

RECORDINGS

Mozart – Munro – Palmer. David

Rowden, clarinet; Dimitri Ashkenazy, clarinet; Omega Ensemble. W.A.

Mozart: *Clarinet Quintet in A Major*, KV. 581; I. Munro: *Songs from the Bush – Clarinet Quintet*; G. Palmer: *It Takes Two – Concerto for Two Clarinets*. ABC Classics ABC 481 4667. Total Time: 71:08. Amazon.com and iTunes

Founded in 2005, Omega Ensemble is a Sydney-based chamber ensemble committed to concerts of new music incorporating a flexible orchestration, similar in implementation to the Vienna Octet or Melos Ensemble, with their largest configuration as a chamber orchestra. Their exploits have brought them notoriety across Australia, and this album is a reflection of Omega's mission: mixing new works with old, small to large instrumentation, "providing the best performances of iconic chamber music."

The excellent clarinetist David Rowden is featured on this collection, and his Mozart interpretation on basset clarinet is what one strives for: presenting a piece in a manner that makes the listener hear it in a fresh way. There is a spontaneity that is not heard in many Mozart recordings. Rowden takes advantage of every second statement of a theme or sequence to do something distinctive with dynamics or ornamentation. It is tasteful and in the classical style, but may be a little much for some traditionalists. The "Menuetto" and "Allegretto con variazioni" movements revel in the moments of silence, and the group is completely on the same page here. Releases are refined and delicate. This is a lovely Mozart that is beautifully executed.

Ian Munro's 2008 clarinet quintet, *Songs from the Bush*, is a three-movement work that weaves together Australian and indigenous folk music seeking to create, according to the composer, "a link and a sympathy between the two cultures." Rowden's earnest phrasing and nuance elevate any music, especially these folk-inspired melodies. The second movement, "Campfire and Night Sky," is reminiscent of mid-20th-century English folk tune-inspired quintets, particularly the Herbert Howells *Rhapsodic Quintet*.

The final movement, "Drover's Lament," is a lovely treatment of indigenous material. The players channel their inner wanderer with an effective interplay. Munro's composition is a worthy addition into the rich subgenre of the clarinet quintet.

The renowned clarinetist Dimitri Ashkenazy lends his star power for the three-movement double concerto *It Takes Two* by George Palmer, also from 2008. The programmatic aspects of this work revolve around relationships, friendships and separation. The soloists take turns playing off each other, circling around and eventually coming together in a fun romp of a piece. The first movement opens with a gentle, languid duet, followed by a back-and-forth technical display. The second movement portrays a couple in love separated by distance, a melancholy dance. The last movement is high energy, with many humorous moments.

Rowden and Ashkenazy are eerily similar in articulation and timbral beauty. They weave in and out of lines seamlessly, completely in sync with the various styles throughout. The instrumentation is a mixed wind/string configuration of nine instruments, but the recording quality makes the group seem much larger.

Overall, the recorded sound is excellent, vibrant and close. The balance is very good, especially in the double concerto. Omega's musicians are top notch, with a mature sense of blend and cohesion. This album is excellent, highlighting the great work Omega has accomplished in a relatively short period of time.

– Osiris Molina

Lieder/Canciones. sTem: Eric Christian Umble, clarinet; Meagan Amelia Brus, voice; Sophia Subbayya Vastek, piano. R. Isenberg: *Das Stunden-Buch*; F. Schubert: *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*, D. 965; G. Piacentini: *Preludio de un Diamante*; D. Catán: "Escúchame" from *Florencia en el Amazonas*. Artist produced. Total time 45:00. www.stemmusic.bandcamp.com

With its debut album **Lieder/Canciones**, the New York-based trio sTem successfully communicates its mission to "adamantly support the creation of new music and the reimagining of existing works." The first and third pieces were



commissioned by sTem, and serve as the definitive recordings of those works, while the final piece is an original arrangement by sTem. The album's centerpiece is that staple of clarinet/soprano literature, Schubert's *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*, D. 965.

Das Stunden-Buch, one of sTem's first commissioned works which was premiered in 2013, was composed by Los Angeles-based Rex Isenberg. Isenberg borrowed four poems from Rainer Maria Rilke's 1905 collection *Das Stunden-Buch*, which is itself modeled after the traditional Christian manual "Book of Hours." Vastek and Umble open with a dramatic introduction of alternating, rumbling arpeggios. Their roiling intensity weaves itself through all four movements, building a narrative founded on divine struggle. Brus and Umble demonstrate their masterful command of altissimo at several moments, culminating in an atmospheric event in the fourth movement, "O Herr." Brus pleads to God for a death that comes after living a life full of love, meaning and need, as she and Umble ascend to the edges of their range.

A beautifully unhurried performance of Schubert's *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* follows. From the beginning, there is a marked difference in recording quality. Recording aside, sTem's ensemble playing is beautifully executed throughout, especially in the end of the first section and throughout the minor transitional section.

The other original commission to appear on this album, *Preludio de un Diamante*, was written by the Mexico City-based composer Giovanni Piacentini. Piacentini used the poetry of Fausto Alzati, also from

Mexico City. With piano and clarinet, Piacentini skillfully builds coloristic textures that depict the moods suggested by the text. “Apenas” (Barely) depicts a space dense with openness. It begins with a meditative clarinet solo consisting of drawn-out lines, wide leaps and extra reverb courtesy of an un-dampened piano. “Sala de Espera a Dios” (Waiting Room for God) opens with a dreamlike ostinato played by Vastek. “Fiebre” (Fever) also opens with a feverish ostinato, an insistent three against two cross-rhythm.

sTem closes their album with an original arrangement of “Escúchame,” the final aria from Daniel Catán’s 1996 opera *Florencia en el Amazonas*, libretto by Marcela Fuentes-Bernal. Florencia, traveling down the Amazon for a performance in Manaus in the hopes that she finds her lover, has learned that the city is experiencing a cholera epidemic and is closed to travelers. In “Escúchame” (Hear Me) she realizes that her lover may be dead, though she can still feel his presence. As the aria concludes, Florencia transforms into a butterfly to reunite spiritually with her lover. Brus’s performance overflows with emotion from her opening line to her final portamento, and Umble beautifully complements with his nuanced, coloristic playing.

In general, recording engineer Chris Abell and mixer Chris Camilleri privilege Meagan Brus’s vocals over the clarinet and piano, often to the detriment of the clarinet. Too much of Umble’s sound was lost, in some cases even to the reverberation of the piano accompaniment. The strongest aspects of sTem’s first album are their collaborations: with each other, with Isenberg and Piacentini, with Catán and his music. For Brus, Umble and Vastek, it is within this fertile ground that the strength of their musicality and commitment to their art shines brightest.

– Derek Emch

Il Clarinetto tra Ottocento e Novecento dal solo al quartetto. Stark Quartet: Vinibaldo Baccari, clarinet; Sauro Berti, E-flat and B-flat clarinet; Antonio Fraioli, clarinet; Sergio Brusca, clarinet and bass clarinet. E. Cavallini: *Quartetto No. 1* and *Quartetto No. 2*; D. Scarlatti: *Allegro in G Minor*; R. Gervasio: *Nel Vivo*, Op. 127; V. Bucchi:

Concerto for solo clarinet; H. Gualdi: *Breve Preludio*; G. Gherardeschi: *Five Sonatas for Three Clarinets*; G. Cappetti: *Il Folleto*, *La Civettuola* and *Cicaleggio* for solo clarinet; B. Lanzi: *Petit Suite*. Tactus TC 890001. Total time: 62:14. Amazon.com and iTunes



After their first recording as an ensemble, *Prime RegISTRAZIONI*, the Stark Quartet’s sophomore offering showcases Italian clarinet solo and ensemble music from the 19th and 20th centuries. It is aptly named **Il Clarinetto tra Ottocento e Novecento dal solo al quartetto** (The Clarinet in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries from Solo to Quartet). Clarinetists know Cavallini, but this album also shines light on arrangements and lesser-known Italian composers. The disc includes premiere recordings of works by Scarlatti and Guglielmo Cappetti.

The Stark Quartet – comprised of clarinetists Vinibaldo Baccari, Sauro Berti, Sergio Brusca and Antonio Fraioli – provides convincing interpretations for these works. The performers are also arrangers, composers and historians. Some of these works would be lost to history without this group’s dedicated efforts. An egalitarian ensemble, they perform in various combinations, from solo to trio and quartet, and sound well matched in any configuration.

For quartet, the works by 20th century composers Raffaele Gervasio and Henghel Gualdi stand out. Gervasio’s *Nel Vivo*, Op. 127, demonstrates the energy and excitement the composer brought to his film scores. It offers contrasting sections where the quartet can display alternating flashes of virtuosity and beautifully

delicate moments. Gualdi, a clarinetist and composer considered a foremost proponent of jazz in Italy, wrote *Breve Preludio*. He proves to be a composer fluent in many musical languages, though the piece has excellent opportunities for the quartet to show their jazz chops.

Ernesto Cavallini’s two quartets are showpieces and sound like great fun to perform. The performers give his works a pulsing energy throughout. These works contrast each other nicely.

The Stark Quartet works equally well as a trio with rotating personnel. In this configuration, they move to earlier works by Domenico Scarlatti and Giuseppe Gherardeschi. Scarlatti’s *Keyboard Sonata in G Minor* is the only arrangement. It gives the three musicians equally interesting parts and sounds like good material for student ensembles. Gherardeschi’s *Five Sonatas* complete the trio portion of the disc. These short compositions have charming character but sound somewhat monotonous when played in a row. There are also momentary lapses in the ensemble’s intonation, which was so sure in the quartet configuration.

This recording skips over duets, but gives both Antonio Fraioli and Sauro Berti the chance to show off with solo works. Fraioli’s turn features three premiere recordings of works by Guglielmo Cappetti. Cappetti wrote for clarinetists with virtuosic technique in the golden age of the instrumental virtuoso. Fraioli is up to the challenge, turning in technically brilliant, fluid performances.

Valentino Bucchi’s *Concerto per Clarinetto Solo* is no less virtuosic but offers a different set of challenges. It demands various extended techniques, flawless registral control, and lightning-fast articulation. Berti handles these challenges with impressive musicianship and fluid technique. This selection stands out as exceptional.

This disc continues to establish the ensemble as an intelligent, humorous group doing excellent work. The diversity in styles and time periods presents a challenge that the Stark Quartet handles quite well. Clarinetists interested in learning new repertoire for chamber ensembles will love this recording.

– Jeffrey O’Flynn