



EVA KENDRICK

The Box of Late Opuses is an album of recent compositions by Tsippi Fleischer, a prolific and highly regarded Israeli composer whose career has spanned more than four decades thus far. This album features vocal works, a musical stage-work, a symphonic piece, and an oratorio. Fleischer is known for combining Israeli/Jewish musical influences with others of the same region, as well as for her musical depiction of the maternal-feminine subconscious, and for the practice of deriving musical textures from her treatment of language and natural acoustics. While these elements are present in each piece on this album, the disc features a new approach to text-setting, which Fleischer describes in her program notes: “not a continuing text set to music, but rather a para- or meta-text of my own devising- a collection of words and syllables plucked out of powerful sources of inspiration.” *A Letter from Naguib Mahfouz*” (2012) for vocal quintet is a haunting work in

which Fleischer weaves the words of Egyptian author and Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz into solemn, polyphonic layerings of Arabic, English, German, French, and Hebrew. Fleischer sets the texts in a declamatory style, and the motet-like texture flows so naturally that the listener is drawn to the voices and the intertwined melodies rather than to what might seem a harsh clash of the different languages. All of the performances on the album are of a highly professional quality, but the superlative performance of this piece by the Vokalquintett Berlin is a clear highlight of the album. The artful way in which the voices are recorded is also of special note. They appear to occupy a three-dimensional space and surround the listener, sometimes closer, further, higher, and lower, very similar to the way in which the voices themselves are layered compositionally.

An Animals' Wish, op. 74, which the composer describes as a "light-hearted, mischievous suite," is for narrator, flute, clarinet, bassoon, viola, violin, and cello. It is intended for an audience of children who may also be participants in an educational setting. The narrator recites the wish of each animal (in both Hebrew and Arabic), and each accompanying instrumental movement is acted out by dancers and/or children. An additional participatory element of this piece, not present on this recording, involves cues written into the score which direct the actors to make corresponding animal sounds. Some of the disjunct melodies and dissonances may occasionally sound less playful and more ominous to ears mostly accustomed to Western music, but one can see how a theatrical rendition of the music by children could change a great deal about the interpretation. The members of the Movarian Philharmonic are very adept in conveying the narrative aspects of the piece. I found the use of trills, flutter tongue, tremolo, and percussive elements, combined with the vocals of the performers, particularly expressive.

Symphony No. 6—The Eyes, Mirror of the Soul, recorded by Sinfonia da Camera, is scored for four vocal soloists, eight string players, and two pianists on prepared pianos. The work is in two movements without a break, and each movement is subdivided into miniatures. The first movement, "Old," has six miniatures, and the second movement, "Young," has ten. As a whole, "Old" is characterized by

slow, wailing melodies, extreme registral shifts, dissonances, and thin but sustained textures. In "Young," the movements are lighter, faster, and a little more playful. The vocalists, members of the Israeli Opera, are exceptional. Their voices are flexible, emotive, fluid, and at times even humorous, without becoming overly comical or calling too much attention to themselves.

The recording and production of this piece are also striking. In several movements, such as "Bottomless Fear (of death)," the listener feels in the midst of this three-dimensional, intriguing, and sometimes disconcerting soundscape of instruments and voices. The composer's experimentation with text and text delivery is clearly evident throughout the piece: in "Is There Still More to Teach Me," the singers employ *Sprechstimme*; in "It's Just Starting," the singers sing a repetition of "ma ma ma" syllables in a child-like, sing-song way; and in "Don't fool me (a boy says to his friend)," there is a combination of laughter and speech. The piece is inspired by a photography exhibit of Dorit Harel and by the photographer's credo: "The Eye, Mirror of the Heart and Window of the Soul. Our Whole Inner World is Reflected in the Look of One Pair of Eyes." The listener is encouraged to observe Harel's photographs in the liner notes while listening to the movements. It is obvious that the pieces have clearly been constructed with a great amount of attention to detail. From the conception and construction of the pieces, the incorporation of extra-musical ideas from the original source material, even down to the arrangement of the players on stage, everything has been crafted with conscious, creative effort.

The final work on the album is *Avram—An Oratorio Portraying the Birth of Monotheism*, for women's choir, three harps, and five violins. In this piece, the composer depicts the creation of three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Although the music is made up of languid and occasional droning sonorities between the choir, soloists, and instrumentalists, the texture is frequently very sparse. The use of unison in both the vocals and bowed strings creates a sense of simplicity as well as a prayer-like quality, and the harp, which alternates between plucked single pitches and arpeggios, conveys a mystical atmosphere. The composer states that "the sense of prayer within a

sanctified atmosphere is intensified by the increasing use of doubled unisono textures." The text is sung in Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek by the Hemyola Women's Choir. The only downside of the pervasive use of unison is that it is extremely hard for choirs to tune in unison while melodically leaping in octaves, and the choir appears to struggle in these sections. It does, however, succeed in creating an intense, urgent atmosphere. The soloists, Tali Ketzef and Avigail Harel, are expressive in their delivery, alternately angelic and earnest. The work culminates in a beautifully woven movement of peace and exhilaration. This is one of the few times when all voices are singing in harmony, rather than polyphony, and it is both affective and eerily beautiful.

This album is a finely crafted piece of work by Tsippi Fleischer. Her attention to detail and depiction of extra-musical ideas is superb. I particularly enjoyed her use of text-setting throughout the movements. The program notes were helpful in fully experiencing her choices in an occasionally challenging and thought-provoking musical language, but the pieces may also be enjoyed on their own as well.

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