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CD Review by Robert Carl

MIDWEST AMERICAN PIANO PROJECT • Stacey Barelos (pn) • ALBANY TROY 1069 (56:41)

GOMPPER Hommage à W. A. DAHN Downward Courses. MAKI Lake Sonata. ALLEMEIER Quiet Music. BARELOS Free and Unticketed. DANGERFIELD 2 Geometric Etudes

The title of this collection could be off-putting to some who will brace behind their coastal defenses (Left and Right). But they'd miss a good show. This disc is testimony to how much substantial music is growing in our backyards, throughout every corner of the nation. Indeed, the only sad thing one ponders is how many very good composers there are out there, and how hard it is for any to get the recognition they deserve as a result.

This project has David Karl Gompper (b. 1955) as its godfather, since most of the other composers studied with him at University of Iowa. And Gompper comes off as a composer of substance and obviously a teacher of distinction. His own piece, Hommage à W. A. (2001), does not refer to Mozart, as a casual perusal might suggest, but rather to William Albright, the composer and organist who taught at the University of Michigan, was a master of ragtime, and died at the unnatural age of 54. Full of stirring fanfare figures (without ever getting bombastic), polytonal harmonies, sparkling passagework, and cakewalking dance material, it's a compact tour de force.

Gompper's students' music is similarly thoughtful, expressive, and crafted. The 2007 Lake Sonata of David Maki (b. 1966) is the most limpid and impressionistic work on the program, but its four short movements combine to form a convincing formal progression from lovely stasis to a rather noble apotheosis. Downward Courses (2006) by Luke Dahn (b. 1976) is the most overtly modernistic work on the program, with its angular motives and expressionistic explosions. And while it says the least to me of the set, it is still blessed with a vigorous rhythmic sense. Quiet Music (2006) by John Allemeier (b. 1970) has a sweet sense of mystery—pointillistic melodies above a tolling pedal at the outset, developing into a quirky little dance that just as easily evaporates into the opening texture.

Stacey Barelos (b. 1978) is, of course, the soloist for the recording, and her 2007 Free and Unticketed is a subtly colored sound poem structured around a little waltz. Joseph Dangerfield (b. 1977) is represented by two short works he calls Geometric Etudes: "Eadem mutto resurgo" (2003) and "Tryglyph" (2007). These are knotty and gnomic, but happily still expressive, especially the second, which ends with richly consonant bass chords rotating beneath a starry sonic firmament.

Barelos is a marvelous pianist. I'm struck by the variety of colors she can simultaneously coax from the instrument, helping to clarify complex textures and bring out the dialogues inherent in the music's counterpoint.

Gregory Marion's program notes are for me the only flaw in the production. They provide a far too extensive analytic exegesis, which tends to obscure the individual character of each piece, and makes the program seem far grayer than it actually is. I would have preferred to have the composers give us their own impressions, which I suspect would have been much more helpful and to the point. But this aside, a very pleasant surprise, and for me, this one's a keeper.
Robert Carl