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FEATURE REVIEW by Colin Clarke



SCHWENDINGER *Creature Quartet: Hymn for Lost Creatures. Sudden Light.¹ String Quartet in Three Movements. Song for Andrew.²* • JACK Qrt; ¹Jamie Van Eyck (mez); ²Christopher Taylor (pn) • ALBANY 1704 (65:29)

Professor of music at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mexican-born Laura Elise Schwendinger was the first composer to win the American Academy in Berlin Prize. A feature in *Fanfare* 36:4 celebrated the first disc fully devoted to her works (also on Albany), while Cedille Records has programmed one of her pieces, *C'è la luna questa sera?*, on a disc entitled *Notable Women*. In the *Fanfare* feature, Schwendinger said that “realizing that technique is your friend gives you the tools to help give voice all of your ideas,” and there is technique here aplenty. Assured, uncompromising, gritty with a core of steely lyricism, Schwendinger’s music is remarkable. It demands we listen fully, and offers rich rewards in return.

The *Creature Quartet: Hymn for Lost Creatures* is in one sense a sort of *Carnival of the Animals* for our time, presenting a procession of musical portraits of various animals. It is the composer’s “personal response to the current mass extinction of species”; the creatures chosen are therefore extinct, mythological, or endangered. Perhaps, therefore, it is at heart a carnival of compassion. The trajectory of the work is described in some detail by Schwendinger in the booklet notes; the strength of the music is such that one need not work through that description to realize the power of her music, this despite the fact that the animation artist Pauline Gagniarre was commissioned by Wisconsin Union Theater to provide an animated video to present each creature in order as the music plays (the captivating video is freely available on vimeo.com). Gestural and yet powerfully organized, Schwendinger’s voice is highly individual. The performance by the JACK Quartet is impeccable, and as a studio recording it is technically more secure than the live Vimeo video. The sheer intensity of both music and performance thereof is spellbinding, as if the passion of the composer for her subject shines through like a light.

The piece *Sudden Light* sets four poems on the subject of light. The first is “Sudden Light” by Rossetti, exploring the enigma of past lives. The mezzo Jamie Van Eyck sings with complete assurance, navigating the mobile lines in Dickinson’s “There’s a certain Slant of light,” while Schwendinger underlines the permeating emotion of dread at winter’s coming. The setting of James Joyce’s “Lightly Come or Lightly Go” contains

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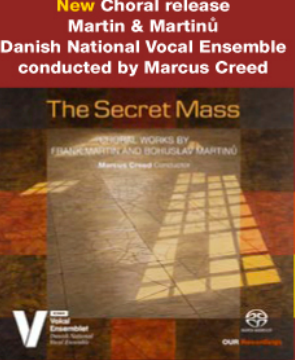
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tenderness alongside icy string shards, and the opening of the final song, “A Light exists in Spring” (another Dickinson setting) implies a Minimalist slant.

Each movement of Schwendinger’s *String Quartet in Three Movements* is inspired by a different composer: Bartók, Andrew Imbrie (Schwendinger’s teacher at the University of California Berkeley), and Ravel. The first movement takes us back to that sense of luminous intensity that seems to be so close to Schwendinger; the performance is impeccable. The Imbrie-inspired movement begins with a viola lament with tremolandos around it that manifest itself more as breaths of air than as string sounds. Here, Schwendinger presents a Webernian sense of utterance both in gestures (initially at least) and in use of silences that speak volumes. The finale holds much that is virtuosic; in some sense it calls for a virtuoso listener, too, in its complexities. It is difficult to imagine a more committed performance than this, in which the lines speak with such clarity, sometimes at warp speed.

The *Song for Andrew* is an in memoriam for Andrew Imbrie, and quotes that composer’s 1983 piece *Pilgrimage*, one of Schwendinger’s favorite pieces by her teacher, who died in 2007 at the age of 86. To this theme, Schwendinger adds her own counter-melody, which, symbolically, speaks alone at the end of the work. The piano adds color to the quartet texture without emerging as a solo instrument. Heavily laden with grief, the impact of Schwendinger’s piece is beyond doubt; the mood, if not the language, of late Shostakovich springs to mind. Remarkable.

The recording is exceptional by any standards, the instruments perfectly placed in the sound picture, all detail audible. Recommended, but remember that this music demands much from the listener and so is not for the faint-hearted. **Colin Clarke**

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