

Review of *Cyprus, First Impressions CD*, July 8, 2008

By *Mark Sebastian Jordan* on MusicWeb International

Every artist must take a journey to find his or her self. American composer Carol Barnett comes to us now with pictures of her journey, which involve both metaphorical and literal travels to the eastern Mediterranean, an area where she has found a music that resonates within her, inspiring vivid and accessible compositions.

*Cyprus, First Impressions* starts with a sultry alto flute solo containing melodic turns evocative of the eastern Mediterranean. Then a string quintet seamlessly takes over the material, expanding the modal harmonic implications. As the flute returns, the music hints at change. Soon, the pace picks up like a breeze blowing over hills, picking up dust and leaves. This leads to a moderately fast main tempo, dominated by a characteristic folk rhythm which holds the music together as the instruments rise and fall, muezzin-like, above it. As the energy dissipates, the music returns to the longing torpor of the introduction, finally fading away, unresolved. Taking the title at face value, this piece seems to serve as both a musical post card and an affectionate valentine to Cyprus. The players play it with commitment, but allow it the space to breathe. Adam Kuenzel's sumptuous phrasing on the alto flute is particularly noteworthy.

George Philippou Pierides is a Cypriot writer whose stories inspired the next work, the very engaging *Vignettes, After Pierides*, for flute, cello and piano. The first movement, "The Incurable," pictures moments leading up to, during, and following a dance. It uses two folksongs as melodic material, starting with gentle anticipation and building up to a lively dance reminiscent of Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsodies*, based on similar folk material. The second movement, "Auto-da-fé," depicts a worker being stoned to death by an angry mob, or so says the author in her program note. The first time I heard it, I heard an aggressive riot of colors gradually coalesce into what sounded to me like an evocation of a train, replete with bursts of steam and whistle. Whatever the case, it is vivid and arresting music. It suddenly cuts off, followed by an awful stillness filled only by a few distracted fragments of sound. The third movement of the trio is "A Song for Aunt Chrystallou," a character study of an older woman who is the spiritual center of her family. Barnett worries in her program note that it might have come out more sentimental than she originally meant, but I get sentiment more than sentimentality out of this music, and that makes all the difference in the world. The music is touching in its warmth balanced with just enough world-weariness to keep it from cloying. This is character-sketching on the highest level, and the vivid, daring playing of flautist Claudia White, cellist Laura Sewell, and pianist Marianne Fleming Bryan brings it fully to life.

Barnett's *Mythical Journeys*, for flute and guitar, date back about ten years before the more recent works on this disc, and the difference seems significant. The later works bear the signs, like so much recent art music, of the joy and freedom of creative imaginations finding it safe to come out of hiding and frolic once again. The big bad wolf of frowning academic serialists scolding anyone who dared to write music that listeners might actually enjoy went into its dotage in the 1980s and finally keeled over dead in the 1990s. This 1991 piece signals where Barnett would be heading in the future, whilst keeping enough of the avant-garde about it to keep the abstract literati off her back. The first, "Seferis: 5 from Mythical Story," is inspired by a poem

lamenting “our friends, lost forever beyond the ocean.” This is gestural, sometimes jagged and thorny music. It occasionally flirts with tonal centers, though it never turns fully tonal or modal. For all its skillful deployment of tones, it remains after multiple hearings rather harsh and unfriendly music. The second piece is “Cavafy: Ithaka,” taking its inspiration from Constantin Cavafy’s poem, which says, “When you set out on your journey to Ithaka, pray that the road may be long, full of adventure, full of knowledge.” Breathily flute notes herald a musical journey that seems to show this abstract composer discovering modes and melodic phrases with a strange, bemused wonder. Flautist Jane Garvin and guitarist Christopher Kachian never flinch in the difficulties of the first piece, and find the doorway opening into a new world in the second piece.

The perfect follow-up to “Cavafy: Ithaka” follows with Barnett’s 2001 vocal setting of the same poem, for baritone and guitar. If the former showed the beginning of her voyage to Ithaka, the latter shows the composer having arrived at her destination. It is with candid insight that she illustrates her voyage with this poem, which ends, “And if you find her poor, Ithaka has not deceived you./ Wise as you have become, with so much experience,/ you must have understood already what Ithakas mean.” Barnett’s arrival in modal, eastern-European-influenced music doesn’t guarantee any rich harvest, it is merely where she had to go to undertake her journey to self. The song speaks with assurance and efficiency, evoking more empathy than the earlier work. The booklet contains an English translation of Cavafy’s text, though not the original Greek text. Baritone Bradley Greenwald sings with a honeyed, almost tenorish tone, and Kachian supports him faultlessly on the guitar.

Unlike other items on this disc, the closing work here, the *Cyprian Suite*, isn’t really fulfilled by the performance, not that the work seems to have as much personality and originality as the chamber works. The piece is for symphonic wind ensemble. There is a risk in trying to transfer folk-inspired music to a more orchestral ensemble, for there is less of an opportunity to establish the individuality of each player in a large ensemble setting. Thus everything runs a greater risk of sounding stereotypical, especially if it isn’t performed with highest distinction, and so it goes here. The first dance, “Servikos,” goes best, weaving restlessness into the textures, though the occasional changing meters seem to provoke a rather careful performance. The lullaby “Aya Marina” comes next, featuring lovely clarinet solos. This evokes for me something of the rapt atmosphere of the lullaby from *Gayane* by Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian. The assembled ensemble, presumably college students, has some minor intonation issues in this movement, but nothing serious enough to derail it. The third movement of the suite, “Exomológhisis,” takes its inspiration from a mischievous song about a romancer who tells a priest he could no more swear off love than the priest could the Divine Service. The setting entrusts the melodic line to lower brass instruments, but the performance is too subdued to capture the intended spirit. The closing “Agapisá Tin” is a love song that builds in energy and activity as its asymmetrical rhythm propels it forward. Again, the performance is coolly accurate, but one senses too much attention being paid to accuracy and not enough to musical spirit.

The recorded sound for this album is quite handsome, if rather close in the ensemble numbers. Timbres are caught both cleanly and alluringly, framing each piece attractively. The band numbers are recorded in a more spacious hall, but conductor Craig Kirchoff’s careful balances keep everything sorted out. Too bad he didn’t dare to let the band have a little free rein, as the reticent band numbers are really the only reason not to give this disc a warm recommendation.