

KERNIS *On Distant Shores*¹. *Morningsong with Mist*². *Playing Monster*². *Angel Lullaby*². *Ballad*³. *Linda's Lullaby*². *Speed Limit Rag*². *Trio in Red*⁴ • ¹Susan Babini (vc); ¹Joseph Peters (ob); ³Caroline Stinson (vc); ⁴Ayako Oshima (cls); ^{1,2,3}Evelyn Luest (pn); ¹Daedalus Str Qt (Min-Young Kim, Aaron Boyd, vns; Jessica Thompson, va; Raman Ramakrishnan, vc) • PHOENIX 183 (62:52)

Aaron Jay Kernis, winner of the 2002 Grawnemeyer Award for Musical Composition and the 1998 Pulitzer Prize, studied with John Adams (at San Francisco), Charles Wuorinen (Manhattan School of Music) as well as with such luminaries as Bernard Rands and Morton Subotnik at Yale. Quite a number of his recordings have been tackled here at *Fanfare*. The assurance of Kernis' writing is clearly evident in this World Premiere recording of the ballet *On Distant Shores*, a piece which focuses on Helen of Troy. Here, Helen is brought to Troy against her will; four memories of her past appear, initially as a group of warriors before each duets with Helen, briefly. The piece includes an arrangement of Kernis' popular and unremittingly beautiful 1995 *Air*, in a simply miraculous performance here by cellist Susan Babini. Kernis' writing is generally approachable, which sets the anguished dissonances within the "Air" into high relief. The timing on the disc back cover is wrong: here it claims 5"20 whereas the piece actually lasts 12"04. A video excerpt from a full performance of *On Distant Shores* can be seen at <http://www.rioult.org/on-distant-shores-2011-2/>

No missing the French Impressionist influence on *Morningsong with Mist*. Pianist Evelyn Luest gives a most sensitive account of a piece that is not only atmospheric but beautifully consistent harmonically. As one could guess from the title, *Playing Monster* is the flipside of *Morningsong with Mist*. A musical depiction of a children's game, it skips around dissonantly and menacingly (and sometimes lumberingly). A moment of obsessive bass seems to veer the music toward minimalist territory; again in complete contrast, *Angel Lullaby*, an arrangement for solo piano of "Double Lullaby" from *Two Awakenings and a Double Lullaby*, references a Spiritual ("Angels Watching Over Me") to great effect. Luest is at her most delicate here.

The *Ballad*, influenced by the death of the composer's mother, was originally for cello and cello ensemble prior to this arrangement. Poignantly expressive, the piece casts a shadow far longer than its nine-minute duration. Caroline Stinson is a superb soloist, her tone full, and capable of bringing off the full emotional weight of the climax. The short *Linda's Waltz* (written for Linda Hoeschler of the American Composers Forum), which includes references to Bill Evans and Brahms, has more than a touch of tender valediction to it. Luest finds exactly the right amount of emotion, at times allowing the music to speak so powerfully for itself. Another occasion piece, the *Speed Limit Rag* (for David Zinman's 65th birthday), not half as manic as its title might imply, is given a beautifully spun performance here. The composer refers to it as a "Gershwin-esque tune on a Eubie Blake-ean slow drag". Who am I to argue?

Finally, the longest piece on this disc, the *Trio in Red*. Partially a reaction to synaesthesia, the piece explores various shades, from an inviting "lightly-tinted near-orange to deep maroon and blood-stained reddish black", again in the composer's own words. The first movement, "Orange Circle, Yellow Line", is generally restrained and tender across its twelve-minute expanse, although there are effective contrasting outbursts. Here the excellence of the performance shines: these outbursts carry all the emotive weight, yet exude accuracy. A simply gorgeous moment of frozen stasis (around the nine-minute mark) is incredibly powerful. The finale, "Red Whirl", seems to speak of whirling dervishes, a heady, intoxicated *Danse macabre* given in a wild performance here. There is even a touch of a Ligeti *Etude* at one point in the piano part, it seems. All the pieces so far on this disc have been World Premiere recordings, but this has one other (which unfortunately I have not heard) on Delos (3423), where it is coupled with works by Copland, Hartke and Zwilich. The present account, however, provides a most involving experience.

Fans of the music of Aaron Jay Kernis need not hesitate.

Colin Clarke