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Ann Millikan: *Ballad Nocturne*

Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra; Grigor Palikarov, conductor; Emanuele Arciuli, piano. Innova Recordings 713 (2010)

KIMBERLY GREENE

Prolific composer and master orchestrator Ann Millikan rallies the forces of the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony and Italian virtuoso pianist Emanuele Arciuli for a captivating journey that bewitches the mind and liberates the spirit in her new release, *Ballad Nocturne* (2010). While the composer's musical style defies a facile description, it is exemplified in her command of the richly diverse sonorities gained through the incorporation of contemporary compositional methods, her expert and vivid orchestration, and the infusion of jazz melodic and harmonic material.

Funded by the Argosy Foundation Contemporary Music Fund in 2007, *Ballad Nocturne* consists of three stylistically-diverse chamber and orchestral works: *Ballad Nocturne* (2009); *Trilhas de Sombra* (2009); and *Landing Inside the Inside of an Animal* (2008). The title composition for piano and chamber orchestra was commissioned by the Orchestra Filharmonica di Torino as a showcase for the meticulous yet impassioned pianist, Emanuele Arciuli. Widely esteemed by American composers and an acknowledged champion of twentieth and twenty-first century American music, Arciuli has inspired compositions by Babbitt, Bolcom, Crumb, Daugherty, Harbison, Rzewski, Torke, as well as Millikan. In this respect, *Ballad Nocturne* represents the perfect vehicle for the talents of the artist.

Outwardly conforming to the rounded binary form of the Romantic lyrical nocturne and the intimate narrative style of a jazz ballad, *Ballad Nocturne* remains an ingenious postmodernist hybrid, in which the orchestra engages in a flirtatious dialogue with the piano. The striking modal language coupled with the vacillating jazz and atonal material is enhanced by string harmonics and bowed crotales. In the recapitulation, the haunting melody reappears accompanied by a disruptive walking bass line and then retreats into the night. The effect evokes mysterious images of twilight as the piano softly wanders into nothingness.

The evocative and striking three-movement orchestral composition, *Trilhas de Sombra* (Shadow Trails), exhibits the exceptional ability of the composer to combine disparate musical styles, orchestral effects, and varied compositional methods in a spatial arrangement. Based upon Millikan's original fanciful narrative, which was written for her Brazilian niece, *Trilhas de Sombra* portrays a young girl of the Amazon and her journey through the Shadow Trails into the Snow World. As she travels through the deepest layers of this world, she arrives at the location where all sound originates and plunges her sword into the mountain. Magically, all sound is transformed and exists in abundance. For the musical depiction of the tale, the composer employs a distinctly expressionist approach, while using melodic material in conjunction with atonal methods. The most breathtaking moment of the composition occurs in the last few minutes of the third movement, "Battling Oligarn Batrone." After the terrifying climax, the exquisite melodic material returns in the orchestra accompanied by an imitative and impressionistic flute solo,

brilliantly executed by the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra and Yavor Jeleu, respectively.

The concluding composition, *Landing Inside the Inside of an Animal*, offers the listener an entertaining adventure into a labyrinth of diverse compositional styles. The static yet energetic atonal first section anticipates a virtual explosion into a musical celebration of Afro-Cuban dance rhythms and finishes with a samba, other dances, and a lively fanfare. This restless piece features a relentless bass clarinet and bassoon interplay, which serves to increase the interest and tension, just before the fiery concluding festivities.

The Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra, directed by Grigor Palikarov, delivers a nuanced performance through its skillful and dynamic articulation of the distinct musical styles embedded in the array of musical material. The compact disc, *Ballad Nocturne*, stands, not only as a significant addition to the repertoire, but also as a testimony to the innovation and craftsmanship of the composer.

Kimberly Greene is a PhD candidate in musicology at Claremont Graduate University, CA. Currently, she serves as an instructor of Music History at California State University, Fullerton, is a recipient of the Walker Parker Memorial Endowment Fellowship (CGU, 2008) and the Albert A. Friedman Research Grant (CGU, 2009). She holds a master's degree in Music History & Literature from CSUF, with additional degrees in German Studies, French, and Business Administration.