

An Interview with Composer David Gompper

BY CARSON COOMAN

I've been a big fan of the music of David Gompper for a number of years and was thus pleased to have the chance to speak with him on the occasion of a new Naxos CD release (reviewed at the end of this article). Gompper has appeared frequently on recordings as both composer and pianist, but this is the first release devoted entirely to his work, and the first disc to contain any substantial quantity of his orchestral music.

David Karl Gompper (b.1954) was educated at the Royal College of Music in London and the University of Michigan. Since 1991 he has been based in America's heartland, where he has been a professor of music at the University of Iowa in Iowa City; he also serves as director of the university's prestigious Center for New Music. Started more than 40 years ago by Gompper's predecessor, longtime professor Richard Hervig, the CNM is one of America's most active centers for the promotion of contemporary music. Gompper has continued its tradition of concerts, tours, recordings, and guest artists.

Gompper is an obsessive perfectionist, and has built a catalog of works that maintain a remarkably high standard of excellence and speak with a voice of expressive power. For me, the most notable characteristic of his music has always been the deeply organic way he integrates simple material and its complex elaboration and development. Although this dichotomy is obviously part of the process of many composers, I know few as skilled as Gompper at consistently creating a single, inevitable musical arc. Every composer faces the challenge of devising a way by which to construct a piece from its basic material—straddling the line between clever-seeming development processes that are too arcane for audibility and overly pedestrian techniques that provide no intellectual engagement. Gompper has a gift for creating developmental processes that are satisfyingly inevitable to a first-time listener, yet sophisticated enough to provide continued enjoyment through ongoing familiarity with the music. Thus, Gompper's music never feels as though disparate elements are simply juxtaposed together. Rather, his pieces (most all of which are structured in a single, unfolding movement) have an inevitability to them that, at every point of the musical process, convinces the listener that everything is exactly as it should be.

The new CD features orchestral works recorded by the Royal Philharmonic in London, the most recent of many links that Gompper has had with England. "I grew up in San Diego but decided that I needed to leave for graduate work elsewhere," he says. "The musical culture of San Diego at that point hadn't become what it later would. Though I had composed, I was primarily a pianist and thus applied to Eastman and Juilliard in piano. I was waitlisted at both and so decided that this might be the sign to try something a bit different. I went to the library and looked up schools in England, since the language would obviously be no barrier. I wrote to the Royal College and the Royal Academy. The Academy didn't reply, but the College wrote back and told me that I had to audition in person. I did so and was accepted as a piano major. During my first year, I worked on my composition portfolio and switched to composition by my second year." At the Royal College, Gompper studied piano with the legendary Phyllis Sellick and composition with both Humphrey Searle and Jeremy Dale Roberts.

In addition to his ties with England, Gompper has also had a lifelong interest in Russia, which in the recent years has manifested itself in many musical connections. One of the works on the new Naxos disc, *Ikon*, is specifically connected to the mathematical dimensions and proportions of an Estonian ikon that Gompper obtained on one of his trips. "My family had a musical background," he says. "My grandmother went to Juilliard and Eastman as a pianist and my

grandfather in the 1940s and '50s was the chair of the music department of Thomas Jefferson High School, newly built in Brooklyn. When I was young, my grandmother once mentioned to me, 'Of course the Russians are the best musicians in the world. The Moscow Conservatory is the place to go as a pianist.' That planted the seed in me that if I wanted to be a serious musician, Russia was going to be a part of it. I started studying Russian, and my goal was to be able to understand the culture and learn the language. In the late 1990s, I went to Moscow with the musicologist Glenn Watkins when he was invited as a lecturer, and I began to meet composers: Irina Dubkova, Vladimir Tarnopolsky, and others. Then in 2003, I returned to Moscow on a Fulbright Fellowship. I've now been to Russia some 15–20 times since that initial visit with Glenn Watkins. I've also played and programmed a great deal of music by Russian composers in the USA."

Gompper's discography is evenly split between his work as a composer and as a pianist. This is rather unusual for a mid-career American composer. Most move out of their early performance activities (if they had any) and focus exclusively on composition, but Gompper has no intention of ever doing that. "I think it is absolutely crucial for composers to be out performing, still connected to live music-making in an active, personal way," he says. "I still keep learning by actually doing. I don't want it to be all cerebral, and the things I've learned from my work with singers and with instrumentalists like Wolfgang [David] are things that I could not have learned any other way. My father was an architect, and I remember him saying when I was very young that he actually missed the real draftsman side of the work: sitting down at the table and drawing things out. As he moved up into architectural administration he did less of this, and he regretted giving it up.

"I also feel it's important to be connected to the music of others in a tactile way. We need to be conscious of what we're doing in the context of a larger perspective by avoiding any kind of hermetical navel-gazing. By continuing to play as a pianist and by conducting so many works with the Center for New Music, I've learned innumerable things—especially pacing and timing—that I believe make me both a better composer and a better musician. I think 'the best composers are musicians,' and for me being a musician involves real, practical performance-based engagement."

All but one of the works on the new CD feature violinist Wolfgang David, who has been a significant part of Gompper's musical life for the last 10 years. Gompper has composed numerous works for David, and they have concertized and recorded extensively as a duo. "In the year 2000, the Viennese violinist Wolfgang David performed at the University of Iowa," Gompper recalls. "I was so impressed with his playing that I engaged him in a recital at the Wigmore Hall, and suggested we work together as a duo. Since then we have performed over 100 recitals, mixing both contemporary with standard 19th-century repertoire. Here was an amazing opportunity to learn more deeply how to compose for the violin. I can tell you that it changed my life. In addition to the existing violin/piano piece I had already at that point, I immediately wrote two more duets based on Irish fiddle tunes, *Star of the County Down* and *Music in the Glen*. In the years that have followed, numerous other works have emerged, including the Violin Concerto."

The major work on the new album is the Violin Concerto, which I believe to be Gompper's finest composition to date. It is a piece that unfolded over a long period of time: "In 2005, Wolfgang encouraged me to write a concerto for him, which I began during a three-week artist-residency at the Banff Centre over the winter break. I continued to collect material and sketch out ideas, and eventually I wrote a duo called *Echoes*. We performed the work over 20 times in concert, and before each of the performances, Wolfgang and I reconsidered every note, phrase, and section. I would add or subtract material until a 'final' version emerged. I then allowed myself about three years to orchestrate *Echoes* into the Violin Concerto. I spent one entire summer on this effort, only to start again completely from scratch one year later. From these experiences—

duet performances and three different orchestrations—I learned pacing and solutions of instrumentation. The importance of scale determined how long a certain phrase would last. A musical idea that is eight bars long might satisfy the listener in the duet version. But I realized that that same phrase, in the concerto, was required to be 12 or even 16 bars in length. There were then two live performances with orchestra before the recording sessions in London. After each session, I made further revisions and edits. Then, by the time we recorded, the work had reached its final form.”

I ask Gompper about his future projects. “The next major endeavor is another disc with the Royal Philharmonic,” he says. “This will be an album of three concerti—a clarinet concerto, a piano concerto, and a double concerto for violin/cello.”

Why concerti? “I’m deeply interested in writing pieces that connect to the deep traditions of instrumental repertoire. I want to write concerti that are perfectly suited to the instrument and that work within the tradition of standard repertoire that instrumentalists love. The goal is to make the music totally natural to the player in terms of playing technique. The recording of the disc is a few years away, because I need to write the new concerti and have them tested in performance. Concerti absolutely must work on a live stage in real performance. Far too many concerti work only on recording.

“I’m also in the early stages of planning for an opera. The university here has been asking me to write one for a few years now, but I’m still trying to find the right librettist and story. In the meantime, I continue to refine my vocal writing, most recently with a large-scale song cycle titled *The Animals*, on new poems written by a former faculty colleague, the wonderful poet Marvin Bell, whose words I’ve set numerous times in the past. Baritone Stephen Swanson and I have performed this cycle as part of a larger program of animal songs by various composers, and we’ll be going into the studio later this year to commit it to disc.”