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Review: New American Works for Clarinet, Vol. II, featuring clarinetists, Richard Stoltzman, Michele Gingras, and Kim Ellis

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By John Cipolla

New American Works for Clarinet, Vol. II, featuring clarinetists, Richard Stoltzman, Michele Gingras, and Kim Ellis, is a refreshingly new sounding offering of contemporary classical chamber music, featuring clarinet duos by William Thomas McKinley (*Clarinet Duets, Book 1 & Book II*), a capella clarinet works by Carl Vollrath (*Fanfare for a Forlorn Clarinet & Pastimes*), and a clarinet trio by Ed Marcus (*Folk Songs and Dances for Three Clarinets*). The variety of music on this disc is quite accessible to both the clarinetist and non-clarinetist listener. The twenty-two tracks on this CD range from 57–seconds to 3 minutes, 59 seconds. The neat added value of this collection is that it includes PDF study scores of the music heard on the recordings and a short “bonus video featurette” of Stoltzman speaking about the music! Thank you to MMC records and the composers for reaching out to the clarinet community and sharing this wonderful music in this way. This is a very forward thinking approach to advancing new clarinet music, and is a very generous and bold step by both MMC Records and the composers.

Richard Stoltzman really needs no introduction to the clarinet community. He was the first wind player to be awarded the prestigious Avery Fischer Prize and can be credited with bringing the clarinet to the forefront as a solo instrument in the later part of the twentieth-century. He has been soloist with over one hundred orchestras as well as recitalist and chamber music performer, and prolific recording artist. Michele Gingras—former Secretary of the International Clarinet Association, Klezmer expert, and internationally known clarinetist, author, and teacher (she is named the Crossan Hays Curry Distinguished Educator and Distinguished Scholar of the Graduate Faculty at Miami University in Oxford, OH) is one of the international clarinet community’s bright and shining stars—always seeking new ways to reach audiences and students with her performing and teaching talents. Kim Ellis has taught clarinet and saxophone at Lamar University and is principal clarinetist with the Symphony of Southeast Texas. Ellis is no stranger to new music and has many impressive credits in her background, including an upcoming recording on Centaur records and another recording with Richard Stoltzman and PARMA Recordings.

McKinley’s *Clarinet Duets, Book 1* is a collection of six duets for two clarinets. Stoltzman and Gingras perform these duets. Stoltzman briefly describes the duets in the CD liner notes. *Clarinet Duets, Book I*: “Nostalgic waltz, both clarinets circling and glistening off each others’ slow twirling; Tight twinkling imitation in waves of reverb; The jazz clarinet glissando rocking waltz; Syncopation with Latin lift; The longing, caressing, sadness, nostalgia, final cry.” The first duo is a slow, hypnotic piece in which Stoltzman plays a beautifully singing melody after a pensive, repetitive, and legato bass figure that is played by both Stoltzman and Gingras. Both Stoltzman and Gingras play with a rich and dark tonal quality. The second duo moves faster in tempo and is a cascading, arpeggiated chase between the two clarinetists. The artists brighten their tone up in this work and make it sound very playful. The third duo increases in intensity by beginning with a glissando in both instruments that culminates in climactic high Fs, the first player reaching their high F one quarter note before the second player. The

intonation in the upper clarion and altissimo registers of the Stoltzman and Gingras is so precise that you can hear the difference tones if you listen carefully—very impressive!. The fourth duo sets up a rhythmic and slightly dissonant repetitive figure as a foundation for the melody. Stoltzman uses vibrato in this duo in the upper register with excellent taste. The fifth duo again begins with a bass line figure. This duo has a strong jazz influence in its melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic material. The sixth duo calms the intense energy that was cumulatively built over the course of the first five duos and completes Book I with a chant-like quality. The beautifully dark quality of the tones of both Stoltzman and Gingras accentuate the wide palette of timbres these artists are capable of producing on the clarinet.

Stoltzman describes each of the duets in McKinley's *Clarinet Duets, Book II*: "Russian Stravinsky, primal, heavy; Into a lightheaded Waltz; Licking each other's lick; Quintuplets in an ornate Ornette world; Everything mellows loving fluidly, thirds mysterious finally fed-up!; Fragile, touching contrapuntal lines." The first duo in McKinley's *Clarinet Duets, Book II* possesses a rhapsodic character reminiscent in mood, though not in compositional style, to the Adagio movement of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet in B Minor Op. 115. The piece begins with a percussive drone figure created with a grace note low F followed immediately by a whole note low E. This set begins with a chant-like mood as the Book I set of duets ended with. The second duet is in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter and begins with a very simple accompaniment in the second part and a very high, and beautifully controlled upper register melody. Non-clarinetists would certainly not be aware of the difficulty of this melody because Stoltzman executes it with absolute ease, as does Ellis when a similar line appears in her part. Movement III is a perpetual motion piece in which both instruments are either playing alone or overlapping, often in unison, but occasionally colliding into passages that are a second apart, giving the passages a brief, but pleasingly dissonant quality. Movement IV is a series of quintuplet arpeggiated sixteenth notes. Though the two clarinets are playing the quintuplets simultaneously, they are often set apart by the interval of a third. The figures again, reach into the altissimo register. In this movement though, Stoltzman clearly personalizes the music and varies his sound by playing with an intentionally looser sounding timbre and focus. Ellis follows his stylistic lead, though with slightly less looseness to her timbre. Movement V has both players playing eighth note lines simultaneously at various intervals apart from each other. The effect is reminiscent of the first movement of Eric Mandat's *Folk Songs*, for those readers familiar with his music. The final movement begins with the two clarinets playing in alternating sixths and thirds. The opening sounds almost like a clarinet study in sixths, but quickly evolves into a more varied compositional shape. McKinley ends the Book II in a pensive, peaceful mood as he did the Book I set of duets. Stoltzman and Ellis demonstrate a particularly striking command of the myriad of timbres that the clarinet is capable of producing and it is through their artistry that McKinley's duets truly come alive.

Fanfare for a Forlorn Clarinet by Carl Vollrath is a short pensive piece that has the open sounds of the intervals of a fourth, fifth, and octave being employed frequently. Stoltzman connects these large interval leaps seamlessly. This piece has a Copland-esque quality to it and the warm presence of the clarinet sound is a testament to the care that

producer, Bob Lord; engineer, John Weston; and Jonathan Wyner, who mastered the recording, took in creating this particularly pleasing sound of the clarinet on this recording.

Dusk to Dusk is the first in a set of four pieces by Vollrath entitled, *Pastimes*. Stoltzman does a very nice job of varying the timbre throughout this piece, as it requires that the performer periodically trill the right hand fingers while playing a left hand note, such as a throat E. *Jewish Wedding* is a lively dialogue between a pretty clarion register short melody and a punctuated low note figure. This dialogue is played very convincingly in a klezmer style. Though Vollrath gives some indications on the music as to when to play grace notes, much of the stylistic interpretation is left up to the performer. Stoltzman's playful and daring personality is heard loud and clear in this movement. *Kite Flying* is a fun piece that rolls along, rhythmically. This piece seems to mimic the unpredictable motions of a kite. The piece is played with an ad lib tempo. Stoltzman takes liberties with his tone and often bends one note into the next as a violin might do when playing a glissando. *Contemplative Garden* utilizes timbre variation. It is in a free tempo and evokes a pensive mood.

Folk Songs and Dances for Three Clarinets by Ed Marcus is the second of two books of *Folk Songs and Dances for clarinet trio*. Marcus notes that these works "suggest the relative simplicity, melody, and rhythmic interest of folk songs and dances," rather than actually borrowing authentic folk melodies. The first two pieces, *Moderately* and *Gently*, are relatively slow in tempo and exploit the richness of the low register of the clarinet. *Scherzo* is a lively piece with much rhythmic and metric variety. *Dreamily with Fidgets* is exactly what the title suggests. The melody is quite dreamy in quality. The other two clarinets interrupt this melody by playing either an opposing fragment of short rhythmic bursts or a simple eighth note accompaniment. This accompaniment is punctuated with yet more rhythmic variety. The last piece in the set, *Impressively Fast*, was inspired while the composer and his wife were watching a DVD set of *Rocky and Bullwinkle* cartoons. It is light-hearted and lively.

New American Works for Clarinet Vol. II is a strong commitment by three American composers, three American clarinetists, and MMC Recordings to—as MMC Founder, William McKinley states in the CD liner notes—"connect contemporary classical composers with their listening public and vice versa." The cover has a monk-like figure playing a wind instrument. The liner notes characterize each piece effectively and give ample biographical information about the performers and composers. The faint yellow and miniaturized font that lists the tracks on the back of the jewel case is difficult to read. It would be easier to reference the individual tracks with the study scores if these track listings were presented in a bolder fashion. This is a highly recommended recording because of its professional recording quality, world-caliber clarinetists, and captivating compositions. This disc is on the MMC Recordings label, MMC 2173. It is available directly from MMC <www.mmcrecordings.com> or from <www.amazon.com> or for digital download from <www.mtraks.com>.