

CD REVIEW 79

UGIS PRAULINS The Nightingale
DANIEL BORTZ Nemesis divina
SUNLEIF RASMUSSEN “I”
PETER BRUUN Two scenes with skylark

MICHAELA PETRI, recorders, Danish National Vocal Ensemble, Stephen Layton.

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This is a very interesting CD.

Let us first introduce the composers.

Ugis Praulins was born in Latvia on 17 June 1957 and studied with Paul Dambas and Gederts Ramans from 1963-1974. He then studied at the Academy of Music in Riga. He has been a sound engineer, and, as a keyboard player, been a rock musician in the group Salve in the 1970s and in a progressive folk-rock band called Vecas Majas in the 1980s. His orchestral works include a Festive Prelude and a Concertino for piano and strings. There are choral and vocal works, some of which use instruments associated with pop groups.

Daniel Bortz is the most gifted composer on this CD who writes in traditional forms. He was born in Osby, Sweden in 1943 and studied violin with Jean Fernstrom and composition with the great Hilding Rosenberg and then with Karl-Birger Blomdahl, Ingvar Lidholm and electronic music with Michael Koenig. Bortz has written four operas, an oratorio and concertos for trumpet, violin, clarinet, piano and recorder respectively.

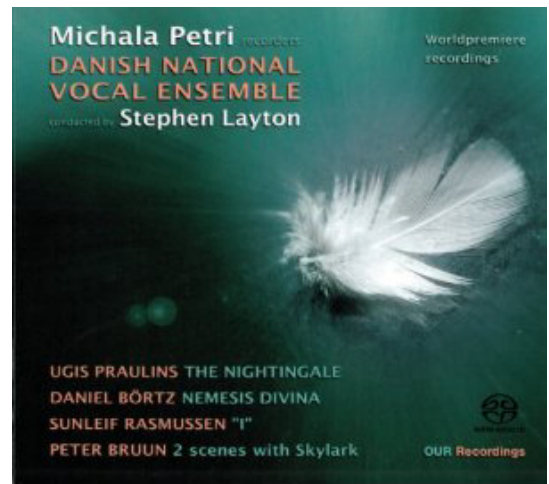
Why is it that most contemporary composers avoid symphonies and concertos and have fanciful titles for their works?

Sunleif Rasmussen was born in the Faroe Islands on 19 March 1961. He studied in Norway and then became a music teacher and a jazz pianist in the Faroe Islands. He then studied at the Royal Danish Academy under Ib Norholm. Rasmussen became interested in spectral music and composers such as Tristan Murail. His biggest work to date is his Symphony no. 1 Oceanic Days. There are choral and vocal works with orchestra, a String Quartet and other chamber works, a saxophone concerto and other works.

Paul Bruun comes from Aarhus in Denmark being born in 1968. He studied philosophy at Aarhus University before he took up composition. Some of his works are concerned with water, the orchestral pieces Moon Water and The Same Fountain. There is also Letters to the Ocean for large ensemble. Other works advocate world peace. There is a fine Concerto grosso. His work Miki Alone for mezzo and orchestra, which lasts about 55 minutes, won a prestigious award.

As to the performers, Stephen Layton is very well known as a fine choral conductor. Michaela Petri was born in Copenhagen on 7 July 1958 and won the Danish Young Musician of the Year in 1968. She introduced us to the recorder as a serious instrument whereas most people regard it as an easy instrument played by primary school children. She has premiered works by Arnold, Jacob, Bortz, Koppel, Holmboe, Michael Berkeley, Bentzon and others. She is a first class player.

Her contribution to this CD is in a secondary but vital capacity. There are no concertos, for example, or works involving her as a soloist.



Praulins's The Nightingale is taken from Hans Christian Anderson's text and is in nine sections. It is a curious work involving many styles from folk music to hints of Renaissance music. The vocal ensemble are first class and the soloists are admirable. The work last about half an hour.

There is a magical start which is eerie, effective with a tremendous crescendo. The high recorder represents the nightingale with its fluttering wings and, later, its song. Some of the text, in English, is spoken and throughout the piece, the music is inconsistent. There are some very fine moments but not always. Often the music is static. The third section with the repeated What's That is impressive. The soprano glissandi are out of place. This is a fairy tale and the music lacks childhood innocence. Section 5, There She Is contains some of the best music as does section 6, At The Palace. Section 7, The Artificial Bird is the most 'modern', but the many styles in this work can be worrying. One passages owes to Tallis 's Spem in alium, but sometimes the vocal writing has too many layers and the work outstays its welcome although the singing is second to none and there is some thrilling recorder playing.

Bortz's Nemesis Divina works better. It has a mysterious opening but, as it develops it is impassioned and coherent and the vocal writing is superb with much variety. The style is consistent and the writing for voices is exceptionally good. Even in the strange whispers there is a profound poignancy. Perhaps it is a little too long to maintain the material.

Rasmussen's work starts with a somewhat Arabic prelude on a recorder. I did not find anything outstanding in this piece but the Paul Bruun work is the most accessible and is often lovely.

To listen to this CD in one go is not recommended. Most of the music is slow and, occasionally, ponderous.

But it is a fascinating an important CD and I add a few more comments

The Praulin work is supposed to be a fairy tale but the music is very grown up.

The Bortz is the more unified work to a text by Carl von Linne which seems to pose doubts in God.

The question is What is God
Who sees, hears, knows
I don't see God
No wonder I don't see God
When I do not see the ego living in me.
What is life?
Our God lights us and every soul with fire.

Rasmussen's "I" seems to be a meditation on human life based on Inger Christensen's modern text and as a consideration of Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.

Two Scenes with Skylarks by Paul Bruun has a text by Gerald Manley Hopkins and his typical complex mysticism.

It is a CD that deserves hearing and invites you to make your own assessment. First hearings may not prove to be valid.

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