


FEATURE REVIEW by Jerry Dubins

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

As regular readers know, contemporary music, especially of the avant-garde variety, is not my bailiwick. However, if the composer is American and of the baby-boomer generation, there's a good chance he has turned away from the more militant extremism of his forebears born one to two decades earlier. In other words, making noise as opposed to making music is, for the most part, and for the nonce at least, no longer in fashion.

David Gompper is one of a number of post-World War II American composers who has followed a moderate or centrist modernist path, producing works in a wide range of genres that have met with both critical acclaim and audience appreciation. Bicoastal, he grew up in New York and California.

Writing about Gompper for *Composer Profiles*, Carson Cooman notes that few composers are as skilled as Gompper at consistently creating a single, inevitable musical arc, something I've referred to on a number of occasions as the art of continuation, a component crucial to music of any era.

The Violin Concerto on this disc, completed in 2009, is a real beauty. Contrary to Cooman's observation about most of Gompper's works being structured in a single, unfolding movement, the Violin Concerto, formally at least, follows a traditional three-movement (fast-slow-fast) classical design. The musical vocabulary is advanced and modernistic, with angular rhythms and percussive effects in the orchestra, but the solo part remains rooted in fundamentally lyrical gestures. Gompper never forgets that the violin is a melody instrument, and his writing for it is shapely and idiomatic.

The opening Vivace, Fuoco movement has a driving primitive dance-like force to it that puts me in mind every now and then of the Sibelius concerto. That impression is carried into the Andante, which begins with a passage in the clarinets that is not entirely dissimilar to the beginning of the second movement in the Sibelius, not that you would mistake the Gompper for it. The slow movement is of a transfixing beauty; it literally gives me chills. It's hard to describe its narrative content and emotional effect. The violin sings a dolorous yet somehow comforting silver-threaded song suspended above a sinewy, ethereal accompaniment in the orchestra. The mood is sustained for more than seven minutes, at which point the violin begins a solo cadenza, continuing to the end of the movement, which fades away in a sequence of high harmonics. One is not even aware that the third movement has begun, for it picks up where the previous movement left off. If Gompper should happen to read this, I hope he will not take offense at my saying that as the violin picks up speed to the marked Presto, I did a double-take, certain I had been transported to the beginning of the last movement of Tchaikovsky's concerto, for that's exactly what it sounds like. Was this Gompper's model? I don't know, but it's extremely effective. The Russian element pervades the entire movement, perhaps no surprise considering that Gompper studied in Russia on a Fulbright scholarship, teaching, performing, and conducting at the Moscow Conservatory. Short as it is, the finale whips up tremendous excitement and ends on the kind of consonant final cadence calculated to bring an audience to its feet cheering. I hereby

pronounce Gompper's Violin Concerto another masterpiece added to the violin concerto repertoire.

Spirals for two violins and chamber orchestra was written in 2007 and has been recorded before. In fact, it was reviewed in another recording by Colin Clarke in *Fanfare* 33:1. Gompper tells us in his booklet note that the piece makes use of the Fibonacci sequence, a number series of 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144 ..., said to be observed in nature, art, music, and mathematics. Since such things fascinate me, I did some reading online to try to educate myself as to the meaning of this. Fibonacci, it seems, was a medieval scientist who, in 1202, set out to record the breeding cycle of rabbits. What he found was that if you started with one pair of rabbits, the number of bunny pairs progressed exactly according to the above series, so that at the end of 12 months you would have 144 pairs. If none of the rabbits died, at the end of the second year you would have 46,368 pairs, or $25 \times 32 \times 7 \times 23$. This same series has been noted in the numbers of petals on flowers, in the chambers of Nautilus sea shells, and in spiral forms in nature, which is why I'm guessing Gompper called his piece *Spirals*. As a theory of how things work, the idea has been applied to fractal geometry and even economics. The latter led me to wonder: If my reviews proliferated like Fibonacci's rabbits, how much would I earn in two years? One must have goals, after all.

I won't pretend to understand exactly how this translates into music, but Gompper does state in his notes to *Spirals* that "the Fibonacci series is applied to all musical parameters, including pitch distribution, density control, and formal and micro-rhythmic structural formulations." I'm impressed, but what does it sound like? If you'll excuse the mixed metaphor, ultimately, music must come face to face with the only arbiter that matters, the ear. And on that score, I find myself not as sympathetic to *Spirals* as I am to the Violin Concerto.

To be sure, there are some atmospheric moments, as for example the delicately accompanied duetting between the two violins beginning at 6:53 which sustains the eerie crepuscular mood for the next four and a half minutes. But on the whole, the morphing from one section or block of the piece to the next does not strike me as having the same strength of logical connectivity to it as is evidenced in Gompper's other works on the disc. Perhaps at some level the brain does sort out the mathematics secreted in the written notes, but if so, it's not a discovery that arouses much of an emotional response.

Ikon for violin and orchestra is another mathematically derived composition, but its basis is not quite as arcane as that of *Spirals*. This time (2008), Gompper was inspired by the proportional placement of objects in the work of 19th-century Russian iconographers—something to do with circles and arcs laid out by lengths of string used as a compass, and how that translates into "pitch matrices revealed specifically through a 'window, as if looking into the spirit world,' created by the triangle."

The notion of spiritual mysteries concealed within the relationship between music and number has been with us since the Middle Ages, so it wouldn't be fair to criticize Gompper for ascribing the same sort of extramusical meaning to mathematical formulas he uses as a basis for some of his works. But again, if he happens to read this, I hope he will take it as a compliment when I say that he doesn't need to rely on such conceits to write magnificent music. I suspect that *Ikon* would have turned out just as wonderfully if Gompper had based it on the geometric pattern of dimples in a golf ball (I've probably just given him the idea for his next composition), or on no mathematical, spatial, or proportional formula at all. For all intents and purposes, *Ikon* is a violin concerto with a fanciful name. It's in a single, extended, 18-and-a-half-minute movement, and, like the formally titled Violin Concerto, it's a strikingly beautiful piece.

Flip, pardon the pun, is the flipside of Gompper, figuratively and literally. It was written in 1993 for the Kansas City Chamber Orchestra, and was intended as a kind of playful, even cartoonish, orchestral divertissement. Snippets from the 1970s TV show Flipper are quoted, as is a samba from the 1985 film Brazil. Gompper's score is a fun piece that plays with various slang uses of the word "flip," as in "flipping out" and "flipping someone off."

As an introduction to this very talented composer, I strongly recommend this CD. Violinists Wolfgang David and Peter Zazofsky sound born to their parts, the Royal Philharmonic is, as you would expect, superb, Emmanuel Siffert has the measure of the music in his baton, and Naxos's sound is spectacular. **Jerry Dubins**