

REVIEW: Fanfare Magazine, Lynn Bayley

PEP: PIANO & EHRU PROJECT, Vol. 1 Corey Hamm
(pn); Nicole Ge Li (erhu); John Oliver (gtr)₁ REDSHIFT
TK437 (75:46)

GODIN *a long the riverrun.* **TSE** *Blues 'n'*
Grooves. **TOP** *Lamentation.* **MILLER** *Captive.* **MORL**
OCK *Verdigris.* **OLIVER** *Eternity*
Gaze. **PARK** *Moonless Night.* **RADFORD** *All Over the*
Map. **CHEN** *Twilight.* **ARMANINI** *Goldfish*

This unusual disc is marked as Vol. 1 of what is apparently going to be a series of recordings featuring the combination of piano and erhu, the two-stringed “spike fiddle” which is indigenous to China. For Western ears, the sound of the instrument takes some getting used to, as it has no resonance (think of the now-obsolete Stroh violins from the era of acoustic recording) whereas the piano is a super-resonant instrument. Yet it was erhu-player Li who approached pianist Hamm for this unusual collaboration, enjoyed the encounter, and so has joined him as an on-and-off artistic relationship playing works designed for the two instruments. Interestingly enough, although the first two works on this CD were written by a Canadian composer (Scott Godin) and a composer from Hong King (Roydon Tse), it is the former that sounds more Asian in musical concept and the latter that sounds more Western, specifically

kind of a rock and blues sort of style, and interestingly it suits the erhu very well.

Edward Top's *Lamentation* combines the pre-recorded sound of a crying woman (played by the pianist while the erhu player is performing) that emphasize the dolorous nature of this music. A brief bio of the composer indicates his fascination with such sounds, as he was apparently noted by a Dutch newspaper of the 1990s as "The Horror Composer" and uses for inspiration such non-musical devices as film noir, thrash metal, and the painters Bosch, Ensor and Goya. That being said, *Lamentation* is a well-written piece that captivates the listener from first note to last, but I admit to being less pleased with Jared Miller's *Captive*, which to my ears had little in the way of anything one would describe as musical, i.e., no thematic interest, no evocation of mood, and a mediocre sense of development and structure except to get noisier and busier as the piece progresses. (I was impressed by Li's mastery of her instrument in playing this piece, but in the end it just sounded like bad horror-film music...and I don't even particularly like *good* horror-film music.)

Happily, Jocelyn Morlock's marvelous composition *Verdigris* more than made up for this. Here is a composer fully in command of her resources as well as structure: she was the first composer-in-residence of Vancouver's concert series "Music on Main" and has recently begun a similar position for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. *Verdigris* follows a simple but effective rhythmic pattern employing four notes on a rising cadence (C-D-E-F)

which repeat themselves for some time while the pianist's right hand plays little chord fills and the erhu plays lyrically in the foreground. For the first time in this recital, we hear a work in which the erhu is used more like a violin and less like a Theremin, and the musical effect is stunning. (Having just reviewed the piano music of American composer Maria Newman before putting on this disc, I was struck at how both composers use space in their music as a compositional device.) A lovely piece, and over too soon for me.

From the lyrical effusion of Morlock we move on to the more percussive style of John Oliver in his four-part suite *Eternity Gaze* (the various sections are titled *Looking Outward Together*, *Forgetting Time*, *In a Mirror*, and *Here, Now*). In his hands the erhu returns to its Theremin-like qualities while the pianist is required to bang the piano lid, pluck the strings, and also hold down the strings with his fingers while the other hand plays the keyboard. This gives the Western piano a very Eastern sound and creates a very picturesque quality, which is extremely hard to do in music. I was quite taken with this suite and think you will be, too; it is just tonal enough to appeal to those listeners who like such things. In this piece, too, an electric guitar is added (played by the composer), and the music develops in one place in the style of old-fashioned R&B-style rock music, in another having the guitar play almost in the style of a Chinese instrument to complement the erhu. This is wonderfully creative music, for me the centerpiece of the entire CD. Oliver evidently has a fine ear for color, and is thus able to create an interesting interaction of the three instruments here.

The last piece (*Here, Now*) sets up a repeated syncopated piano figure in D minor which acts almost like a *perpetuum mobile* for that instrument, yet which changes both key and rhythmic emphasis as the work progresses. Towards the end, both the erhu and the piano's right hand move towards a stubbornly lyrical theme, trying to exorcise the left-hand rhythmic figure and eventually succeeding as a more conventional waltz rhythm permeates the last section—but with a twist when the guitar re-enters, then slowing down the tempo and picking it up again. The guitar now strums loudly in the foreground as we ride off into the (Canadian) sunset.

Michael Park, credited on the back cover of the booklet as being the first composer for PEP, contributes the evocative and moody *Moonless Night*. Once again, we hear the erhu as a Theremin substitute in music that is sinister and rather dark in character. The difference is that *Moonless Night* is a well-constructed piece, although at one point I had the bizarre feeling that it was a minor-key paraphrase of the old Laurel and Hardy *Cuckoo Song*. Park keeps on developing his piece, however, and in unusual ways that grab hold of the listener's attention: little rhythmic cells that open up and expand, moving the music outwards from a central idea like an ever-widening spiral.

Composer Laurie Radford, the notes tell us, combines “instruments, electroacoustic media, and performers in interaction with computer-controlled signal processing of sound and image,” which almost scared me away from listening to it. Fortunately, the music isn't as bad as advertised, although I was

not pleased by the insistent rock-type rhythm that permeates much (not by no means all) of it. When Radford relaxes the beat and gets more into involved writing for the instruments, she has something interesting to say. I was less than pleased by the silly rock beat in the middle section, however. Why do so many modern composers insist on combining classical music with *rock* when utilizing *jazz* rhythms and development are so much closer to their aesthetic? (No, that's not a rhetorical question.) Sadly, then, for me the latter part of *All Over the Map* is just that, music that moves into the realm of meaninglessness. Your reaction may differ, however, depending on your tolerance for electroacoustic media and computer-controlled signal processing. (To me this sounds like a modern-day train engineer who throws a switch in the roundhouse, not something that applies to music.)

Chinese composer Chen Si Ang's *Twilight* is another evocative piece combining Eastern and Western elements in an interesting way. That being said, I can't really say that I felt that *Twilight* was a particularly strong piece, merely a nice one. It tends to hover around B1 minor although it is modal in nature, occasionally moving into other keys such as C (modal) and neighboring tonalities. The second half of the piece picks up the tempo, but honestly, it just didn't communicate that much to me.

We conclude our survey with *Goldfish* by Mark Armanini, who studied with Elliot Weisgarber at the University of British Columbia but also traveled to Taipei, Beijing, and Nanjing, so he is a composer steeped in both traditions. His score here is more Western in construction than Eastern, but he understands the

lyrical potential of the erhu and makes good use of it. Here is another evocative piece, almost in the nature of ambient music, except that the overall mood of this work is sad and inconsolable in feeling. By and large, I did not feel it was the strongest piece to end the CD on, but in the second half the tonality shifts from minor to major and the mood lightens up a bit.

Overall, then, a very worthwhile musical adventure featuring two exceptional musicians in an eclectic series of works.

- Lynn René Bayley