

Jalsaghar. Vivienne Spiteri, harpsichord. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 16410, 2010. 1 compact disc (60:18). Vivienne Spiteri, harpsichord, on all tracks, with various performers and ensembles. Contents: *In the Beginning was the End* / Hope Lee (17:08) – *Blurred Lines* / John Beckwith (10:31) – *Sancerre* / Bruce Mather (9:22) – *Swift Silver* / Linda Bouchard (3:50) – *Ringaround* / John Beckwith (7:24) – *Lines Overlapping* / John Beckwith (8:50) – *Insect Variations: My Life as a Bug* / Kirk Elliott (8:40) – ...*Was the End...* (0:42). \$13.98.

The unusual title of this disc comes from the Bengali word meaning “music room.” It also refers to a 1958 film set in Bengal in the 1930s relating the tragic story of a music-loving landlord who refuses to change with the times. However, this reference is only partially apt. While harpsichordist Vivienne Spiteri does indeed create a vivid acoustic space—a virtual music room—filled with wonderful sounds, there is no sense whatsoever of lingering in the past or resisting progress. She instead takes an instrument rich in traditional historical conventions and embraces its modernity with works that display the harpsichord’s capacity to participate in contemporary musical styles and languages. Spiteri demonstrates a remarkable sense of vision in selecting works that treat the harpsichord with striking imagination.

The innovative nature of this recording is due largely to the realization of Spiteri’s philosophy regarding the role of the instrument in the compositional process, the timbral possibilities of instrumental combinations, and the dramatic possibilities of the recording studio. Spiteri advocates separating the harpsichord from its historical role, so that the instrument’s associations do not dictate musical style. “What *Jalsaghar* proposes,” writes Spiteri in the liner notes, is that the instrument takes a secondary role, “a mere medium for the transport of Music,” in the scheme of things. She cautions that “*Jalsaghar*’s harpsichord may sound unlike its conventional self, perhaps even unrecognizable,” but this is an outcome of her goal “to make it, the harpsichord, adapt to, and be in the service of, *Music*, rather than vice-versa.” Spiteri’s discomfort and dissatisfaction with the harpsichord’s traditional instrumental pairings led her to explore compositions in which the harpsichord is combined with the accordion, banjo, and lever harp. These are hardly obvious choices, but they share in common either a similarity of timbre—what Spiteri calls “timbral harmony”—or a similarity of mechanism: all but the accordion produce sound by plucking strings. In the recording of these pieces, Spiteri draws inspiration from the example of Glenn Gould to exploit the potential of the recording studio. Rather than attempting to capture the equivalent of a concert performance, the wider perspective of controlled acoustic parameters and space is explored by recording the instruments in separate spaces and manipulating the sound design through left-right panning and spatiality. “Space,” observes Spiteri, “participates as a dramatic and dynamic device, and provides a sonic depth-of-field.”

Spiteri’s unusual approach results in a disc that is refreshingly different from most recordings of contemporary music. The disc also achieves a strong sense of coherence despite presenting seven compositions by five different composers. Much of this is the result of a shared conception of instrumental combinations. Although Spiteri complains of the difficulty in convincing contemporary composers to move beyond traditional instrumental combinations with the harpsichord, she found in Hope Lee and John Beckwith her “first happy and willing collaborators.” By this, Spiteri refers to the willingness of both composers “to explore different instrumental combinations based on homogeneity of timbre [or] timbral

harmony.” The resulting works are wonderful studies in timbre that demonstrate the effectiveness of Spiteri’s approach.

Lee’s *In the Beginning was the End* combines rich, sustained chords in the accordion with fragile notes from the harpsichord to produce a shimmering glow. Much of the piece unfolds at a gentle pace allowing the sounds to be savoured and appreciated. In contrast, Beckwith exploits timbral differences by presenting the instruments in dialogue. In *Ringaround*, the harpsichord presents a harshness that is tempered by the lever harp’s soft, dreamlike tones. In *Lines Overlapping*, Beckwith contrasts the refined elegance of the harpsichord with the unsophisticated bluegrass ramblings of the banjo. One could easily imagine here a dialogue between a country hick and a city slicker. This becomes especially amusing when the harpsichord is eventually brought into the banjo’s stylistic world.

The concept of timbral harmony also informs Bruce Mather’s *Sancerre* and Kirk Elliott’s *Insect Variations: My Life as a Bug*. In *Sancerre* for harpsichord and lever harp, Mather makes brilliant use of quarter-tone tuning in both instruments. The texture is so wonderfully brittle and transparent that the quarter-tones convey an otherworldly calm that soothes like wind chimes. Elliott’s *Insect Variations* is an evocation of a bug’s fleeting existence in three continuous movements: “Conception and Birth,” “Childhood, Work, and Mating,” and “Death, Ascension, and Compost.” Scored for harpsichord, banjo, and lever harp, the trio’s unusual sound takes on vivid dramatic meaning.

Two compositions on the disc, Beckwith’s *Blurred Lines* for violin and harpsichord, and Linda Bouchard’s *Swift Silver* for harpsichord, harmonium, and celesta, appear to be at odds with Spiteri’s approach. The violin is one of Spiteri’s “non-desired instruments” and the instrumental combination of *Swift Silver* demonstrates “dissimilarities in individual timbre and mechanism.” For the listener, neither piece seems out of place as both are fully at home in the ways they continue the explorations of timbre found elsewhere on the disc. The brooding drones and quarter-tone inflections of *Blurred Lines* remove it decisively from any harpsichord-violin traditions of the past, whereas the shimmering tones of the celesta in *Swift Silver* add to the already rich sonic palate. The final piece on the disc—not credited and not discussed in the notes—is the short ...*Was the End*.... It appears to be Spiteri’s response to, and summary of, the disc as a whole.

Jalsaghar draws together some of Canada’s finest composers and performers who deliver imaginative compositions and highly convincing performances. Still, it is the conviction of Spiteri’s artistic vision that really molds and unifies the album. Despite presenting compositions by multiple composers writing for different instrumental combinations, *Jalsaghar* conveys wonderful continuity and a strong sense that these pieces belong together. Although unconventional, the works are consistently interesting and thoroughly enjoyable in their explorations of instrumental timbre and effect. Spiteri articulates her ideas clearly and persuasively in the liner notes. The quality of this disc affirms their validity.

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