



SACD REVIEW by Peter J. Rabinowitz

ÅM *Be the Purpose*.¹ *I Awoke*.² *This Our Virgin Now*.³ • Ellen Sejersted Bødtker (hp, electric hp); Carl Høgset, cond; Ellen Berit Norbakken Solset (sop);^{2,3} Hildegunn Riise (nar);^{1,3} Grex Vocalis;³ Oslo C Music Festival Str • 2L 51 (Blu-ray Disc & Hybrid multichannel SACD: 58: 07)

“The fragile, almost intangible sense that time and weight do not exist invites us through the doorway of ‘now.’ The first movement is the face of timelessness; the second that of weightlessness. And before and in between each movement the harp plays cadenzas which attune our ear to silence.” So Norwegian composer Magnar Åm describes *Dette Blanke No* (“This Our Virgin Now”), a concerto for harps (acoustic and electronic) and voices employing (like the other works here) poetry he has written himself. If that account suggests a fairly restrained and hypnotic work, with little forward pressure or narrative line, the music won’t disturb your expectations. The first movement—in which the chorus sings (with subtle virtuosity) almost exclusively long, sustained notes—is especially static; but even the second movement, where the level of choral activity falls somewhere between that of Holst’s “Neptune” and that of Debussy’s “Sirènes,” aims more to soothe us than to move us. I hesitate to drag out the labels “New Age” or “Spiritual Minimalism.” The music’s harmonies, especially in the slightly denser second movement, are too taxing for that. In addition, while the mood may be generally serene, there are more troubling undercurrents than you find, say, in many of Pärt’s more unambiguously lofty compositions. But it’s certainly music that encourages meditation.

Vere Meiniga (“Be the Purpose”)—originally for Chinese harp and string sextet, and rewritten for Ellen Sejersted Bødtker to play on European instruments—is far more varied in its surface. It begins as a gloss on Debussy, but eventually branches off in a number of different directions, now still, now scurrying, now fluid, now angular, now gentle, now bursting with a post-expressionist *angst* that may remind you of Schoenberg’s later music or Berg’s *Lyric Suite*. Throughout, Åm draws a wide variety of colors from his instrumentalists and his tactfully employed electronic-harp effects. I found it a far more gripping experience than *Dette Blanke*, but both works—and the brief, haunting song between them—offer plenty for adventurous ears.

Almost as striking as the music, though, is the recording. As on 2L’s “Divertimenti” (see Andrew Quint’s review in 32:2), we’re offered the music in a variety of formats on two separate discs. Specifically, there are six alternatives (compared to the nine on the earlier release): on the Blu-ray disc, you can choose from 5.0 DTS HD MA, 5.0 LPCM 24/96, and 2.0 LPCM 24/96; you get the three options you’d expect on the SACD. Forget the stereo tracks: Åm gives the album as a whole the title “Sonar,” since “we all send our symbolic sonars into the physical and spiritual space, in a constant search for meaning.” In particular, he composes music that engages our “perception of direction”; and while he’d prefer a recording technology that could also convey height, he’s here made the most of what he calls the “single plane” of current surround-sound systems. This is music that literally surrounds the listener (the program booklet has detailed charts), and much of its evocative power comes from the subtle interplay of locations. All three of the surround-sound options are magnificent—and I suspect that any differences you hear are more likely to come from differences in your equipment than differences in the recordings.

Two quibbles. First, the notes tell us almost nothing about the composer, who is hardly a household name: his *Study on a Norwegian Hymn* has been played around a bit, but it’s not easy to track down information about him or his background. Second, although the Blu-ray disc is essentially audio-only, it does provide menu information on your screen if you turn it on. Why not also give the texts and translations? They’re available in the program booklet, but having them on-screen would, I think, heighten the effect. All in all, though, this is strongly recommended for the adventurous who own the right playback equipment. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**