

GUNN, Somewhere East of Topeka • The Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble

This disc is a collection of 16 short works with titles such as *Katmandon't*, *Cowbellies*, *The Help Me Rondo*, *Dance of the Hasidic Chigger Hecklers*, *Do Aliens Wear Sombreros?*, *Out of Cahoots*, *Billions of Brazilians*, *Hunting Tuna*, and the eponymous *Somewhere East of Topeka*. The composer of these pieces, David Gunn, is co-host of *Kalvos and Damian's New Music Bazaar*, an every-Saturday-afternoon, two-hour radio show broadcasting interviews and non-mainstream classical music from Vermont. Gunn has so far produced mostly four-to five-minute chamber "tone poems" like these, each having fun with the conceit set up by its often Schickelesque punning titles (frequently arcane). The humor is broad and relaxed, and the instrumentation usually mixes varying combinations of violin, cello, clarinet, bass clarinet, saxophone, marimba, piano, and percussion—though a solo piano and a brass quintet each comprise one whole composition on this CD.

So what are these pieces, composed between 1992 and 1997, like? Well, they are loosely contrapuntal, mostly with subject and answer closely overlapping in *stretto* style, and they move through a klezmer-blues sound world that is sometimes elegantly smooth and other times skewed by polkas, tangos, and dotty waltzes. Occasionally, harmonies act with a mind of their own. Rhythmic patterns often move with minimalist doggedness but then, in a surprising instant, can chase rabbits into the woods.

The CD's title track, *Somewhere East of Topeka* (simply a reference to a spot in 1982 where the muffler on Gunn's car once fell off), is scored for clarinet and calliope and instructs the performers to play "fluid and klezmery." That phrase characterizes much of what is heard on this collection. For instance, *Cowbellies*—for violin, clarinet, bass clarinet, and cello—saunters around for about four minutes, beginning with a lumbering gait and gathering grace while morphing into a kind of Prokofievian Overture on Hebrew Themes as adapted by Astor Piazzolla. Then rather conventional pieces, such as *Going Like Sixty*, take a listener for a ride that has few associations attached. The humor can rest principally in a work's title (*Katmandon't*), or can come internally as in *The Help Me Rondo*, which has instructions on page 10 of the score for the percussionist to drop his/her music, "look confused" while the other instrumentalists play on unobservant, call out "Help me," and then recover in time to deliver a glissando-prefaced "full stride romp."

A couple of pieces call for narration, and I found them the least interesting. Yet overall, this is very catchy, neo-populist entertainment. I'm not sure, however, that the compositions are best experienced by a sit-down-and-listen-all-the-way-through approach, for there is a degree of repetitiveness of gestures and rhythms that dulls the surprise and spontaneity. The individually uncredited Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble plays with infectious panache that invites a listener to grab a noisemaker and join in.