

## Lifchitz, Max. 2014. *Ars Nostra Plays Max Lifchitz*

The *Ars Nostra Ensemble*,

North / South Consonance N / S R 1058, CD

Max Lifchitz (Mexico, 1948) is a leading musician on New York's modern-music scene. He is not only a composer, but also the Founder and Music Director of the North/South Consonance, Inc. Chamber Orchestra, which has been performing concert series since 1980, as well as promoting and recording the work of contemporary composers from the Americas and around the globe since 1992. Max Lifchitz was born in Mexico City, the son of Russian-Jewish émigrés. He studied composition under Rodolfo Halffter (1900-1988) at the National Conservatory of Mexico and continued his education at the Juilliard School of Music and Harvard University. His work as a New Music composer and conductor has been supported by such institutions as the Ford and Guggenheim Foundations, the Aaron Copland Fund, the Alice M. Ditson Fund, Meet the Composer, Inc., and the Zethus Fund for Contemporary Music. Since 1986, Lifchitz has been a Professor of Music at the University at Albany, State University of New York, where he has also served as Chair to the Departments of Music and Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies.

In *Ars Nostra Plays Max Lifchitz*, though, the opposite occurs: Lifchitz is the composer being recorded, and not by his own ensemble, but by *Ars Nostra*, which is self-described in the CD booklet as follows:

Ars Nostra is a concept rather than a group. Its mission is not only to bring together performers affiliated with the University of the South Florida School of Music, but to also promote “our arts” by performing music composed by our colleagues and contemporaries. The composers of our time have rich and diverse resources to draw upon embracing ancient sounds, ethnicities, popular music, as well as Western arts traditions (p. 2).

These last lines connect us with the first piece recorded on the album, titled *Mosaico Latinoamericano* (1991), for flute and piano. This piece of music is divided into two parts: the first, *Canto Lucumí – Xtoles*, is grave and inspired by two melodies from ancient cultures: the Mayan and the West African, whose people arrived as slaves to the New World. The second part, *Huapango-Merengue*, is lively, portraying the syncretic genres born as a result of hybridization (*mestizaje*) in Latin America. It develops an interchange and opposition of the two genres: merengue (Dominican Republic) and *huapango* (Mexico, El Salvador).

The next work, *Yellow Ribbons No. 44* (2007), for flute and piano, is divided into three movements. In the first movement, the flute sustains long notes and is then joined by the clusters on the piano in an interplay of motifs, descending scales, and registers. In the second movement, the flute part develops in response to the varied patterns performed by the

piano. In the final movement, some ideas from the first movement are repeated and varied throughout. Both works are played with warm and rounded tones on the piano, as well as fine phrasing and dynamics from the flute.

*Yellow Ribbons No. 43* (2007), for clarinet, begins with a declamatory melody that suggests Middle Eastern-style music. The clarinet develops the narrative with an interaction of riffs, scales, and ornate passages in different registers. These works belong to a series of pieces dedicated to the fifty-two North American diplomats and citizens who were held as hostages during the Iran Hostage Crisis (November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981). Lifchitz reveals that they celebrate the "artistic and political freedom so often taken for granted in the West" (p. 3). The work is highly inventive and lyrical.

*Three Songs for Soprano and Trumpet* (1988) is inspired by three poems: *Do the Animals Think?* (Steve Levine, 1937-2016), *Insects* (Ron Padgett, 1942), and *Honey* (Gary Lenhart, 1947). An undercurrent of humor runs through these pieces. Musical imitation, onomatopoeic hums, *Sprechstimme*, and tremolos are some of the elements used in these works. The performers achieve balance, lucidity, and finesse in their interpretation.

*Canto de Paz* (1983), for soprano, flute and piano, generates a peaceful ambience with the melismatic melodic lines of the voice and the sound of chords by the prepared piano. *Three Concerted Madrigals* (2012), for soprano, flute, clarino trumpet, and percussion, is based on the texts *L'ultimo di di Maggio* (Sebastiano Festa, 1490-1524), *S'io parto, I' morto* (Luca Marenzio, 1560-99), and *Non rumor di tamburi* (Vincenzo Ruffo, 1508-87). Lifchitz borrows the *Stile Moderno* and transports the listener to the past. In both pieces, the singer performs the melodic lines with full-bodied phrasing, introspection, and an earnest tone.

*Rhythmic Soundscape No. 6*, for bass clarinet and percussion, is divided into four movements: *Incantation*, *Interrupted March*, *Illusive Dance*, and *Frantic Hallucination*. This work interweaves diverse percussion instruments and rhythms together with the riffs and long notes of the bass clarinet. It recreates a "primitive" ritual, and Lifchitz's idiomatic use of percussion makes this sparkling and radiant score even more nuanced.

The last work in this recording is the series *Piano Silhouette*, inspired by five paintings (*Different Ways to Climb a Mountain*, *Woke Up to Find It Missing*, *Slippery Slope*, *Low Country*, and *Sky, Tree, River*) from the *Climb the Black Mountain Series* (2010-2011), by artist Elizabeth Condon. She is a Fine Arts Faculty member at the University of South Florida, and her paintings are included in the CD booklet. In these works, Lifchitz offers a musical interpretation of the paintings and their titles.

This recording is superb from every point of view. The eclectic style of Lifchitz's compositions offers a rich and varied palette of sounds; in addition to this, the *Ars Nostra* Ensemble collaborators are outstanding musicians and perform the pieces with confidence, conviction, and focus.

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