

DAYTON: *Piano and Strings*

Michael Sheppard, p; Sarah Jane Thomas, Andrew Kwan, Joshua Hong, Marika Suzuki, v; Yang Guo, va; Lavena Johanson, c
Navona 6143—65:75

This album of works by Peter Dayton (born 1990) show a composer whose heart and care are palpable. His melodic sensibilities are at center stage. It's a collection of works whose main motifs you're going to walk away from a performance singing. These works are often inspired by people or pieces of art, and that makes this album all the more like a personal tribute. These works practically hum with the intensity of love and life, and they are presented in sequence in a way that makes the process of listening to them feel like looking through a beautiful photo album. These performances are emotional and dedicated, and Dayton is a young composer who has a voice that deserves to be heard often.

HUANG: *Piano Pieces*

Xing Rong, p—Toccatà 425—70:01

An-lun Huang's compositional aesthetic carries with it the silky beauty of Debussy, the romance of Rachmaninoff, but is forceful underneath. The Three Excerpts from the Ballet *A Dream of Dunhuang* are more derivative and thinly-scored than I had expected. Four Large Preludes and Fugues, Op. 68 are a set of pieces that as a musician are fascinating to observe. Huang makes these forms his own, but his Preludes and Fugues will remind you more of Shostakovich's than Bach's. Xing Rong plays the pieces on this album with aplomb. She's aggressive and tender, delicate and exact. It's quite clear she followed the composer's directions without fail. This album speaks an interesting truth about intersection of cultures: here we have Western-inspired music with Chinese subject matter written by a composer whose time in college was delayed for years while he was sent into the countryside as a laborer during the Cultural Revolution. And this music is well worth listening to.

Ancestral Voices

Apollo Chamber Players
Navona 6130—69 minutes

Apollo Chamber Players, based in Houston, has a commissioning project called 20x2020, which is an endeavor to commission 20 multicultural works by the year 2020, and the results thus far are astounding and deeply enjoyable. Gilad Cohen's *Three Goat Blues* is perfectly

paced, flowing gracefully from one idea to another, all the while working with an old Provençal prayer tune, 'Chad Gadya'. Arthur Gottshalk's 'Imágenes de Cuba' open up with lazy, sunshine-filled glissandos that opens up into a re-writing of 'Peanut Vendor'. Deliciously dissonant, Gottshalk's work is as colorful and vibrant as Cuba itself. Malek Jandali's Quartet in E-flat works Syrian folk melodies into six movements of gorgeously-written string quartet textures. Written in New York in the summer of 2016 during the bombing of Aleppo, this work has a loud and beautiful message, and I'd urge you to reach for it next time you're feeling the urge to listen to Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet. Javier Farias's *Andean Suite* is an exquisite showcase of Peruvian and Bolivian influence. Filled with tributes to folklore and traditional instruments, this piece has melodic imagery that is so clear you hardly need the program notes to know where the music wants you to travel. Farias also plays guitar with the string quartet in this piece, and it's a delicious musical addition. Apollo has hit a home run with this album that is carried out with the upmost technical proficiency and emotional balance. And, moreover, of the albums I've reviewed in the last year, this is without a doubt the most culturally relevant, politically topical, and necessary of them all.

KOJS: *Ceaseless Beauty*

Deering Estate Chamber Ensemble; Kimberly Soby, soprano—Centaur 3575—56:47

A gorgeous collection of chamber music by Slovakian-American composer Juraj Kojs. "Ceaseless Beauty" lives up to its name. His music is inspired by Slovak folk music and nature and marries a vivacious rhythmic aesthetic with minimalist techniques to create pieces that are a pleasure to listen to and that inspire the imagination. The piano quartet *Tatry* is a fine display of Kojs's compositional persona. *In Stillness* for solo piano begins with a dark, undulating, determined riff in the lower register that brings to mind something akin to the poem he offers as program notes: "A storm of flamboyant hunters galloping into heart eruptions". Indeed, Juraj converts words and phrases into chords and melody without anything lost in translation, painting evocative landscapes of tone and tempo. A passage of running 16th notes in the piano and viola snap pizzicato in his *Where the Light Surrenders* is particularly gratifying, and the song cycle *The Harbingers of Light* is dark and sumptuous. With text by Kojs, Kathryn Alexander, and Margaret, this work and its five