



Anna Marie Wytko. Saxophonist. TimeGrabber Digital.

The saxophone has been recognized as the signature instrumental voice of jazz, but saxophones were conceived in the mid-19th century as new orchestral members that combined the flexibility of woodwinds and the power of brasses. The sax continues to shine in a classical context and has no finer modern advocate than Anna Marie Wytko. Dr. Wytko possesses a prodigious technique plus extraordinary control of tone and dynamics. She plays a challenging and musically compelling program, leading off with the Sonata by the late Czech composer Jindřich Feld, a 21-minute work employing microtonal and multiphonic techniques. Its emotional core is the “Bells of Liberty” movement that honors the 1989 Velvet Revolution: in Wytko’s hands, it unfolds with an understated majesty. The rest of the disc presents music by living composers, including Frenchmen Philippe Gantchoula and Anthony Girard, plus Americans Sean Heim and Craig Weston. Gantchoula’s *Krypton* and Weston’s *Paradox Found* has Wytko switching from alto to baritone saxophone as she’s joined by her father, Joseph, on soprano sax for a pair of trios of exceptional vitality. Throughout the disc, the saxophones are recorded closely—we hear clicking keys and clacking pads—with the piano accompaniment further back in the soundfield. **AQ**

Further Listening: Anna Marie Wytko: “When night came...”



Weinberg: Complete String Quartets. Quatuor Danel. CPO (6 CDs).

Mieczyslaw Weinberg was a Polish composer of Jewish heritage who made his career in Russia. He worked alongside his musician father in the Jewish theater and began piano lessons at the Warsaw Conservatory at age 12. He fled east in 1939 and studied composition in Minsk with one of Rimsky-Korsakov’s students. When the Nazis invaded Russia, he went to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and in 1943 Shostakovich invited him to live in Moscow. The two composers became close friends, sharing ideas and influencing each other’s music. Weinberg was arrested in February, 1953, as part of a wave of anti-Semitism. Shostakovich wrote to Lavrenti Beria, head of the KGB, to plead his case; Weinberg was released in April, shortly after Stalin’s death. He received some major state awards in the following years and left a large body of work, including 22 symphonies and these 17 string quartets performed by Quatuor Danel.

Weinberg has been dismissed by some as a pale imitation of Shostakovich, but while his musical language is similar, his work is of a different sort. Weinberg’s moods are less extreme, and he’s often sunnier or gentler. He isn’t shallow or unemotional, but he avoids the depths of angst and anger that Shostakovich plumbs. That alone might make your eyes light up if you find Shostakovich turgid or overblown. There are moments of sheer romantic beauty that Shostakovich

never could quite reach. The Sixth Quartet’s first movement has several of those, while the second movement, almost a scherzo, lacks the bitterness that often tinged Shostakovich.

The single-movement Eighth is one of Weinberg’s best and most concise. A slow, wandering theme rises out of the first low notes and soon turns into a limpid melody played over quiet pizzicatos. The tunes are markedly Jewish and quite attractive, and Weinberg travels through yearning affections, klezmer dances, and a muted meditation at the end. The first two movements of the experimental Fifteenth are whispered, the one calmly and the other eerily. The hushed, surreal third has lines that slither and shimmy a half-step apart from each other; the fourth is a thick, awkward sarabande, and it’s about the only place where the performers sound half-hearted. The fifth movement is a tough listen with its grating repeated notes. With this quartet, Weinberg really does get the furthest afield from his normal self.

The Fifth Quartet’s first movement is one of the loveliest and most enjoyable here, restful yet pensive. The second movement has the cello playing a pizzicato accompaniment while an insouciant violin melody goofs along with just a hint of swing to it. The Ninth opens aggressively, but its drama and intensity aren’t aggravating. There’s a cryptic scherzo and a cerebral-yet-sensitive andante before the boilerplate finale. The Second’s spunky ending is reminiscent of the finale to Prokofiev’s *Classical Symphony*. The Seventeenth is congenial and often warm; even at the end, Weinberg was still listening to the joys of life. It would be hard to imagine a better-played, more intelligent cycle than what the Quatuor Danel has given us. Sonics are clear and flattering if not the most reverberant. **SE**

Further Listening: Shostakovich & Weinberg: Quintets (Kirschnereit, Szymanowski Quartet/Hänssler); Shostakovich & Weinberg: Cello Concertos (Altstaedt, DSOB, Nestorowicz/Channel)