

sections of the choir. All in all, the work is admirable for its diversity of expression and accessibility.

Occasionally the soloists of the *Coro dos Inconfidentes* are less than secure. Purists would probably question the freedom of certain passages (i.e., the string portamento just before the bass solo “Attendite universis”), but I welcome such exuberance. One could also quibble with a few of the translations. “Jerusalem, rise and undress thyself from happiness” (Jerusalem surge, et exuete vestibus jucunditatis) will likely elicit a smile from a native speaker of English. These reservations are cavils, however. Ramos, an important figure in the musical life of Minas Gerais today, offers listeners a solid conception of work that allows us a glimpse into Catholic church music of the Americas that we are just beginning to appreciate in the United States. As post-secondary music programs increasingly incorporate Latin American music into their curricula, we can hope that many more such recordings will issue from Brazil and other countries with similarly bounteous choral traditions.

Carol A. Hess



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Anthony Davis, *Amistad*. New World Records 80627–2, 2008.

This live recording of Davis’s two-act opera, based on the infamous rebellion on the slave ship *La Amistad* in 1839 and setting a libretto by the composer’s cousin Thulani Davis, was made during two of the premier performances mounted in November/December 1997 at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, which commissioned the work. Conducted by Dennis Russell Davies and directed for the stage by George C. Wolfe, the cast included Thomas Young (The Trickster God), Mark S. Doss (Cinque), Stephen West (John Quincy Adams), Florence Quivar (Goddess of the Waters), and Mark Baker (Navigator). The present release includes a handsomely produced eighty-three-page booklet containing stimulating introductory articles by George E. Lewis and Anthony Davis, a full set of performers’ biographies, a plot synopsis, helpful historical and cultural notes (by the librettist) that describe the principal dramatic roles, and the full libretto of the opera, liberally illustrated with production stills.

The opera as performed in 1997 differs significantly from a leaner and more compact version of the score subsequently prepared by Davis for its in-the-round revival at the Spoleto Festival USA in 2008 (on which occasion it was performed, with great historical irony, in the former slaving port of Charleston, South Carolina), for which the composer made a number of cuts, reorganizations, and a major reduction of the instrumental forces. Critical responses to the revised version were somewhat warmer than those that had attended the premier staging, and the present recording of the latter at times provides a reminder of the occasional longueurs

that had threatened to detract from the dramatic fluidity that the librettist's and composer's powerfully imaginative conception of the story so patently deserved. Yet listeners coming to the opera for the first time through the agency of this recording will still be overwhelmed by the sheer vitality of the music in its original form and (even without being able to see the compelling stagecraft) the vividness and originality of the basic dramatic conception, which avoids a rigidly chronological approach to the events and includes evocative and sometimes surreal flashbacks. More importantly, the dynamism and nervous energy of much of Davis's music constantly prevents the opera from succumbing to any ponderous (if perhaps understandable) earnestness that a politically sensitive topic of this kind might have engendered, and that arguably impeded Steven Spielberg's uncharacteristically stolid *Amistad* film—coincidentally released in 1997 at almost exactly the same time as Davis's opera was launched, although the Davis project had been in the making for some ten years.

Davis's compositional idiom is a heady mixture of jazz-derived elements and the advanced tonalities of the modern concert hall, and his technical dexterity allows him to move with convincing ease from something as hackneyed as a whole-tone scale to more sophisticated harmonic formulations that sometimes verge on atonality. Much of his music is infectiously propelled by dance-like additive rhythms and motoric ostinato patterns, some suggestive of minimalism, and others directly inspired (both texturally and tonally) by Indonesian gamelan music. Jazz elements are frequently brought to the fore by an ensemble of two reeds, trombone, bass, and traps and well suit the feeling of tensely repressed nervous energy that is an overriding feature of the opera—a mood sometimes prolonged at great length at the expense of extended moments of repose and reflection, of which there are relatively few. Whereas the inclusion of scat improvisation, blues-tinged saxophone solos, and jazzy percussion might have jarred sharply in the context of a film score intended for a period drama (such as John Williams's music for Spielberg's *Amistad*, in which cultural references are restricted to quasi-tribal singing and sporadic ethnic drumming), in Davis's opera the contemporary jazz references not only pay overt tribute to the musical glories of African American culture but are also perfectly in accord with the stylized theatricality and energy of the work's staging.

Without exception, the performances on these discs (preserved with exemplary clarity and tonal range by the engineer) are first rate. The orchestral playing under Dennis Russell Davies impresses with its necessarily taut rhythmic control, finely judged pacing, and tempo contrasts, and the occasional passages of luminous instrumentation in the drama's more impressionistic moments are beautifully rendered. Of the principal sung roles, the two African deities deserve special mention. Thomas Young's Trickster God is a tour de force of manic virtuosity, hitting perilously high notes with astonishing ease and effortlessly negotiating the severe demands of some exceptionally challenging vocal writing; since the Trickster's role—as both commentator and participant—is an important cohesive factor in the overall conception of the work, Young's brilliance is largely responsible for the powerful impact of the recording as a whole. Florence Quivar, as the Goddess of the Waters, is perfectly cast in a role that is accorded the most extended lyrical set piece in the entire opera, and

her vocal maturity allows her to achieve an emotional depth all the more memorable for the scarcity of female voices amid the inevitably male-dominated casting.

Mervyn Cooke



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*Music of Bernard H. Garfield.* John Clouser, bassoon; Elizabeth DeMio, piano; Ellen dePasquale, violin; Stanley Konopka, viola; Richard Weiss, violoncello; Michael Hope, baritone; Julia Lockhart, piano. Azica Records ACD-71254, 2010.

The bassoon is one of those instruments that receives new compositions as one might receive scraps after the main meal. Few composers begin their careers with a desire to focus their creative energies on producing literature for the bassoon; rather, compositions for the instrument generally follow those for piano, violin, flute, or other more popular instruments. Popularity is not the only obstacle to composing for the bassoon, however. The idiosyncrasies of the instrument require empathy from composers that some are not willing to give. With those obstacles in mind, bassoonists are always eager to learn of new works, especially those that feature the instrument well.

Bernard H. Garfield (b. 1924) knows the bassoon intimately. He served as principal bassoonist of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1957 to 2000. In this prominent position he was featured in a number of solo recordings that are esteemed by many generations of bassoonists.<sup>1</sup> The International Double Reed Society recognized his lifelong achievements by awarding him honorary membership, the Society's highest distinction. What is little known about Garfield, however, is that he completed a master's degree in composition before his work as a professional bassoonist. Many of the compositions on this compact disc come from his days as a student composer.

Garfield's compositions are well crafted and always tonal, and what they might lack in twentieth-century adventurism they compensate for with sanguine lyricism. The first half of the recording is devoted to bassoon literature. Garfield's compositions feature the bassoon at its best. Jocular leaps add excitement to the faster movements, and the tenor register (G<sup>3</sup>–G<sup>4</sup>) of the instrument is employed with poignancy in lyrical moments. He features the high register with appropriate orchestration, realizing that although melodic climaxes can be reached on the highest notes of the instrument, the bassoon produces less volume in the upper register. The slower movements for bassoon and piano show the influence of French literature. For example, the melodic gestures and harmonies are reminiscent of Debussy's vocal works and Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte*.

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Concerto in B-flat, K.191 (Columbia MS 6451); Carl Maria von Weber, Andante and Hungarian Rondo (Columbia MS 6977); and W. A. Mozart, Sinfonia Concertante and Franz Joseph Haydn Sinfonia Concertante (Columbia ML 5374).