



Magazine Issues

Conductors

Performers

Ensembles & Orchestras

Instrumentalists

Instruments

Search

Singers

Voices

Vocal Roles

SACDs

Reviewers

Labels

Archive

Feature Articles

Composers & Works

Collections

Jazz

Videos

Bollywood & Beyond

Book Reviews

Want Lists

Hall of Fame

Related Articles

- First
Prev
Issue 32:5 May/June 2009
Next
Last
- First
Prev
Composers
Next
Last
- First
Prev
Jens F. Laurson
Next
Last
- First
Prev
NAXOS
Next
Last
- First
Prev
Jeffrey Grossman
Next
Last
- First
Prev
piano
Next
Last
- First
Prev
viola
Next
Last
- First
Prev
violin
Next
Last

CD Review by Jens F. Laurson

L. SMITH Sonata.^{1,3} 4 Etudes.³ Suite for Viola.² *Intermezzo and Capriccio*.³ Viola Sonata.^{2,3} 6 Bagatelles.³ Piano Sonata.³ Concert Piece^{1,3} • Sarah Darling (vn,¹ va²); Jeffrey Grossman (pn)³ • NAXOS 8.559351 (58:57)

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. **Jens F. Laurson**

This article originally appeared in Issue 32:5 (May/June 2009) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Related Articles				
First	Prev	<i>Issue 32:5 May/June 2009</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	Composers	Next	Last
First	Prev	Jens F. Laurson	Next	Last
First	Prev	NAXOS	Next	Last
First	Prev	Jeffrey Grossman	Next	Last
First	Prev	piano	Next	Last
First	Prev	viola	Next	Last
First	Prev	violin	Next	Last



Search WWW Search
www.fanfarearchive.com

[FANFARE MAGAZINE HOME](#)

Copyright © 1977-2009 by Fanfare Inc.

[Comments?](#)

[TOP OF PAGE](#)