

AN AMERICAN JOURNEY • Avguste Antonov (pn) • HARTSHORN no catalog number (27:10)

VOLLINGER *Dreams Before You Awake*. ZACHARIAS *First Romance*. SAUNDERS *Starry Wanderers* (excerpts).  
ROLLIN *Blue Fantasy*. HOGAN *Cumulis Humilis*

I suppose the first thing I ought to say is that the present CD is actually a privately issued CDR, and to point out that the playing time is a mere 27 minutes and 10 seconds. With that caveat put up front, I may now recommend this interesting recital of new American piano music (all by living composers) to readers that have an interest in such. I give priority to William Vollinger only because he is the one composer in this recital whose music I know, and given the fact that he has been interviewed in *Fanfare*, whose readers have met him in a feature by Raymond Beegle. This piece included a review of his *Raspberry Man* and *Raymond Changed*, two of his poignant and often gently humorous speech-song works. I recently heard a performance of his latest such work, *Stalin*, inimitably performed by the composer himself. Consequently, I was very happy to hear a work in another medium by him in this recital.

Vollinger's *Dreams Before You Awake*, which actually closes the disc, is at 10 minutes also the most substantial work on the CD, and by a rather good margin, as the other works range in duration from a minute or two up to six minutes. *Dreams Before You Awake* is perhaps the sort of title for which no program notes are necessary, a good thing given that there are none included for this work (or any of the others in the booklet; the notes are confined to bios of the performer and composers). The work opens with a simple solo line, but Vollinger quickly brings in other material (brusque jumping chords, grunts in the lowest register, flutters of notes in the treble, etc.) to suggest the restlessness of sleep that has been infiltrated with dreams. These seemingly unrelated gestures interrupt the general flow of the gentle sonorities that the composer has ongoing as a sort of default music. Yet, through all this, the piece has a discernible structure and flow that keep the listener's interest sustained throughout its course. It is *interesting* music in the best sense of the word.

The remaining composers are all likely as unknown to you as they are to me, so I'll give a comment or two about each one. Richard Zacharias, whose *First Romance* opens the CD, is a composer working in the Youngstown, Ohio area. He serves on the board of the New Music Guild. Self-taught as a composer, his interests are diverse, as evidenced by his mastery of the German language and his having been awarded a doctorate in English literature. His romance is cast in A Minor, more or less, but includes diatonic non-chordal tones in many of its sonorities. Its

direct simplicity might remind the listener of one of the *Gymnopédies* of Erik Satie. Interest is sustained through his bringing occasional notes outside of the A Minor scale into play, a good thing given that the piece never really modulates outside of that key area, although it ends unexpectedly on a C Major triad.

Samantha Hogan studied classical voice and trombone in her growing-up years, but in college turned to composition, studying with Robert Rollin (whose work is also heard in this recital) and Scott Pfitzinger. Her cutely named *Cumulus Humilis* is another simply conceived work, which begins in two-part counterpoint before opening up into more homophonic textures. Eventually, a playful figure is introduced into the right hand that livens up the activity a good bit before the piece winds down to a gentle conclusion. This would seem to be the first recording of any of her music.

Matthew Saunders is associate professor of music and department chairman of Lakeland Community College in Kirtland, Ohio, where he teaches music theory, history, and serves as conductor of the Lakeland Civic Orchestra. His composition studies were undertaken with Donald Harris and Thomas Wells, among others, and his music has been performed across the United States at venues such as the International Horn Society and the Society of Composers. He also received the 2012 ASCAP Plus Award. Heard herein are three excerpts from *Starry Wanderers*. Absent any notes, I can only speculate that each of these three brief pieces represents something from the firmament. “Venus” conjures up an air of mystery and silence with its subtle sonorities. “Earth” opens with a forceful set of block chords, and some dissonances in the upper register of the piano. In general, the harmonies are less tonal in this movement, but the piece to my ears is more suggestive of the earth hanging out there in space rather than any of the multitude of activities that occur on its surface. “Stillness at the Edge” is again very gentle and sweetly piquant. These three pieces left me desiring to hear the entire suite, but given the dearth of information, the length of *Starry Wanderers* remains unknown to me.

The next work on the disc is *Blue Fantasy* by Robert L. Rollin, who was born in Brooklyn, and began composing at age eight, eventually being recommended by Erich Leinsdorf for a composition scholarship at the Juilliard School of Music. Receiving his doctorate from Cornell University, he studied with Mark Brunswick, Ravi Shankar, Robert Palmer, Karel Husa, Elliot Carter, and György Ligeti, quite a pedigree, to be sure. His recent premieres and guest residencies have taken him to four continents. His *Blue Fantasy*, one of no fewer than three works I’ve reviewed just for this issue that contains “blue” in its title, does have (as do the other “blue” pieces) reference to blues sonorities,

but here they are rather subtle throughout. The tonality of the piece is quite obscure, with diatonic melodic lines undergirded with chords that are quite outside of the diatonicism of the melody. Six minutes in duration, the work has several contrasting sections.

All of these pieces, expertly and cleanly executed by Avguste Antonov, are worth hearing, but the final three of them make the strongest impression. The piano sound is well recorded, although the novel tuning system employed for the piano on this CD did not always fall felicitously upon my ears, which have been long acclimated to equal temperament. Definitely worth exploring, presuming the disc is priced according to its short duration.

**FANFARE: David DeBoor Canfield**