

Bassoon CD Reviews By
Ronald Klimko, Moscow, Idaho

Archipelago: Martin Kuuskmann, bassoon; William Schimmel, accordion; David Rozenblatt, percussion CCn'C Records (Habbekestrasse 18, 59889 Eslohe, Germany; Tel: +49 (0) 2973 2088; Fax: +49 (0) 2973 2660; email: post@ccnc.de; website: www.ccnc.de) CCn'C 01312

This is a very interesting and fascinating CD. Estonian-born bassoonist Martin Kuuskmann joins forces with accordionist/composer William Schimmel and percussionist David Rozenblatt to present this truly unique recording. The namesake piece Archipelago combines multi-recorded tracks of bassoon sonorities of a Georgian folksong with driving percussion and sustained accordion chords to create an other-worldly, almost electronic atmosphere for the first track on the disc. Most of the other cuts, however, are less non-traditional. There are arrangements of such familiar tunes as Harbor Lights, Autumn Leaves, and Wind of Your Mind, interspersed with free interpretations of themes from Beethoven to Bartok-from Piazzolla to Elmer Bernstein's Walk on the Wild Side.

The latter is by far the "wildest" work on the album with both bassoon and accordion going absolutely ballistic! All this is great fun and makes for a totally different landscape from the usual ones for the bassoon. Martin Kuuskmann shows without question that there is very little that he can't do on the bassoon. His technique and virtuosity are remarkable throughout-from double tonguing to circular breathing to multiphonics to incredible high notes to you-name-it-he does it all! My one objection to the CD is the microphone placement for the bassoon, which, to my ears, is a little too "close" to the instrument. I feel that this makes the bassoon a little too "tubby" sounding. Perhaps it was necessary, however, to achieve a decent balance between the bassoon and the accordion-I can't say for sure. But it is a minor problem point to this otherwise unique and strongly recommended recording. I give it very high marks for its exciting originality. Rating: 3 Crows

Absolute Mix: A Live Recording. Absolute Ensemble, Kristjan Järvi, Conductor. CCn'C Records 00702. (Address given earlier.)

This CD comprises a live performance of contemporary music by the New York City based ABSOLUTE ENSEMBLE. Of most interest to bassoonists will be the second piece on the recording, which is a nice performance of Michael Daugherty's Dead Elvis (1993) by bassoonist Martin Kuuskmann. Martin really gets into the "role" beautifully, as one can judge by the live audience reaction in the background. Obviously there is a lot of visual impact to this work; however, this performance stands strongly on the basis of its musical performance by both Martin and his fellow musicians in the ABSOLUTE ENSEMBLE.

The remainder of the CD features equally strong performances of very interesting 20th Century compositions, such as Michael Daugherty's rarely-heard Sing Sing: J. Edgar Hoover (1992) with the recorded voice of the former FBI director accompanied by strings, sirens, ringing telephones, etc. Following this is an equally programmatic work by James MacMillan (b. 1959) entitled "...as others see us..." (1990). This is a two-movement work. The first movement is Henry VIII (1491-1547) in which a polytonal arrangement of a Scottish tune is overlaid with Henry's famous composition Greensleeves, providing a strongly programmatic commentary on both the brutal and the misogynistic character of this most complex personality. Similarly, the second movement depicts the dual nationality, American and English, of Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) with Anglican quasi-liturgical motifs overlaid with 1920's American jazz. All in all this is an interesting work.

The performance of John Adams' (b. 1947) Chamber Symphony (1992) Roadrunner which

follows, gives us a work inspired by both Schoenberg and the by pervasive hyperactivity of Roadrunner cartoons-a unique combination if there ever was one!! There is also a short, spirited Study #2 for Player Piano by Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997) in an arrangement by Yvar Mikhashoff thrown into the mix of these unique works. But then, after all these original shenanigans, the recording ends with a beautiful, gentle interpretation of an arrangement of Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun by a student of Arnold Schoenberg, Benno Sachs. The transcription was originally made for special chamber performances by Schoenberg and his friends in Vienna in the early twentieth century.

I really like this recording. Normally all-contemporary music can be deadly. But here conductor Kristjan Järvi has gone to great lengths to present unique and original pieces in a very cohesive concert. To my ears, all of these pieces of modern music are effective in communicating to an audience, albeit in sometimes weird and unusual ways, however. My hat is off to him and his excellent virtuoso ABSOLUTE ENSEMBLE. I recommend this unique recording strongly to you.

Rating: 3 Crows