

MUSIC OF BARBARA HARBACH ~ ORCHESTRA V

Expressions for Orchestra

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Barbara Harbach: Orchestral Music V

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**Barbara Harbach’s music continues to impress; her voice is original,
her fertility seemingly unending.**

Conductor David Angus and the London Philharmonic Orchestra are no strangers to the music of Barbara Harbach. Two discs of her symphonies Nos. 7–11 (plus the orchestral suite *Hypocrisy*) performed by that combination stand out in particular, so it is good to encounter Angus and his Londoners again, recorded at Cadogan Hall, one of London’s newer halls, just off Sloane Square, and a superb recording venue. All four works heard here were composed in 2017.

Inspiration for Harbach can come from a wide variety of sources. For the first piece we hear, it is Martin Luther that provides the backbone for the five-movement *Suite Luther*. It uses the chorale melody *A mighty fortress is our God* (*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*) by Luther himself in three of the movements, and the hymns *In peace and joy I now depart* (*Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin*) and *From deepest need I cry to Thee* (*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*). The opening movement, “Motet,” introduces the chorale in a blaze of joy, and Harbach references techniques by composers such as Buxtehude, Bach, and Pachelbel in using counterpoint to precede each phrase. There is a sense of calm to the second movement, and some lovely woodwind playing in this section from the LPO as well; the approach to the final glowing consonance is nicely managed. It’s difficult to miss the famous chorale *Ein feste Burg* in the third movement, which is itself entitled “Chorale Fantasy,” in this context fresh, being supported by markedly open harmonies. “Introspection” (aka the slow movement) comes with *Aus tiefer Not*, perhaps unsurprisingly given the chorale title. The scoring here is pellucid; only strings, flute, horn, trumpet, and trombone are used. The contrast of the lightly tripping counterpoints to the chorale

of the finale (*Ein feste Burg again*) offers both a sense of arrival and of hope. Harbach uses playful counterpoint to maximal effect, with the whole building to a final tutti statement of the theme in traditional harmonic garb.

Arabic and Moorish decoration inspires *Arabesque Noir*. Melodic curlicues dominate the first movement, “Looking for an Angel,” which has a second theme the composer calls “She’s a Woman, Simply Woman.” The woodwind excels in this first movement, while the central “Evening Love” exudes fragrant crepuscular satiation. The melodic flow is easy and approachable, and the final “In the still I will wait” describes secret trysts of lovers; at times it seems viscerally to be seeking to project the clandestine thrill associated with such meetings.

Described in the booklet notes as “four snapshots that look back to the turbulence, Revolution, slavery, Civil War and social unrest of the 18th- and 19th-Centuries,” *Early American Scandals* returns to a period in history that has inspired Harbach on a number of occasions. The first movement, “Love—Revenge” begins with a reminiscence of a waltz, one which soon takes on sinister undertones. The “revenge” part of the title could refer to that between slave and master, or equally within a relationship. The second part, “River Styx,” touches on the Orpheus legend in the pining to see a lover one more time, but it also meditates on decisions we make in life, whether good or bad. The ear is led through the process by generally appropriate spotlighting (the clarinet is perhaps a touch forward in the sound image). The third part, “The Vulture Hours,” refers both to insomnia (those hours of the night when one is eaten up by repetitive thoughts) and to the assassin John Wilkes Booth and the horror he brought on his family, the darkest part of the piece. In contrast, two fiddle tunes find their way into “Virginia’s Real Reel,” with the slide trombone of Lyndon Meredith providing a real feel of a hoedown. This is a more considered party than one might find in, say, Copland; thematic superimpositions, too, when they occur, veer more towards Ives.

Finally, *Recitative and Aria* is inspired by the work of the actor Edwin Booth (the older brother of John Wilkes above). The free-flow recitative section leads to the instrumental aria in which Wilkes dreams of a world wherein things could have been different, one in which he is free from alcohol addiction and does not lose his wife after just three years of marriage. This final section (separately tracked and entitled “Our love forever now”) is a glowing beacon of hope, beautifully and unhurriedly performed here, a the perfect close to the disc.

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Colin Clarke Fanfare Magazine March/April 2020

HARBACH *Suite Luther. Arabesque noir. Early American Scandals. Recitative and Aria* • David Angus, cond; London PO • MSR 1672 (59:02)

Four stars: A talented composer keeps a strain of Americana alive for today

There’s a strain of Americana that many *Fanfare* readers can identify with. It doesn’t necessarily use folksongs but has a populist ethos that puts Copland in his *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*

mode and most of Morton Gould's compositions at odds with cultural snobbery. The heyday of the populist aesthetic was the 1930s when the Great Depression made comrades of the workingman, left-wing idealists, and WPA artist and composer in a way not to be repeated. But some composers of considerable technical skill who could swim in the post-Schoenberg mainstream, which remains elitist even though strict atonality and dogmatic 12-tone systems have had their day, choose instead to reach the broader audience that Copland and Bernstein won over.

I don't mean to read Barbara Harbach's mind or to impose an idiom on her orchestral music, which in the latest volume ventures beyond American culture. But as the booklet points out, she has an abiding interest in early American history. As a noted organist and harpsichord player, it is natural for her to align herself with the eighteenth century onward, and there are elements of counterpoint in her writing that stem from Bach. She goes even further back historically when mining the hymns of Martin Luther, but *Suite Luther*, which begins the program, doesn't use "Ein feste Burg is unser Gott," which features in three of the work's five movements, as Mendelssohn did for solemnity in the "Reformation" Symphony but closer in spirit to Copland's use of "Simple Gifts" in *Appalachian Spring*. She proves that a Lutheran hymn can dance. There's an unalloyed streak of optimism in Harbach's musical imagination that is irrepressible.

For six decades, from the songs of Charles Ives through the ballets of Copland and the Broadway musicals of Bernstein, optimism seemed like an enduring aspect of American music, but I think Harbach is one of its last heirs. The best piece here is *Recitative and Aria*, which is based on the actor Edwin Booth reflecting on the sorrow and tragedy brought upon his name, which was illustrious in American theater circles in the mid-nineteenth century until his brother, John Wilkes Booth, brought unforgivable shame to it. The piece employs a solo French horn to speak for Edwin, and the accumulation of expression is powerful. I wouldn't say, however, that the music achieves tragic impact. In compensation, Harbach delivers arching melody and swelling emotion that is satisfying in its own right.

Her most exploratory piece is *Arabesque noir*, where the night in the title is sensually amorous. Orientalism in Western music has had a seductive erotic overtone even if this had to be decorously hidden. Harbach is interested in the master-slave relationship (one could as easily call it the sultan-harem relationship) in which secret assignations are buried. To delve into these ambiguities she doesn't imitate the melisma of Arabic music but adapts her own idiom to create "motifs that are sinuous, spiraling, and undulating," to quote the program notes, which are very helpful in their detail and completeness. The notes also speak of extensive ornamentation, but I don't hear that so much as a style personal to Harbach of embedding melody in shifting texture, glittering color, and contrapuntal figures. *Arabesque noir* is her equivalent in music to a Persian carpet. (In *Suite Luther* the way she sets the hymn tunes like a chorale against a constantly

moving accompaniment can't help but sound like Bach cantatas.)

Early American Scandals is a provocative title, but the music is at times no more scandalous than a waltz. The mood is nostalgic, reaching back to Stephen Foster and Louis Moreau Gottschalk as I hear it. This is the vein of Americana I grew up with in light classical recordings that Morton Gould specialized in. Gould lamented that he wasn't nearly as famous for his serious pieces, and clearly Harbach doesn't write in a folksy vein. She is continuing the neo-Romantic strain that occupied American composers who rebelled against atonality. It was a hard sell in the Fifties and Sixties, and when Minimalism made tonality once again chic, the aesthetic was not Romanticized but quasi-mechanistic.

What Harbach and her predecessors have as a great advantage is that audiences love melody and are won over by Romanticism. I don't know if this has aided Harbach's acceptance in the concert hall, but her artist bio describes a burgeoning career not just as a prolific composer but as a keyboard performer, editor, and publisher. She is especially active in the area of women composers and has done great work advancing the cause of American women composers in particular. Her energy is seemingly inexhaustible, and I am glad to report that her musical imagination sustains a high level of exuberance, invention, melodic attractiveness, and curiosity about new themes and musical languages. This enjoyable disc is evidence of all those things, and the performances under David Angus leading a somewhat reduced London Philharmonic are everything they should be—warmly recommended.

Huntley Dent Fanfare Magazine March/April

Four stars: A talented composer keeps a strain of Americana alive for today