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New Releases: CDs

“American Classics” - Chamber Works of Leland Smith

by Jens F. Laurson

"New Releases" posts are regular columns that feature reviews of new CDs that are, for one reason or another, truly outstanding among the many I come across every month.



[L. Smith, Sonatina & other Chamber Music, Jeffrey Grossman, Sarah Darling - Naxos 8559351](#)

If “listenable” and “interesting” didn’t indicate condescension and damning with faint praise, I’d make them the two first adjectives to describe the chamber music of Leland Smith (b. 1925) on this Naxos “American Classics” disc, because Smith’s music is both interesting and listenable, but not in the least worthy of condescension. In fact, this is modern music, frequently spiky and abrupt, that continuously holds your attention or regains it when you get distracted. It offers a string of pleasant surprises to the listener who is willing and eager to give contemporary classical music the benefit of the doubt, but is let down all too often. Brian Ferneyhough lovers will find it kitsch; those who think Bartók is modern, random noise.

That is, in short, the basis from which you might want to judge my most subjective term “listenable”: not embarrassed by the Romantic strain that creeps into American modernist works, nor afraid of modernism itself. You probably know who you are, and you know whether you might be at least interested in a disc from this series. If you are not already intrigued by the idea of an American

student of Olivier Messiaen's, Roger Sessions's, and Darius Milhaud's, chances are that asking you to consider Smith's Sonatina for violin and piano from 1953 or his Piano Sonata from 1954—at almost 15 minutes the longest work on this disc—will not yield a new convert.

The rest take note: Smith is a charming *Kleinmeister* whose pieces offer anything from the pithy to bold, whimsical to aggressive, flighty changes of mood that make these chamber works varied without coming across as unmotivated, indecisive, or erratic. His Sonata for Viola and Piano contains some very dynamic piano writing that sounds fun to perform, its nervous quality thrown into sharp contrast with lyrical interludes.

I tend to be a little skeptical when a composition's movements has titles like “Quarter Note = c. 80–82”—why bother with the (pretense of) old fashioned sonata form when the title screams “but nothing like the old fashioned stuff”—but then Smith's Piano Sonata, the first movement title of which I just quoted, has an appeal that might be likened to “Piano Tone Poem for a Butterfly with ADD.” It's light and jumpy, with irregular sparkle equidistant to Debussy's impressionism and Boulez's abstractions.

Sarah Darling and Jeffrey Grossman perform ably and with dedication; and the sound is good. Not least because all the pieces are world premiere recordings, it's very good that we have this kind of music on CD, although I don't think that it is best heard on recordings. It belongs out there in auditoriums where it should be listened to live. Occasionally.

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