

## RECORDING REVIEWS

George Lewis, *Les Exercices Spirituels*. Tzadik Records TZA 8081CD, 2011.

Modern art music often requires different language to describe it, along with new ways to talk about experiencing it. George Lewis, the Edwin H. Case Professor of Music at Columbia University and featured composer on this CD, challenges us to experience his music as an altogether unique sonic venture. The three works on this CD, dedicated to philosopher Arnold L. Davidson, represent evolved and evocative contemporary concert music, with considerable depth in sound, conception, and intellectual scope. Lewis's work reflects the influence of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), an organization to which he has belonged for decades and a community of innovative thinkers that expresses ideas with an acute awareness of relevancy and timeliness.<sup>1</sup> Like much great avant-garde music, Lewis's works draw largely on musical fragments, conceptual ideas and sounds, sequences, extended instrumental effects, and extended performative devices that are sometimes more clearly poetic than driven by predictable and traditional musical expression. The music draws the listener in with its precision, color sound landscapes, spiritual sonorities, rhythmic pulsations, instrumental pairings with electronic streams, and diverse melodic directions of line.

Lewis's CD calls for adventuresome listeners who are open to music as an experience of philosophical ideas. To be sure, Lewis's music pulls from many traditions, including spirituals and U.S. folk tunes, and we sense the presence of Charles Ives in its marching band spirit and sonorous church bells. Yet its razor sharp precision, references to bebop, electronic music samples, and synthesizer effects simultaneously make it sound fresh and modern. The quality of this recording is excellent, which allows Lewis's remarkable ideas and sounds to be heard with clarity. The ensembles represented here (Ensemble Erik Satie and the Wet Ink Ensemble) are superb and execute the music with extraordinary precision and provocative expressiveness.

The CD opens with the title selection, *Les Exercices Spirituel*, scored for flute, bass clarinet, drums and percussion, guitar, violin, cello, and live electronics and spacialization (performed by Lewis), which is performed by Ensemble Erik Satie with Arnaud Petit conducting. Lewis writes of his work, "these spiritual exercises were for me . . . something to focus my compositional energy on, to interact spiritually with the more prosaic and determined compositional processes."<sup>2</sup> Immediately we are grabbed by the precision of rhythmic pulsations, and the distillation of aural color. Using only a few different pitches, Lewis leaves plenty of space for the music to develop. And develop it does. The strings, percussion, woodwind, and synthesizer effects grow, and are eventually joined by piano, guitar, and cymbals. This effect is a musical construction of birdcalls in a "nature walk environment." As this sonic

<sup>1</sup> For a history of the AACM, see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> George Lewis, quoted in Richard Carrick, "Interview with George Lewis," <http://interpretationsblog.wordpress.com/2011/09/16/interview-with-george-lewis>.

environment continues to evolve, we might liken it to an abstract painting, where colors can actually be “heard.” When viewed from every possible angle, the colors in this aural landscape begin to mix and converge.

*Hello Mary Lou* is a markedly different work in that it evokes a quiet elegance, mirroring a respect and admiration of its celebrant, jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams (1910–81). The piece was inspired by the 1990 documentary about Williams, *Music on My Mind*, directed by Joanne Burke. Written for flute, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, tuba, viola, cello, and double bass, *Hello Mary Lou* was recorded by the Wet Ink Ensemble, conducted by Carlo Christian Betterdorf. Lewis chose to orchestrate this work in expansive gestures that color the track appropriately and patiently. This piece is simply a lovely jazz ballad in new musical colors. Eventually, snippets of blues and bebop emerge, only to return to the familiar ballad style that opened the piece.

The final work on this CD, *Ikons*, was written for the Vancouver Olympiad. It is another large-scale, collaborative piece, scored for flute, clarinet, bassoon, percussion, violin, cello, and double bass, all conducted by composer Rand Steiger. Lewis’s trombone playing can be heard in the funky middle section of this work. Near the end, we hear a varied texture comprised of bebop, reminiscences of Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du soldat*, and the welcome return of Lewis’s own exquisite trombone playing.

This is a totally satisfying and exciting CD with an avant-garde sensibility and a commitment to a style of music that appeals to listeners who care about line, phrase, nuance, and innovative musical expression. This CD represents new music from the pen of a modern master who knows his blues, spirituals, bebop, and song traditions, and who challenges us to hear these traditions even more deeply.

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*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2012) Volume 6, Number 4, pp. 494–497.

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doi:10.1017/S1752196312000417

*Midnight Frolic: The Broadway Theater Music of Louis A. Hirsch*. The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, Rick Benjamin, director. New World Records CD 80707–2, 2010.

For those too young to recall the original 1950s television programs or even the 1970s reruns of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, its theme song, “The Love Nest,” might be as unfamiliar as the composer’s name, Louis Achilles Hirsch (1881–1924).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the initial popularity of “The Love Nest,” Hirsch’s biggest

<sup>1</sup> In the months before this song would be heard relentlessly in *Mary* (1920), a hit Broadway musical produced by George M. Cohan, “Love Nest” enjoyed hit recordings by stratospheric tenor John Steel and Art Hickman’s orchestra. Burns and Allen adopted the first forty seconds of the tune as their theme song, both for their radio show in the 1930s and 1940s and their bi-weekly television