

Portraits in Music – CD Review

Stas has been attending the Blakely Island Accordion Camp since 2004. It's a summer endeavor that has been devotedly organized by John and Ellen Bonica and was inspired by their years of involvement with the Galla-Rini Summer Accordion Camps. The island offers a beautiful setting off the coast of Portland, Oregon, and the people who gather there are special in their love and appreciation of the instrument. On the occasion of Summer 2006 Stas asked the participants to suggest titles to him and he combined their suggestions with creative snapshots of their personalities and composed eighteen original pieces.

The present collection has a suggestion of unity that begins with a hymn-like prelude (for Joe Baccellieri) and closes with a poignant piece dedicated to the late Joe Petosa, Sr. Both pieces begin with the sound of the sea and so there is a sense of experiencing the sixteen inclusive selections as discrete, lyrical moments within a parenthesis of eternity.

A Beautiful Waltz (for Paula Yankopoulos) has the flavor of a Viennese waltz with its stateliness undercut by some lively interplay between the bayan and cello (Roza Borisova). It suggests a classic skater's waltz (with spins) and loses nothing in comparison with the best of them. *Musette Manouche* (for Anne Metais) has a bittersweet, graceful melody. Stas plays it with a fluid rubato. However, I wished at times it was a tad slower with interpolated silences to extract all its inherent emotion. *Valse Victoria* (for Vicky Eriquat) is played by Misha Litvin on domra and Irinia Yanovskaya on guitar. It was beautifully rendered by both artists. Misha has performed on other albums of Stas' and he never fails to deliver taste, control and heartfelt feeling. *Valse Victoria* has an Italian flavor that is evocative of a summer's romance in Venice. *Polka Blakeski* (for Jim Tobler) is played solo by Stas and generates a Weill/Brecht Dreigroschenoper feeling that I liked.

For Ellen (for Ellen Bonica) is a dazzling French waltz combining a soaring melodic line with interesting contradictions of sweetness and tartness. The *Big Chuich Tarantella* (for John Bonica) is a rousing tarantella that needs no further (or better) description (Stas on bayan, Misha Litvin on mandolin, John Simkus on bass accordion, Terry Smirl on percussion and John Babbitt on bass). *Patty's Waltz* (for Dick Carlson) has the slightly dark (call it burnt sienna) mood of a Russian waltz combining a D minor key, whirling rhythm and vivid interplay between Stas and John Simkus on accordions (with John Babbitt on Bass, Terry Smirl on drums). The main theme is haunting. *Love Comes Softly* presents Misha and Irina in what could be a companion piece to *Valse Victoriarepresenting a later, reflective moment in the Venetian romance I've imagined. Again, the two musicians are superb, with Misha displaying an elegant sense of expression and legato.*

Generation Relation Waltz (for Stella Allison & Joan Grauman) is a beautifully done duet by Stas and John Simkus. The waltz is very much a French experience, contrasting an expressive, emotional C minor main theme with ironic gaiety and a return to the reflective opening theme and some excellent interplay between the two accordions. *Money Bags* is a syncopated, bluesy comic turn with a honky-tonk ethos, a surprising and solid addition to Stas' musical vocabulary. *Jana's Joy* (for Jana Maas) is a complicated little waltz full of sweetness, dissonance and a great deal of chiaroscuro in a short time. *My Friend* (for John Simkus) offers a solid basis for John to do what he's a master of, improvisation, and he never disappoints. John is accompanied by Stas with John Babbitt on bass and Stas solos as well. At the end they join forces and bounce off each other for a solid finish.

Mt. Tam Sunset (for Gwyn Lister) opens with a melancholic Russian waltz, a bit darker than *Patty's Waltz*, and it suggests a sense of loss and remembrance. *Stella's Sound* (for Stella Allison) is moody, dirge-like and insistent suggesting an unrelieved interlude with hints of arpeggios that would escape if they could. After repeats and by measure 17 I would have liked a change of rhythm, maybe something Latin, to accentuate the quasi-antiphonal syncopation that's an interesting part of the composition before it returns to a committed, somber 4/4 enclosure, and

slowly fades away. *Twilight Reflections* (for Ron Griffin) is an introspective waltz with a fine A theme and effective variations in the B part (especially nice) and C part, all of which support a mood that's eventually countered by the cheerful D section and fused later with variations of A and a surprising return to B's outburst. It's a complex little waltz and something of a story. *Fig Newtons in the Morning* (for Sharon and Gus Grehosky) has a slightly humorous, off-center theme with piquant dissonances and nice interplay between Stas and John playing variations prior to a cadenced reprise and a final restatement.

Serentiy (for Joe Petosa, Sr.) begins with the sound of the sea and a theme that's suggestive of an air. It's nicely performed by Stas and John (on bass accordion) and evokes a timeless elegiac mood that offers a heartfelt and uplifting tribute to a man in a time and place devoted to the instrument he dedicated his life to and loved.

Stas continues to grow as a composer. He's certainly mastered the waltz, and he's a talented melodist, which is a born talent. This collection is mostly waltzes, but displays solid variety within the form and Stas always creates a sense of time, place and story, notwithstanding program notes or interpolations by me. His music speaks to our senses and weaves a spell. It will be interesting to see if he expands his talent to longer forms. Some of the works here interrelate in such a way that they become more than a sum of their parts, which seems to be leading towards a sonata or suite.

This is an excellent CD. All eighteen original compositions are memorable (and well played), so much so that it's impossible not to have them replay in your mind long after listening to them. It's unusual to achieve eighteen for eighteen in aesthetic reach and accomplishment. CDs by world famous artists rarely have more than one decent tune out of ten, which explains the phenomenon of downloading specific songs. Enjoy all of these works, and the music is available in book form.

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