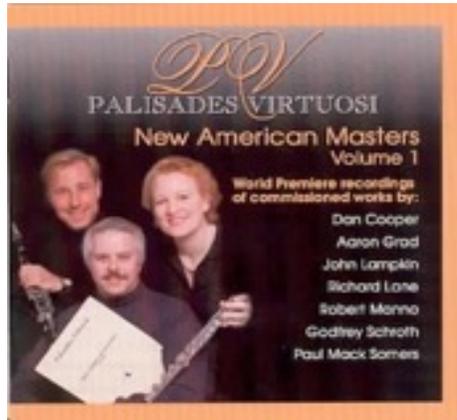


PALISADES VIRTUOSI: NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME 1

Margaret Swinchoski (fl); Donald Mokrynski (cl); Ron Levy (pn)

• ALBANY TROY 826 (69:47)

GRAD Lep · i · dop · ter · ol · o · gy. **MANNO** Three Scenes from the Mountains. **COOPER** Trio. **LANE** Trio No. 2. **SOMERS** An Arch of Miniatures. **SCHROTH** Variations on an Appalachian Carol. **LAMPKIN** George Washington Slept Here!



Palisades Virtuosi/New American Masters 1

The stylistic and emotional range of this release is as extraordinary as is Palisades Virtuosi's fine-tuned ensemble work. Despite its diversity, all of this music is quintessentially American. The only composer known to me is Robert Manno (b. 1944) whose music has been praised by Ned Rorem as "maximally personal and expressive"—qualities found in abundance in *Three Scenes from the Mountains*, composed in 2004. Manno's long experience as a chorister both at the New York Metropolitan Opera and the City Opera informs his music. I suspect that he conceives his soaring melodies first, and then harmonizes them. Whatever the case, the result is unfailingly satisfying. *Three Scenes from the Mountains* was inspired by views from his home in the Northern Catskills. The essences of the titles of its three movements—"The Wind on the Water," "The Meadow at Dawn," and "The Forest at Night"—are eloquently conveyed in this unabashedly post-Romantic music, music that in many ways forms the affective core of this release.

Virginia-born Aaron Grad (b. 1980) is the youngest composer on this program. A student violinist and pianist from age five, and a guitarist and song writer from age 10, he gravitated to New York City in 1998 in order to study jazz guitar at NYU, and quickly became attracted to New York's "downtown" new music scene. Given traditional esthetic "verities," he stands astride two mutually exclusive musical worlds—that of pop and jazz and that of serious music (okay, okay—let's say three worlds, which should make him, if nothing else, an astonishing contortionist). I don't know whether he is a contortionist or not. I do know, given the evidence here, that he is a fine composer with an original and refreshing voice—virtues that apply to all the composers on this offering. *Lep i dop ter ol o gy*, composed in 2003, was dedicated to Palisades Virtuosi's pianist, Ron Levy, who is an aficionado of butterflies. It is based on the most elemental of musical tools, the arpeggio, which, as a butterfly in flight, modulates freely—sometimes languidly, sometimes energetically—over asymmetrical meters. Implied lyricism and subtle rhythmic manipulation distinguish this highly metaphorical and evocative piece.

Dan Cooper's (b. 1970) mentor was Otto Luening. Among his principal teachers he counts John Heiss, Steve Mackey, and Paul Lansky. The essences of his *Trio*, composed in 2004, are communicated in its three movement's titles: "Vaudevillians," "Barnacles," and "Kingston Bop." Cooper is fond of driving rhythms and, from time to time, of pressing the winds to the extremes of their compasses (he substitutes the piccolo for the flute, and the bass clarinet for the clarinet). This is the quirkiest piece on this offering. "Barnacles" sounds almost like a parody of Webern (albeit a loving one), with wide interval leaps and extreme metrical manipulations. "Kingston Bop" is a two-and-a-quarter minute romp full of instrumental virtuosity and the sly humor which, to a greater or lesser extent, informs each of *Trio's* bars.

Trio No. 2, composed in 2004 by Richard Lane, brings things back to the gentle lyricism of Robert Manno. New Jersey native Lane (1933–2004) studied at the Eastman School of Music. His teachers were José Echaniz and Armand Basile (piano), and Louis Mennini, Wayne Barlow, and Bernard Rogers (composition). *Trio No. 2* is his last, and alas, unfinished, composition. His untimely death in 2004 precluded the completion of its third movement. Full of languid lyricism—long spun melodic arches over simple but telling harmonies—*Trio No. 2* ends both seraphically and hauntingly.

Paul Mack Somers (b. 1942) studied composition with Warren Benson and George Andrix, and participated in master classes with Norman Dello Joio. His career is centered in New Jersey. Among his many activities, including serving as the director of the Classical New Jersey Society, writing musical criticism for two of New Jersey's most prominent newspapers, and performing as both a harpsichordist and conductor, he taught a university level "Music for Non-Music Majors" course whose students told him "in no uncertain terms that they simply were not interested in hearing any piece of music lasting more than three minutes," to quote his own liner note. He quickly realized that that brief time parameter not only fit the pop music to which his students were accustomed, but also fit scads of classically legit miniatures (all those Chopin etudes and mazurkas, etc). An Arch of Miniatures , composed for Palisades Virtuosi in 2003, can be thought of as music for listeners with short attention spans. It consists of five movements—the longest weighing in at 4:05; the shortest at 1:41. It also encompasses many of the techniques and esthetic flavors of the other composers on this release. Mahler once said to Sibelius, "a symphony must contain a universe." The challenge to the musical miniaturist on any point of our musicological space-time continuum is, somehow, to shoehorn that universe into a tiny time span. In An Arch of Miniatures Somers realizes that paradox with great resourcefulness and elegance.

I am lumping the two last composers together because they both present comparatively extended sets of variations on American themes. Godfrey Schroth (b. 1927) studied with Paul Creston—in my often-less-than-humble opinion, one of the finest of our mid-20th century composers. Among his semi-recent compositions is Threnody for the Victims of September 11 . John Lampkin (b. 1946), studied piano and composition with Donald Waxman after attending Harvard. His Insects: a Musical Entomology in Six Legs for woodwind quintet won the Grand Prize in the 2001 Composers' Guild Composition. Schroth's Variations on an Appalachian Carol uses as its theme I Wonder as I Wander —an indigenous American tune that has been set with great distinction by, among others, Luciano Berio in his 1973 Folk Songs for Mezzo Soprano and Instrumental Ensemble . Schroth's setting is variously pensive, agitated, serene, and more diatonically straight forward than Berio's. Lampkin's George Washington Slept Here! uses the melody Soldier's Joy , a tune popular 250 years ago, as its point of departure. It was used as a fiddle tune in barn dances in colonial America and will be instantly recognizable. In these variations Lampkin shows himself to be a fine tongue-in-cheek humorist, but one who never loses respect for his source material.

In terms of intonation, articulation, and musical insight, Palisades Virtuosi represent the best of our current world-class standards. In an interview with the Empire Brass that I conducted eons ago, both first trumpet Rolf Smedvig and then tubist Sam Pilafian stated that their ensemble goal was "total meltdown," meaning the sounding of a chord wherein the intonation and balance were so correct that the separate lines of the music melded into a unified whole. In the quieter moments of this music, Palisades Virtuosi achieve this routinely—and then there is all that louder passagework where they really wail.

The recording—bright, detailed, full-bodied, and timbrally true—is at the level of this whole endeavor. In sum, this is Want List material. **William Zagorski**