

FEATURE REVIEW by David DeBoor Canfield



GOMPPER Violin Concerto.¹ Ikon.¹ Flip. Spirals² • ^{1,2}Wolfgang David, ²Peter Zazofsky (vn); Emmanuel Siffert, cond; Royal PO • NAXOS 8.559697 (70: 28)

Prior to hearing the works on this CD, I had heard only one piece of music by David Gompper, on a CD of saxophone music by University of Iowa composers. That work impressed me, and so I was happy when the present disc arrived from Fanfare Central. It would appear that the CD under review is the first all-Gompper release to appear in this magazine, although individual works of this composer have been given mixed reviews by several Fanfare colleagues. Walter Simmons (24:3) found his Anon for oboe and piano to be a dry, colorless, quasi-atonal dialogue, but Robert Carl (32:5) found him to be a composer of substance. For the music under review here, I must cast my vote squarely with Carl. Gompper's music works on every level for me.

Gompper's style intermixes passages of fairly straightforward tonality with others of dense chordal textures and tonally diffuse lines. Occasionally one hears passages that sound as if they are written with aleatoric notation, although without having scores in hand, I cannot be certain of that. The Violin Concerto that opens this CD was completed in 2009, and was written for Wolfgang David, who performs it here. The concerto begins with three chords in the solo instrument that serve to make a dramatic announcement that something important is coming. Gompper doesn't disappoint us as he leads us through the energetic Vivace, Fuoco, the rhapsodic and improvisatory Andante, Cadenza, and the brief, scintillating Presto. The dynamic impact of the piece reminds me quite a bit of the violin concerto of William Schuman, long a work that has been a particular favorite of mine.

Ikon, another work written for solo violin and orchestra, was inspired by an icon the composer purchased on a concert tour through Estonia. Its structure was dictated by the proportions typically used in Eastern Orthodox iconography. These were created through the use of string and compass, and Gompper has used the same ratios in the present work. Its main motive is derived from three layers of pitch matrices created by a triangle derived from the crosses of the stole in the icon. Tonal centers in this work are less well defined than they are in the concerto, but the work produces a powerful impression. Thus Gompper shows himself to be the opposite of an iconoclast, whatever that would be.

Flip is the only work on the CD that doesn't call for a solo violin. It was composed for the Kansas City Chamber Orchestra, using the meaning of the word of the title in various playful ways. Thus, the three elemental ideas from which the work is generated "flip" from one register to another, or from one section of the orchestra to another, and eventually "flip out" through extended emotional eruptions. Along the way, a snippet of the theme of the popular 1970s TV program Flipper is heard. Clearly, Gompper has a sense of humor, and it comes through in this piece. Somehow, though, he seems to have missed putting any reference to comedian Flip Wilson in the piece.

The CD closes with Spirals, a work for two violins and orchestra based on the Fibonacci series, beloved (I suppose) by mathematicians. This series (it's infinite, but begins with 1, 1, 2, 3, 5 ...) is derived by adding each number in it to the next one to produce the subsequent number. A number of composers, perhaps most notably Béla Bartók (e.g. in his Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta) have used this series to structure their music, even as painters have in many works of art. In nature, one finds the series cropping up in the spirals of seashells and

leaves on plants. Gompper has applied the Fibonacci series to virtually every parameter in this work, including pitch distribution, density control, and formal and microrhythmic structural formulations. The two “spirals” of the work are eight and 13 minutes in duration, two consecutive numbers found in the series. The composer has connected them end to end such that the object forms spirals both outward and back inward. It might sound complicated, but the piece seems perfectly structured. I am particularly taken by its close, a duet in harmonics for the two soloists, where the accompaniment gradually fades away. I cannot think of any other piece I’ve ever heard that sounds anything like it.

The playing of Wolfgang David is strong, exuberant, and well focused throughout his solos on this CD; likewise that of Peter Zazofsky, who joins him in Spirals. Emmanuel Siffert and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra provide solid support in all four pieces, and sonics are rich and warm. Kudos to Naxos for this one—it’s definitely worth picking up. **David DeBoor Canfield**