

Barre composer creates witty, rewarding music on debut CD

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By Jim Lowe

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David Gunn's music is fun and accessible. But it's a lot more than that.

"Somewhere East of Topeka," the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble's just-released CD of the Vermont composer's music, thoroughly enjoys Gunn's sparkling musical wit, but it also touches on a deeper emotional vein.

In fact, the title-piece may well be the most beautiful in the album. Named for the location the composer lost a muffler, a beautiful lilting melody is played by clarinetist Steven Klimowski over a jazzy rhythm on cicadas performed by Gunn.

The fast-paced "Running Lights" is another that goes well beyond Gunn's penchant for humor, and may well be the album's masterpiece. Colorful brassy sounds by trumpeter David Brubaker and saxophonist Rebecca Blow create the driving ebb and flow in a Minimalist atmosphere created by Klimowski, violinist Thomas L. Read and percussionist D. Thomas Toner. With just a taste of klezmer, the nearly four-minute work is intense and upbeat – and would make a great overture for a 21st century Broadway show.

It should be noted that this recording was made nearly five years ago, beginning in August 1997, at the Vermont Public Radio in Colchester. Release was delayed because of lack of funding. Since then, Gunn's style has become more serious, illustrated by his 2002 "A Tangoed Web," performed throughout Vermont last fall on the Vermont Symphony Orchestra's Made in Vermont Festival tour. Still, this album is full of Gunn's characteristic spice and wit, and provides generally delightful listening.

The Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble, founded in 1987 by Klimowski, brings together some of the state's best musicians to champion the classical music of today. Several of the compositions on the album were commissioned by the VCME.

Gunn seems to be fascinated by Minimalist and klezmer styles. "Katamandon't" is delightfully inventive, with klezmer-flavored dances ranging from tango to polka. It flows easily from one style to another, never losing its dance momentum. It's lots of fun, but rhythmically and instrumentally complex.

"Fossick" is one of the most interesting works. The Minimalist piece features Klimowki's clarinet playing disjointed melody over repetitive violin accompaniment, then they switch, with a lot of interplay ensuing. Harmonically straightforward with a repetitive rhythm, it's attractive and infectious.

Another Minimalist piece, this time a rather dark one, is the song, “Do Aliens Wear Sombreros?” Over a colorful background, soprano Jill Levis manages to make the rhythmic parts sound lyrical and quite beautiful. (The composer wrote the nonsensical lyrics.)

Some of the music is downright funny. “Cowbellies” is a jazzy and almost exotic look at cow bellies. Performed on clarinets played by Klimowski and Craig Olzenak, Read on violin and Bonnie Thurber-Klimowski on cello, this four-plus minute piece of wit is quite descriptive with an exotic attractiveness and jaunty rhythm.

Another particularly rewarding and well-written work is “Out of Cahoots.” The solo piano work turns French Impressionist-flavored music, reminiscent of Debussy and Satie, into rolling melodies with slightly off-kilter harmonies. Performed sensitively and effectively by Paula Ennis, the piece is witty with a classical feel to it. very, very rewarding and quite beautiful.

There is much colorful and interesting music on this album, but not all of the 16 short pieces are as effective as the works mentioned. There is sometimes sameness in the klezmer colors and jaunty rhythms, and too much of the string writing is sawing and awkward. But, all in all, this is delightful and accessible music by a fine composer living in Barre.

There are excellent liner notes by Northfield composer Dennis Bathory-Kitsz, but the record company unfortunately neglected to name the individual performers.

“Somewhere East of Topeka,” music of David Gunn performed by the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble, Albany Records CD Troy-535, www.albanyrecords.com or www.vcme.org.