JONATHAN LESHNOFF: STRING QUARTETS 1 & 4, FOUR DANCES
CARPE DIEM STRING QUARTET
MS1765

The more I hear of American composer Jonathan Leshnoff, the more I like him. This new MSR release showcases three works for string quartet that have markedly different personalities. Two of them were written expressly for the ensemble we hear on this CD album, the Carpe Diem String Quartet, consisting of Charles Wetherbee, 1st violin; Amy Galluzzo, 2nd violin; Korine Fujiwara, viola; and Carol Ou, cello.

“Carpe Diem,” in Latin, means “seize the day.” The members of this young quartet do just that (and how!), responding instinctively and with enthusiasm to Leshnoff’s delicious music. As they say in classical circles, “Life is short, so play your encores first.” That might serve to describe the Four Dances for String Quartet (2014). Each of these pieces is capable of standing on their own, beginning with a rather moody Waltz that alternates insouciantly between a straight triple meter in 3/4 and a reflective theme. The next movement is a Pavane in a quieter mood. The third is a scherzo, titled Chas Tanz, referring to the nickname by which the other members call the first violinist. It is suffused with a lot of infectious energy (a life portrait, perhaps?) The finale is entitled “Furlane,” recalling the Forlane, a lightly tripping dance used by Bach and Rameau – and in modern times by Ravel in Le tombeau de Couperin. The whimsical spelling might reflect Leshnoff’s humorous take on the old baroque dance, here rendered as a lively, propulsive, upbeat romp in 6/8 time that really “makes the fur fly.”

The two numbered quartets, both dating from 2011, are by their nature pure music and serious business, beginning with Quartet No. 3. The kernel idea of this work is stated right at the opening, marked Grave and living up to its name. It is laden with sad, melancholy overtones that prove to contain the seed of more positive fruition in the third movement finale, marked Allegro with Spirit. This movement begins energetically and builds up to the point where the kernel idea returns, triumphantly this time. In between we are given a delightfully wistful, dance-inflected movement entitled Romance. As Leshnoff recalls, the initial inspiration for String Quartet No. 4, surprisingly, was a melody he heard at a recorder recital given at his daughter’s school and performed by her and her fellow students. The sound and spirit of this melody, which Leshnoff found pure and uplifting, inspired the translucent quality of the second movement, marked Slow and Pure but nonetheless possessing a compelling quality in addition to its obvious charm.

The movements are: 1) Largo, molto rubato; 2) Fast; 3) Slow and Pure; 4) Fast; and 5) Largo, rubato. The inside-out arch design compels our attention, as does the fact that all five movements are linked and are performed without interruption. The first is brief and rhapsodic. the second possessed of tremendous energy, ending abruptly and without resolution. After the comparatively innocent yet somewhat contemplative Slow and Pure middle movement, the short fourth movement is characterized by a relentless forward drive and still manages to unite the themes of the quartet in a short space of time (2:10). The fifth and final movement, another Largo, slow and contemplative where we would expect a livelier finale, brings the quartet full circle in a surprisingly satisfying way that we could not have imagined.

Keep your eye (and ear) open for more from Jonathan Leshnoff. There seems to be little he cannot do in the way of instrumental music and he certainly knows his craft. He may turn out to be the first great composer to emerge in the 21st Century.

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Phil Muse