

The Lowe Down: ‘The Third Highway’: Barre composer David Gunn tells stories

By Jim Lowe, Staff Writer
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David Gunn is featured on a new album of his chamber music, “The Third Highway,” by Vermont Virtuosi. [Photo by Allyson Barrieau]

Barre composer David Gunn has the unusual ability to write fascinating music using a tonal palette in traditional styles. He does this with an irrepressible theatricality, taking the listener on enjoyable but most unexpected journeys — as indicated by his completely nonsensical titles.

Six of Gunn’s imaginative musical travels are showcased in the recently released album, “The Third Highway,” featuring Vermont Virtuosi performing six substantial chamber works written 2003-2014. Although there are many stylistic consistencies — theatricality, jazzy rhythms and harmonic juxtapositions, and fantasy over form — each work has its own story to tell.

The recording’s title composition, “The Third Highway” (13:21), intertwines concert and alto flutes, violin and piano, in a gently propelled journey through various colorful lands, hitting more turmoil before it’s done. The work explores the possibilities of each instrument, and this performance benefits from Arturo Delmoni’s beautiful violin.

Delmoni plays as a member of Vermont Virtuosi, a varying personnel ensemble Gunn founded with his wife, flutist Laurel Ann Maurer, in 2013. Joining Maurer and Delmoni on the recording are clarinetist Karen Luttkik, bassoonist Julian Partridge, violist Tatiana Trono and pianist Claire Black.

Gunn has attracted a public following co-hosting the award-winning new music radio show Kalvos & Damian’s New Music Bazaar. He has written music for orchestra, chamber ensembles, vocal groups, soloists, Theremin, Ray Bradbury’s Pandemonium Theatre Company, and more recently for ensembles that feature the flute. His first piece for flute choir won the National Flute Association’s Flute Choir Composition Competition in 2012. This recording is Gunn’s first release since “Somewhere East of Topeka” in 2001 (Albany Records).

Maurer is one of Vermont's foremost flutists, so it isn't surprising that she is showcased in one of the album's most successful works. With the composer's tempo marking of "Trending Sultrily," "Forbidden Flute" (12:36) is a delightful driving virtuoso fantasy for flute and piano. Almost unique for the composer, its variations are all on the same theme. This is grand virtuoso music, sympathetically and expertly played by Maurer and Black.

Luttik, a Boston clarinetist who frequently plays with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, was showcased in another of the most compelling works. Despite its title, "In the forest, 400 owls discover a giant badger" (10:41) would be a good candidate for the standard clarinet and piano repertoire.

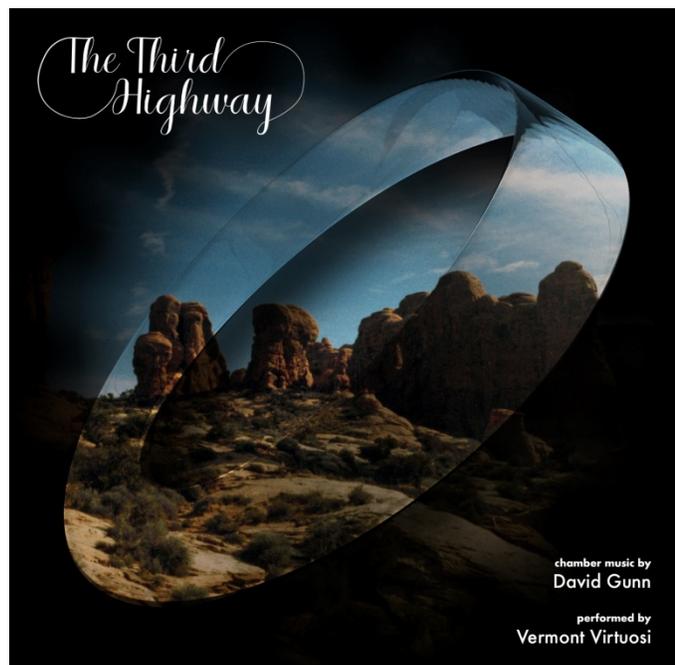
In this "multi-themed jazz fantasy," as described by the composer, the alternately lyrical and rhythmic clarinet is propelled by a driving repeating piano. The charismatic work is at once virtuosic, substantial and rewarding, even romantic and fun. The performance by Luttik and Black is inspired.

Still, most beautiful is "Les visions de Bellimar" (12:07), a sensual and lyrical work for flute, viola and piano. Maurer's brilliant flute is countered by the tawny and sensitive viola of Trono, brought together by the architecture of Black's substantial piano. When the tempo picks up, even taking on some of Gunn's trademark jazzy jauntiness, the sensuality never dissipates, and the work eventually takes on a grandeur. It's gorgeous and never predictable.

In "The Conchoid of Nicomedes" (10:13), for flute, clarinet, bassoon and piano, dark, brooding and introspective lyrical lines intertwine, then accelerate into a driving jazzy rhythm, interspersed with exotic lyricism. It's substantial, theatrical and irresistible.

"Euphonicum Tangenturis" (12:59), which the composer aptly describes as "agreeable sounds going every which way," for flute, clarinet and piano, travels enthusiastically through its moody and sometimes exotic roller-coaster journey. It's jaunty, fun and well played.

David Gunn's music sounds like it could only have been written by him — and that makes it a pleasure to listen to.



Vermont Virtuosi. "The Third Highway," chamber music of David Gunn performed by Vermont Virtuosi, is available from CDBaby at store.cdbaby.com/cd/davidgunn, through Vermont Virtuosi at kunaki.com/Sales.asp?PID=PX00ZNKGS0, or for streaming and download at davidgunn.bandcamp.com/.

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