F. Gerard Errante: Delicate Balance

Accourant Records

Delicate Balance presents ten electro-acoustic set-pieces created by composers with whom clarinetist F. Gerard Errante has collaborated over the last five years. The pieces draw on an array of backings that are both electronic and acoustic, with the clarinet solo at the heart of the piece. The flexibility of the recording format makes it an exciting experiment in the use of technology to enhance the acoustic experience.

Alex Shapiro composed “Water Crossing” after Errante presented him with an image of his canoe tied to the dock at his home on the Virginia coast. An image that in turn prompted Shapiro to envision a water journey that has the canoe morph into a sailboat chaperoned by dolphins as it glides through the waters. The adventurous composition finds Errante's clarinet fluidly weaving through passages alternating between peaceful splendor and dramatic portent. “Passage” drops Errante's playing into an ever-shifting sound-world of rich texture and color, as the clarinet blends into the mercurial context Thompson fashioned for it from percussion instruments (bamboo wind chimes, gongs, tam-tams) and environmental and “found” sounds (a nightingale’s song also figures prominently during the piece’s later sections). Douglas Quinn's “A Little Night Music” uses treated field recordings of thrumming insects heard on a warm midsummer's night in rural North Carolina as an evocative sonic painting for Errante to erode against.

McGregor Boyle’s “Midway Inlet” is one of the recording’s most beautiful pieces, in no small part because its soaring melodic line is derived from the early plainsong hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus.” Designed to simulate a boat journey through a tiny creek to the inlet and back, the piece unfolds Errante's celestial musings with a computer part that tracks the clarinet's playing and replicates it by sustaining certain notes, strip away the superfluous nature sounds (water, bird chirps) and the piece begins to sound very close in spirit to Ingrid Marshall’s “Dark Waters,” even if the latter is a work for English horn, not clarinet. In a setting such as Joseph Harchanko's “Breath,” the way that Errante's clarinet weaves against the eb and flow of a constantly shifting backdrop often calls to mind the percussive voice of Gavin Bryars.

Particular inspirations guided the creation of many pieces; a dreamlike vision from Cocteau's Beauty and the Beast of Belle running in slow motion down a long hallway inspired Peter Terry's “Echoes of the Invisible,” which offers a five-minute meditation that's soothing yet mysterious at the same time. Inspired by a moonlit night on a beach in Majorca, Robert MacKay's “Equanimity” integrates environmental elements into its evocative backing. A nocturnal stillness hangs in the air, with Errante's voice murmuring softly amongst chattering insects and animal noises, almost as if the fundamentally unlike creatures are communing with one another. The blurring of the voices is enhanced by the use of live electronic processing, so that the clarinet is merged even more dissonantly into the whole. Inspired by a print of the same name made by the Japanese printmaker Hokusai, “Cherry Blossom and a Wrapped Thing” by Judith Shatin is more conversationally electronic in nature, with the clarinet gently floating against an equally delicate and minimal backdrop. With opening chords that oddly evoke György Ligeti’s “Time After Time,” O. Gause’s “Reign of the Heart” ends the album on a soothing, melodic note that's unappealing but whose smooth jazz style is obviously somewhat at odds with the more experimental compositional bent of the other pieces. Even so, there's ample evidence on hand to suggest that Errante's release is worth the attention of both clarinet and non-clarinet enthusiasts.

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