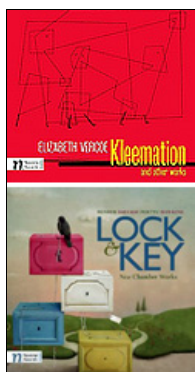


Classical CD Reviews

"ELIZABETH VERCOE: Kleemation and Other Works" = var. performers/Theodore Antoniou, dir. – Navona
"Lock & Key: New Chamber Works" = by PENDER, SALVAGE, PERTTU & HAWKINS – Navona

The Vercoe album supplies more variety of expression and a lot more to think about than the second one.

Published on September 26, 2013



"ELIZABETH VERCOE: Kleemation and Other Works" = Kleemation for flute and piano; Fantasy; Irreveries from Sappho; Herstory II: 13 Japanese Lyrics; To Music; Despite our differences #1 – Peter H. Bloom (Kleemation) and Nancy Stagnitta (To Music), flute / Mary Jane Rupert (Kleemation), Rosemary Platt (Fantasy, Irreveries), Randall Hodgkinson (Herstory), and Christine Paraschos (Despite our differences #1), piano / Elsa Chariston, sop. / Sharon Mabry, mezzo-soprano / Dean Anderson, percussion / Joseph Sheer, violin / Karen Kaderavek, cello / Richard Pittman (Herstory) and Theodore Antoniou (Despite our differences #1), dir. – Navona NV5884, 68:00 *1/2:**

"Lock & Key: New Chamber Works" = SCOTT PENDER: In the Time Before; R. DAVID SALVAGE: Albumleaves; DANIEL PERTTU: Gloamin: A Fantasy for Flute and Piano; MALCOLM HAWKINS: Bonjour Ma Petite – Moravian Chamber Players / R. David Salvage (Albumleaves) and Yuling Huang-Davie (Gloamin), p./ Andrea Kapell Lowey, flute – Navona NV5881, 64:00 **1/2:

Navona can be applauded for exploring the range of styles available to contemporary American composers, one that is really breathtaking, as the composers represented on these two discs attest. Styles range from the chromatic/atonal music of Elizabeth Vercoe through the frankly Reichian minimalism of Scott Pender to the modal, folk-influenced work of Daniel Perttu. Lots of very different musical influences here, as richly, confusingly varied as the styles that American painting or poetry can muster in the early twenty-first century. And while I'm glad for the opportunity to sample all of it, I'm also glad that Navona has chosen to provide Elizabeth Vercoe a retrospective showcase because I find her music the most satisfying of all.

Vercoe (b. 1941) also shows a willingness to adapt different musical styles and elements to her basic idiom: the essential atonality of her music is leavened with some well-chosen pop influences where appropriate to the subject matter at hand. That includes *Kleemation*, a work based on drawings by Swiss modernist painter Paul Klee. Klee's sometimes whimsical, sometimes troubling art turns for its inspiration to the uninhibited world of the child artist. The five drawings behind Vercoe's piece are helpfully reproduced in the notes to this recording. They are, indeed, both whimsical and a bit unsettling, and Vercoe captures both these essences in her music. The first piece, "Goodbye to You," "incorporates the title into the rhythm of the music. . . ." while the second, "Please!" "draws on the vernacular tradition of swing music. . . ." So far, the music is unintimidating and attractively casual, matching the drawings. The more ominous side of Klee's art is explored in the other pieces, especially "Afraid of the Beach," with its dark swirls of sound from the keyboard, the anxious flutter-tonguing on the flute. Finally, there is "More Will Be Marching Soon" (reproduced on the album cover), a typically simple but frightening portrait of the soldier as mere cog in the modern fighting machine. Vercoe subtly worked the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" into her piece; it haunts the fabric of the score, flitting by in shards and pieces, a ghostly remnant of the original.

The most successful work on the program—at least my favorite—is *Irreveries from Sappho*, which brings pop musical-influences to bear on three of Sappho's brief lyrics: "Adromeda Rag," "Older Woman Blues," and "Boogie for Leda." Vercoe may take a page out of William Bolcom's playbook, but the results are witty, sly, very enjoyable. As Vercoe herself writes, "Sappho's poetry. . . seems remarkably up-to-date. Its wit calls for whatever musical sleight of hand the composer might muster. . . ."

Herstory, based on lyrics by Japanese female poets from the eighth to the twelfth century, also explores the themes of love and longing typical of Sappho, but in place of wit there is more of despair, reflected in Vercoe's somewhat histrionic approach to the poetry. In some cases, given the quiet intimacy of the verse, Vercoe's treatment is pretty much over the top. The writing for the accompanying instruments, however, is interesting—mysterious, often spookily evocative. Even so, I don't find this music as successful as the shorter *Irreveries*.

The piano *Fantasy*, on the other hand, exploits the resources of the piano in clever and musically satisfying ways. Vercoe not only unlocks the colors of the keyboard but asks the pianist to get inside the instrument and produce haunting, slithery sounds on the strings—not a new idea, of course, but handled with an ear well attuned to balance and variety.

There's more poetic reference in *To Music*, the titles of whose four short sections are taken from Russian poet Anna Akhmatova's work.

Like the *Fantasy*, it successfully showcases the colors and techniques available to the modern practitioner of her instrument, in this case the flute.

I count *Despite our differences #1* among my least favorite works on the program, but one problem is the hissy live recording made during the work's 1985 premier at Boston University. It's distant, thoroughly lacking in presence, and that seems to infect the music, which I find more than a bit dry and pedantic.

However, the other works on the program receive good recordings in a variety of venues and in performances that almost certainly have the imprimatur of the composer herself. On balance, this is a fine and varied showcase for Vercoe's considerable gifts.

Despite the fact that a variety of composers writing in a variety of styles are represented on the album entitled *Lock & Key*, there's less emotional and intellectual range on display here. I'd place most of this music in the category of classical easy listening, which certainly has its place.

Scott Pender is very upfront about his debt to Steve Reich, telling us that the inspiration for *In the Time Before* was a "particularly energetic live performance of Steve Reich's *Double Sextet* by the Bang on a Can All-Stars." According to the composer, the work is written in "'elaboration' form, a form I developed many years ago, in which I take a short piece or section of a piece of music and stretch it into a longer work, applying various transformational processes to the original material." It's an interesting idea that is also behind the music of Fred Lerdahl and other contemporary composers, but the result is very Steve Reichian, with maybe a little Michael Torke thrown in for good measure.

The Internet is behind R. David Salvage's *Albumleaves*: the composer wrote these pieces for his musical blog albumleaves.com. Here we have just a sampling of many such works that appear on the blog, and I have to say they had as little impact on me as the work of most bloggers, musical or otherwise. Written in "a wide variety of styles," the pieces predictably have no musical focus or center. Maybe the randomness will appeal to some listeners, but I find it all pretty vapid.

I'm far more partial to Daniel Perttu's folk-influenced *Gloamin*, whose modal strains recall the works of modern English pastoralists (Vaughan Williams et al.) and other culturally attuned composers who found expression writing in modes, such as Ernest Bloch.

Finally, we have Malcolm Hawkins's *Bonjour Ma Petite*, written for the Thayer Music Festival in Massachusetts and designed for performance by teenage musicians. It's light, bright, fairly attractive stuff, recounting a boy-meets-girl-in-gay-Paree tale in five brief musical vignettes.

The notes to this program promise that it "opens the door to discover harmonious, melodic chamber works tied together by a shared understanding of the most treasured aspects of humanity." Heady thoughts, but as you can guess from my evaluation above, I don't see the promise being fulfilled. It's not all chamber music either, since Salvage's work is for solo piano. So this is just a randomly assembled group of pieces and composers that may divert by their sheer variety but one that doesn't give a listener much to chew on emotionally or intellectually.

—Lee Passarella
