

HARBACH: *Veneration; Frontier Fancies; Arcadian Reverie; Rhapsody Jardine; One of Ours*

František Novotný, violin
Cynthia Green Libby, oboe
Slovak Radio Symphony / Kirk Trevor
MSR 1252 – 56 minutes

American Solstice; Transformations; Forces at Play; Carondelet Caprice; Fantasy and Fugue on Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; Separately Together; Rhapsody Ritmico

Ensemble Istropolis, Moyzes String Quartet,
Woodwind Quintet, Brass Quintet / Kirk Trevor
MSR 1253– 65 minutes

These two releases are the first in a seven-volume set of the works of American composer Barbara Harbach (whose birth date is not listed anywhere that I could find). She's a master organist and harpsichordist as well as a prolific composer. She has scads of awards and achievements, but the most telling accomplishment of all is her PhD from the Eastman School of Music. She's a dead-on heart-and-soul American romanticist in the Copland-Hanson-Harris mold, having learned everything from those men [and others in that rank] except how to copy them and sound like them. Harbach's music astonished me for its heavy reliance on the lyric and the beautifully (and cogently) framed melodic line. I haven't heard this kind of romanticism for years. She most resembles Copland, who did not play tricks and painted with broad, distinct melodic colors. But it should be said at the start that Barbara Harbach is her own woman. I could listen to her music for hours.

The first volume is music for full orchestra. No dates are given for anything here (what's this with no dates?), but most of it seems as if it could have been composed in the 40s or 50s, though they probably date from the 80s or 90s.

Veneration is a gently unfolding flower of one melody after another. It won't remind you of anyone in particular, but I thought I heard some of Randall Thompson's phrasing or perhaps William Schuman's (even Jerome Moross comes to mind now and again). You *think* of these guys but you don't actually hear them. This music is so uniquely characterized with its own sense of beauty that it makes me wonder where this woman has been all our lives. Harbach seems not to want to put a date on anything; even her own wikipedia entry has no date. She is like one of Loren Eisley's time effacers (from *The Invisible Pyramid*) who don't want to be known. Still, this is music that really needs to be heard.

Frontier Fancies is a violin concerto where the violin struts its stuff as if at a hoedown (dance rhythms abound) but without sounding at all like any hoedown Copland wrote (or Harris, who also made prominent use of solo violins in his music). Both the soloist, Frantisek Vontny, and the orchestra are Czech, but they take to this music with easy familiarity. It's not difficult to play.

Arcadian Reverie is for string orchestra and takes much of its inspiration from Vaughan Williams (*Norfolk Rhapsody* and *Symphony 2* especially). Indeed, much of Harbach's music seems to be an effortless dovetailing of British and American musical cultures. *Rhapsody Jardine* makes a nod or two toward John Ireland and Edward Rubbra, with the oboe (Cynthia Green Libby) riding the melodies. *One of Ours—A Cather Symphony* is based on the novels of Willa Cather, and you can feel and hear the Nebraska prairie. Each of the three movements is only four minutes long—a simple song. (I had the feeling as I listened to this music and read about Ms Harbach on the Internet that she is the true female counterpart to but not the sidekick of the great American romantics writing in the 1930s, all of whom were male. Perhaps she feels she was born out

of time and should have been back there slugging it out with the Big Boys. I think she could have stood toe-to-toe with them. Perhaps this is behind the evasiveness about her birth date.)

Volume II is a collection of chamber works (one of three in the whole series from MSR) and begins with *American Solstice* for chamber orchestra. It reminded me of the earthy, yet nostalgic paintings by Thomas Hart Benson (the same that graced RCA's series of American composers from the early 90s). Ms Harbach does use several familiar folk motifs, but never varies from standard dance or waltz rhythms. *Transformations* is for string quartet but is broken down into eight brief movements that say their piece and move on (this is a strategy that Roy Harris used—statements rather extrapolations). The sound is very intimate. The Moyzes Quartet does not seem to be an aggressive group. Either that or conductor Trevor knows how to shape this music carefully.

Other works here of note are *Forces at Play*, *Carondelet Caprice*, and *Separately Together*, all for chamber orchestra. They are playful and infectious and seem perfectly appropriate for their limited resources. The program concludes with *Rhapsody Ritmico* for brass quintet. It begins with a fanfare, slides into a lullaby, then becomes a fugue with everything mixing together in a rather stately English processional at the end. A great deal of credit for the success of the music on both these records goes to the conductor and the sound engineers. They have done their best to present this composer, who should someday—if there is any justice in the universe—become a household name. You have *got* to hear this woman's music if you're a fan of mid-century American romanticism. She brings something entirely new to the table.