

***Visions: The Complete Books of Rhapsodies and Fantasias.*** Piano Music of Constantine Caravassilis. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 18613, 2013. Christina Petrowska Quilico, piano. 2 compact discs (CD 1: 64:55; CD 2: 48:21). Contents: v. 1. *The Book of Rhapsodies. Postcard from Smyrna* (9:56) – ...to a Galliform Marionette (5:49) – *Visitations* (11:23) – *Shadow Variations on a Theme by Alan Hovhaness* (27:24) - *Pandora's Jar* (10:23) – v. 2. *The Book of Fantasias. Soul Ascending* (6:03) – *Fantasia on the Dies Irae* (11:40) – *View from Pluto* (7:59) – *Fantasia on the Rising Sun* (13:04) – *Lumen de Lumine* (9:36).

*Visions: The Complete Books of Rhapsodies and Fantasias* is a recording of piano works by the young Canadian composer Constantine Caravassilis (born 1979). These are two assembled sets of five standalone compositions, representing Caravassilis' large-scale cycles for solo piano. The exact dates of composition are only provided for *Fantasia on the Rising Sun*, from 2005 through 2010, and *Lumen de Lumine*, 2004. The recordings are accompanied by a substantial booklet that proves to be essential to arriving at a deeper understanding of the works and of his compositional style, discussed in more detail below.

The harmonic language used by Caravassilis is decidedly tonal and there is little that might be described as harmonic development; however, there are some extended periods of dissonance that provide some pleasing contrast. While showing occasional influences from minimalism, in general these works are, as Caravassilis himself describes them, obsessed “with melodic development through quasi-melismatic variation.”

The *Book of Rhapsodies* exhibits a variety of influences that are readily audible, including Eastern modality in *Postcard*, Debussy in *Marionette*, Scriabin in *Visitations*, and Schumann in *Pandora*. Structurally, these are not the rhapsodies of Brahms or Bartok. Caravassilis' approach to form is actually more rhapsodic in spirit than either of those masters. Only the *Shadow Variations* pay tribute to what might be called a standard form. In all of the individual pieces, there are appropriate contrasts that are evident as each composition unfolds, but the narrative style is largely one of gesture and pause, gesture and pause, et cetera. Notwithstanding that this approach flirts with being too predictable, the style of writing reflects a good understanding of the pianistic idiom, some fine sense of the piano as a coloristic instrument, and enough structural contrast so as to avoid being insipid. Perhaps the most effective of the *Rhapsodies* is *Pandora's Jar*, in part because it presents some palpable changes in tempo that create a strong toccata-like quality and some actual drama.

The *Book of Fantasias* is the shorter of the two sets by almost fifteen minutes. One hears fewer allusions to other composers, perhaps by design, although in *Pluto* there are sounds reminiscent of the late experiments of Liszt. A repeated note ostinato features prominently in the materials of the first, middle, and final pieces, which serves to unify the five movements

more notably than what is heard in the *Rhapsodies*. At the same time, however, it seems to work against the various images that the titles are intended to suggest. The most successful movement, *Fantasia on the Dies Irae*, provides an appealing array of motivic and harmonic interplay that maintains the thread of the narrative throughout and, although not strictly a theme-and-variations, there is enough of that compositional technique present to sustain that thread.

Ms. Petrowska Quilico provides fine interpretations of these works. Her use of colour and pedal is penetrating and rich, and she imbues the phrasing of the gesture-pause-gesture-pause with enough variety to hold the works together and avoid mannerism. Included in the booklet are reproductions of paintings that she has created under the inspiration of these works, which provide a visual interpretation of each movement. They are interesting and colorful, but inasmuch as they are responses to the music, they do not particularly offer insight to what we actually hear.

On the other hand, Caravissilis' notes *do* provide important information that guides the listener to a greater understanding. Caravissilis' characterization of his own style is both informative and troubling. Recognizing that he focuses on melody reflects a level of self-awareness that is good for any composer to have. It is a valid compositional approach, and one that Caravissilis handles adeptly. However, some of his other comments lead, at least for this reviewer, in the direction of compositional danger. It is difficult to imagine, for example, Stravinsky or Messiaen saying that his work was "driven solely by emotion." Even more problematic is this statement: "there is one other important component in a musical work that cannot be 'learned': the exploration of form." One *has* to believe that form is more than that which "emerges entirely from the composer's intuition and can unfold in a natural, organic way." Schoenberg's approach to composition, for example, is frequently referred to as "organic," but there is an interior discipline to how he handles progressive development that is anything but "intuitive," and there is a tightness therein that is both essential *and* audible. I believe that Caravissilis may be doing himself a disservice. He has clearly brought considerable compositional discipline to the writing of these sets. The fine music on these CDs is worthy of repeated listening and performances.

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