

Review of Lady Huang's Album by Pamela Hickman

"Lady Huang's Album" - music for one or two harpsichords - is a new and unique recording presenting new music of living composers from Australia, Italy and the Americas and performed by two renowned keyboard artists - Australian-born Diana Weston and Israeli-born Michael Tsalka. Several of the works were written for them.

Four of the works on the recording are written for four hands (with Tsalka playing the primo part in pieces written for two harpsichords), the first being "Tilting at Windmills" (2017) by Australian composer and actress May Howlett (b.1931), a work inspired by Cervantes' tale of Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza. Of the musical elements suggesting Howlett's tongue-in-cheek but endearing description of the characters, the Spanish aspect - harmonic and rhythmic - is quite dominant (we even hear what a castanet effect). The composer refers to "the Don's majestic chords and the squire's erratic scale passages" in a colourful scene that alternates between gently appealing whimsy and intensity. Another work, this time strongly Australian in subject is "Crimson Rosella", by musicologist/composer, broadcaster and writer Ann Carr-Boyd (b.1938); this was commissioned by Diana Weston for herself and Michael Tsalka, to be played on two harpsichords. Titled "in honour of one of Australia's most spectacular and beautiful birds", the piece consists for four sections, some of its material adapted from earlier works of Carr-Boyd. A mix of tonal and atonal modes, I think I heard the bird's wing flutterings and bird call motifs. As the work progresses, the potpourri of dances and intensely loaded chords seems to move away from the bird, or does Boyd-Carr perhaps aim to describe the observer's emotions on viewing the most splendid of parrots with its dramatic, eye-catching markings? Composed in 2016 and dedicated to Tsalka and Weston, "Toccatà" by Mexican composer Leonardo Coral (b.1962), opens with small, separate jagged motifs, creating a "harsh dialogue", in the composer's own words. This is followed by a more pensive, introspective flowing section before returning to the feisty, teasing energy-infused ideas of the first section, thus to sign out of the masterful, quick-witted miniature. In the last work for four hands is "3 Stukken a 4 main" (Three Pieces for Four Hands) by Argentinian-born composer, arranger, harpsichordist and organist Pablo Escande (b.1971), the first of the miniatures is a fiery, intense and joyfully brash Capricho. In contrast, the middle piece titled "Naive" mixes harpsichord registers in amiable, cantabile and wistful expression. The final Toccatà is invigorating and entertaining in its driving, unrelenting Latin rhythms. I can only agree with Diana Weston, who claims that the skilfully written work "demonstrates the power, colour and vibrancy of the harpsichord supremely well." In these works, the experience Weston and Tsalka have accrued in performing together is a major factor in what can only be referred to as uncompromising musical collaboration.

The pieces performed by Diana Weston here are all by Australian composers. "Green Leaf for Elke" by prolific composer Elena Kats-Chernin (b. Uzbekistan, 1957) is based on the first movement of her award-winning ballet "Wild Swans" (2002). Written in memory of opera director Elke Neidhardt, "Green Leaf for Elke", a gently arpeggiated "poem", touching and reflective in its tonal/modal mix, invites the listener to follow its relaxed harmonic process and join its elegiac course. It is surely no coincidence that recorder player Benjamin Thorn (b.1961), artistic director of the New England Bach Festival and arranger of works by such composers as Strozzi, Castello and Caccini, chose dance movements freely based on the same ground for "Underground Currents" (2010). Referring to the pieces somewhat based on tonality as "creating resonances of chaconnes and passacaglias", Thorn's writing comes across as improvisatory in character as it frequently veers off course to the unexpected with the wink of an eye. Originally from New Zealand, Diana Blom (b.1947) moved to Australia in 1969. The four pieces of "Lady Huang's Album" (1984), from which the disc takes its name, are influenced by music of the ch'in, a seven-string long Chinese zither. In the work, the composer, whose time in Hong Kong and Malaysia has clearly provided the inspiration and background for writing in this style, introduces playing techniques idiomatic to the ch'in and Chinese scales. Blom's writing is eloquent and sophisticated; Weston's rendition of the four miniatures, so convincingly indicative of the plucked instrument, is descriptive, subtle and beguiling, enticing the listener into the evocative world of Chinese music and art. A real treat! The piece was dedicated to Mrs. Grace Wei Huang.

Eclectic in taste, an artist performing from the classical music tradition, through jazzy and tango styles to his own compositions and improvisations, Italian early keyboard player and award-winning composer Gabriele Toia (b.1967) has dedicated "Variations on a Ground" (2016) to Michael Tsalka "as well as to some of the composers who most influenced my music", of whom he mentions Béla Bartók, Ligeti, Chick

Corea, Ennio Morricone and Alban Berg. The 13 variations are based on a ciaccona bass from Vivaldi's Concerto in G-minor RV 107. The sections, some more harmonic in emphasis, others exploring the countless textural possibilities offered by the harpsichord, form a rich kaleidoscope of musical ideas. In playing that is not simply virtuosic but strategic, sensitive, rich in detail, shapes and imagination, Tsalka inspires and moves as he gives expression to the particular character and mood of each variation of this outstanding piece of music. Harpsichordist and organist Max Yount (b.1938, USA) is well also known as a teacher and composer. Michael Tsalka, whose connection with Yount goes back several years, has premiered works of his. "Sonatine" (2014) is an intense and complex piece, its tripartite construction concluding with a rondo which is, in the composer's words, "interspersed with jazzy episodes". Tsalka's reading of it is sincere, objective and erudite but it is also entertaining (we remain unaware of its original programmatic content) as its personal appeal grows on one with listening.

Recorded in 2017 for the Wirripang Label, Australia, listeners will appreciate the disc's lively sound quality. Bristling with interest and variety, Diana Weston and Michael Tsalka present its selection of contemporary works in performance that is profound, discerning and insightful.

Pamela Hickman: Born in Australia;in Israel since 1968.Studied at Melbourne University(BA Languages,Music,Education),the Jerusalem Academy of Music(Theory,Composition),New York University(Music education.)