves of a more internal, emotional nature.” Though Shapiro frequently makes connections to the ocean in the titles of her pieces and program notes, her work is neither obviously impressionistic nor narrowly programmatic; instead, the listener is free to take his or her own spiritual journey through each piece.

The first movement, “Surge,” features the solo cello throughout and favors the lower, darker ranges of all the instruments. The lyrical opening adagio quickly gives way to a central section with fast-paced, jagged dialogue between the players that reaches a frenzied climax. Without pause, the listener enters the troubled yet serenely beautiful second movement, “Ebb.” A yearning restlessness reminiscent of Shostakovich is expressed through a constant stream of melodic suspensions and resolutions punctuated by fidgety outbursts from the accompanying instruments. Extraordinarily poignant, “Ebb” is the emotional center of the work and one of the highlights of the disc. The closing allegro, “Rip,” is a nervous, constantly unfolding exchange of staccato moving notes and syncopated chords that pulls the listener in a myriad of directions. Growing increasingly turbulent, *Current Events* comes to a sudden, unsettling conclusion.

*At the Abyss*, for piano and percussion ensemble, is the composer’s reaction to “threatening and violent events throughout the world.” The first section of the opening movement features the piano and marimba in unison scale passages that rise threateningly before the listener; a brief lyrical respite leads to a restatement of the troubled first theme that, with its relentless brutality, brings the movement to a chilling end. The otherworldly atmosphere of the second movement, “Reflect,” is evoked through bowed percussion instruments and a wandering, improvisatory piano solo. Stark and chilling, this music invites the audience to do as the composer suggested: “step back to reflect on [the world] in grief.” The closing allegro, “Act,” is a brief scherzo that once again features the piano and marimba in unison riffs accompanied by a jazzy drum set. The piece finishes with the nervous energy of a combo ending a late-night jam session in a smoke-filled club.

Shapiro evokes an intriguing array of textures from the small ensemble of instruments, here expertly performed by pianist Teresa McCollough (who commissioned the piece), Thomas Burritt on marimba and vibraphone, and Peggy Benkeser on percussion. Winner of the Best Original Composition Award from Mu Phi Epsilon in 2003, *At the Abyss* is an exciting and approachable work that will no doubt find a wide audience in the coming years.

The performance of *Bioplasm* by the Los Angeles Flute Quartet (Colleen Carroll, Eileen Holt Helwig, Lisa-Maree Amos, and Peter Sheridan) is a virtuosic *tour de force* of balance and mood. Written for four performers who collectively play seven instruments and sing, the atmosphere oscillates between driving intensity and chant-like serenity. The composer explains that she wished to “create an organism from the four flutists that oozes across the sonic floor as a unified entity.” Judging by the growing number of

performances that *Bioplasm* is receiving around the world, Shapiro has succeeded in creating a living “organism” that is indeed taking on a life of its own.

The reviewer looks forward to experiencing a live performance of *Slipping*, the first track on the disc. This “world tour for anyone with attention deficit disorder” will leave listeners marveling again at Shapiro’s ability to conjure an astonishing kaleidoscope of sound from the simplest, most unexpected means. To imagine *Slipping*, picture Zorba the Greek drinking a piña colada and dancing a tango to the accompaniment of a Cuban band in a Japanese restaurant—and for good measure throw in a passing tribute to Elvis! Violinist Robin Lorentz, harpsichordist Kathleen McIntosh, and percussionist Dan Morris perform with obvious relish and somehow manage not to laugh out loud (a reaction Shapiro’s riotously eclectic score openly invites).

The shorter pieces on the disc are no less musically substantial than the larger works and would be valuable additions to any concert program. *For My Father*, movingly played by pianist Susanne Kessel, was originally a movement from *Piano Suite No. 1: The Resonance of Childhood*. The composer wrote of the haunting score, “As some notes fall downward and others struggle against the decline, the music reflects my experience of watching a brilliant and beloved parent’s irreversible descent into dementia.” Though only at the midway point of the recording, the listener may wish to pause the disc after experiencing this austere, deeply personal statement of loss.

“Phos Hilaron,” loosely translated as “Gladdening Light,” takes its title from a Christian hymn dating to the third century that was originally sung in early evening when lamps were first lighted. The only section on this recording from the six-movement *Evensong Suite*, the composer notes that this luminous music “celebrates the serenity and beauty of the setting sun.” Riding a pulsing wave of piano chords, a trio of wind instruments spins a fabric of meditative sound that culminates in a flash of brilliant color, like a flame coming to vivid life at dusk. Brice Martin, flute; Charles Boito, clarinet; Carolyn Beck, bassoon; and Frank Basile, piano, collectively deliver a sensitive, evocative account.

In *Music for Two Big Instruments*, Shapiro presents the partnership of a tuba player and pianist with “two contrasting themes, one up-tempo and the other nearly a jazz ballad, to showcase how beautiful and diverse this great instrument really is.” This highly attractive, compact piece in ABA form is a noteworthy addition to a repertoire sorely in need of serious works for this pairing. Alan Baer’s performance on the tuba is notable for a warm sound and energy to spare in the work’s fast sections; pianist Bradley Haag provides lively, solid support.

Finally, Leslie Lashinsky, contrabassoon; Dan Morris, percussion; and Alex Shapiro, electronic track, bring the menacing *Deep* to life. Inspired by “the depths of the translucent sea,” the contrabassoon rises out of an ominous pool of threatening sounds like an ancient creature emerging from the blackest depths of the water. In the middle section, flashes from rolled cymbals and high electronic sounds suggest shards of sunlight penetrating the ocean’s surface. Despite a momentary ascent, the bassoon finally plunges again into the silence of the darkness and cold. This intriguing soundscape brings the disc to a brooding conclusion.

Considered as a whole, this outstanding recording presents an engaging collection of pieces that consistently demonstrate the composer’s expert craftsmanship and clearly defined voice. Never rambling, Shapiro packs telling emotional explorations into concise formal structures that allow the audience to savor each moment. *Notes from the Kelp* is highly recommended not only as an enjoyable and varied listening experience, but also as a source of accessible and important new works by one of the most gifted composers active today.

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