

RECORDING REVIEWS

David Starobin, *Family Album* (*New Music with Guitar, Vol. 7*). Bridge Records CD 9239. 2007.

The seventh volume in guitarist David Starobin's *New Music with Guitar* series contains works by composers whom Starobin has known for years, who have written for him in the past, and/or who have become a part of his life: thus the title, *Family Album*. Starobin (b. 1951 in New York) and his wife Becky formed Bridge Records in 1981 and began *New Music with Guitar* in 1988. Like other volumes in the series, the music is newly written for the classical guitar and calls for not only an imposing technical facility—which Starobin has in abundance—but also inspired musicianship. This volume is the most personal thus far, with the long associations with the composers as well as pieces relating closely to the performer's life. Works on the recording are by U.S. composers William Bland (b. 1947), Paul Lansky (b. 1944), and Starobin himself, as well as the Cuban-born Tania León (b. 1943), who has worked in the United States since the 1960s. Danish composer Poul Ruders (b. 1949) is also represented.

Bland was born and works in West Virginia and has known Starobin since their student days. His set of *48 Preludes for Guitar* (the pieces here are from 2005, but the set was completed in 2009) cycles twice through all the major and minor keys—an extremely ambitious feat for the guitar. Originally conceived for guitarist Michael McCartney, preludes from the set have become part of Starobin's concert repertoire; six were selected for this CD (nos. 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, and 15). Each piece is a miniature on a single idea. Of particular note is Prelude No. 3 in D-flat major, as lyrical and accessible a piece as one could imagine in a key rarely encountered on the instrument, and the bluesy and dramatic Prelude No. 8 in C minor. These preludes could find their way onto the concert stage of technically well-equipped guitarists, although they appear to be available only in manuscript at present.

Known mainly as an opera composer (especially *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Kafka's Trial*), Danish composer Poul Ruders has stayed with the Starobins in their home in New Rochelle, New York, on trips to the United States. One of these visits inspired the *New Rochelle Suite* (2004/2005) for amplified (classical) guitar and percussion, originally written for Starobin and his daughter, Allegra, but here performed with percussionist Daniel Druckman. The instrumental combination is arresting and effective, highlighting the percussive aspects of plucked strings and adding a tremendous variety of timbres through the various percussion instruments. Movements are entitled "Grand Opening," "Kafka" (based on the opening theme to *Kafka's Trial*), "Thanksgiving," "Night Tango," and "Stampede." As might be expected from Ruders, the music is dramatic, even theatrical, and challenging, for both listeners and performers.

Starobin has known composer/conductor Tania León since the 1970s. Her *Bailarín* (The Dancer; 1998) was originally intended for Starobin's *Newdance*

CD (Bridge 9084) but arrived too late to be included on that disc. It is a complex work, full of sudden shifts of material and complex rhythms. The dance is slightly out of place here amid the other larger multimovement works, but it is performed with energy and flawless technique. It provides a bridge to the second work for guitar and percussion (and also the second work related to New Rochelle) by Starobin himself. *Three Places in New Rochelle* (2002)—an obvious nod to Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England*—includes imitations of street noises and other sounds inspired by locations near the guitarist's home. Movements 1 and 2 are titled after his favorite local restaurants ("Bombay Express" and "Mirage") and use a variety of percussion and found instruments, including an egg beater. Once again the work was originally written for Starobin's daughter but performed here by Druckman. The final movement, "The Top of Mount Joy," gets its name from a landmark hill, which, during the course of composition, became associated with his wife's recovery from a life-threatening accident.

Before the twentieth century, the solo guitar repertoire comprised almost entirely works by guitarists themselves. The formidable and idiosyncratic technical demands of the instrument are still daunting to most composers, and many works written for the guitar by nonguitarists require extensive editing for performance. Although he is not a performing guitarist, Paul Lansky played the instrument as a young man and is praised in Starobin's liner notes as writing idiomatically for the instrument, demonstrated admirably with his *Semi-Suite* (1997/1998). The work has its origins, once again, in Starobin's *Newdance* CD, for which Lansky wrote "Crooked Courante." The courante inspired the full suite presented here, with the whimsical titles "Putative Prelude," "Aimless Air," "Crooked Courante," "Shameless Sarabande," "Awkward Allemande," and "Partly Pavane." Although not neo-Baroque in style, the suite is quite effective and beautiful, reminiscent of the early eighteenth century in its complex textures and deeply intimate style.

All of the works are major additions to the guitar repertoire, although only time will tell which ones may find themselves on the future programs of ambitious guitarists. The personal connections Starobin has with the composers indicate that these recordings will have a currency and weight, adding historical importance to the top-level performances; in short, they would be required listening for anyone attempting any of these works. The booklet inserted with the CD contains excellent program notes by Starobin, lists Web sites for the composers and information for finding the published scores of the music, and (for guitar aficionados) includes a discussion of the three different guitars used on the recording. As could be expected with a CD produced by a company owned by a guitarist, the sound quality is top notch.

Gary R. Boye

