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(2 reviews)

George Tsontakis: *Anasa*,
True Colors & *Unforgettable*
AUDIO CD; IMPORT
Naxos American Classics

American classical music had come of age by the 1950s; it seemed in great shape: Copland, Barber, Bernstein, Schuman, Sessions, Carter—someone for every taste. But musical politics in the conservatories was the snake in the grass; I know a very promising young composer who simply quit music. George Rochberg helped break the serialists' stranglehold; unfortunately, the music he wrote after his conversion was weaker than that written before. We were in the doldrums for decades. Other countries fought past Boulezism and continued to turn up masters: Britten in England, Ligeti in Hungary, Dutilleux in France; even German culture, annihilated by the Nazis, produced a Henze.

Thankfully, American music in our century has blossomed; composers, untethered, are writing for themselves instead of for the public. There had been signs earlier: Reich and Adams. In the front row of the class sits George Tsontakis. Not as widely appreciated as others in the limelight—he lives in New York's Catskill Mountains rather than on Broadway—Tsontakis has received the highest composer honors: the International Grawemeyer Award and the Ives Living Prize, and he enjoys performances worldwide. How does the old saw go? I've never met a Tsontakis piece I didn't like. I was heartened to learn that he studied with Sessions—a meaningful link to the deepest, if not the most widely appreciated, music of its era. But these three works are concertos, which were not Sessions's forte.

NAXOS

AMERICAN CLASSICS



George
TSONTAKIS

Anasa
True Colors
Unforgettable

David Krakauer,
Clarinet

Eric Berlin, Trumpet

Luosha Fang and
Eunice Kim, Violins

Albany Symphony

David Alan Miller



Anasa (Greek for “breath”) is a 2011 clarinet concerto commissioned by the Albany Symphony and written for David Krakauer. Its three movements are more-or-less the conventional fast-slow-fast but sport internal variations in tempo and character. I hear echoes of Donald Erb here: a freedom of imagination, honesty, and bright colors in the service of solid construction—music that can be giddy without being trivial. As the clarinet pursues wild, skittish ways, often sailing on klezmer seas, the orchestra lies back on a more classical cushion. It’s a winning combination.

True Colors (2012) is a concerto commissioned by the Albany Symphony for its principal trumpet, Eric Berlin. It conjures the radiant innocence of Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*—although the music is totally different. A four-minute “Prologue: Echoing” introduces a single 14-minute movement, “Magic Act.” Part of Tsontakis’s magic is to invoke jazz without becoming jazzy, and the soloist is given ample virtuoso opportunity without the trumpet becoming blatant. One brief orchestral climax is cut off by the trumpet, leading to a quiet ending. The magic is enhanced by the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, where a long reverberation time produces a golden warmth without smearing the music, the sound both brilliant and soft.

Unforgettable is a double-violin concerto, smooth as silk yet exotic, almost oriental. The first movement, “Changing Landscapes,” “ranges in mood from serenity to almost frightening and propulsive gestures” (Tsontakis, in his program notes). The second, “Leapfrogging,” is a friendly competition between the soloists; it “builds to a bit of a ruckus” before settling into “reconciliation.” The third, “Ballade” (the title is ironic, we are told), references Bach and jazz, but very subtly. The orchestral writing dissolves the boundary between tonality and atonality. The entire concerto is lovely. The Troy hall also warms *Unforgettable* (*Anasa* was recorded elsewhere); the solo violins are placed far apart, so we may follow their dialogue clearly.

All the performances are exceptional, from the soloists and from David Alan Miller’s Albany Symphony, which has become America’s beacon for new music. Listening through this disc again, one is struck by how well each concerto captures the character of its solo instrument(s). That’s something that should go without saying, but it’s not often the case; it speaks to Tsontakis’s abilities as well as his sensibilities. He has been a while earning his place at the table: He’s 67. Let’s hope George Tsontakis continues to produce meaningful music. We need it. We need him. **James H. North**

Review 2

Way back in 1997, a disc of orchestral music by the American composer George Tsontakis (b. 1951) caused a stir. The work, titled *Four Symphonic Quartets*, was a collection of orchestral tone poems inspired by T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," composed between 1992 and 1996. It was released on the now defunct Koch label, and featured the Monte Carlo Philharmonic under James DePriest. With titles such as *The Dove Descending* and *Winter Lightning*, these works showed a subtle and sophisticated synthesis of post-Impressionist colors with suggestions of Minimalism but also, as James North put it in his original *Fanfare* review, a "density of ideas and structural complexity," all cloaked in the full resources of a symphony orchestra. I was impressed at the time, but unfortunately managed to miss two subsequent orchestral discs of Tsontakis's music (which include two violin concertos). Now the Naxos American Classics series gets into the act, with a new release of three concertante works conducted by that indefatigable champion of American music, David Alan Miller. The program consists of a clarinet concerto, *Anasa* (2011), a trumpet concerto, *True Colors* (2012), and a concerto for two violins and orchestra, *Unforgettable* (2009, revised 2013).

As you might expect, Tsontakis's language has changed over 20 years. What remains from the *Four Symphonic Quartets* is his sure touch in handling orchestral textures, and a sense of the flavor conveyed by certain harmonies: The minor chord at the very opening of *Anasa* is an example. However, these are concertos, and therefore built around a soloist (or two, in the case of *Unforgettable*).

In the concertos for clarinet and trumpet, the color and cultural baggage of the solo instrument bring a transformative influence to the music. *Anasa* was written for the musician who performs it here, David Krakauer, well known for his interest in the klezmer tradition of Jewish folk music. (He was also the dedicatee of David Del Tredici's *Magyar Madness*, another work with clear ethnomusical characteristics.) Tsontakis combines this influence with one of his own—Greek folk music—to produce distinctive rhythms, familiar melodic tropes, and a particular style of clarinet playing that takes the instrument into what might be termed its squealing range. Krakauer plays with great skill and tremendous conviction, and the whole piece is a lot of fun, but in the outer movements these dominating stylistic traits tend to elbow aside any recognizable compositional voice. Not so the glowering slow

movement, which in its later episodes contains similar influences but incorporates them into a powerfully individual musical statement.

In the two movements of the trumpet concerto, *True Colors*, the first of which is a short, preliminary prelude, Tsontakis plays on the two “true colors” of the instrument well known to American ears: the fanfare-like statement, and hot jazz licks. Soloist Eric Berlin is equally adept at producing a bright gleaming tone for the first, and raw, brash power for the second. Reflecting this musically, Baroque-era melodic gestures combine with jazz-tinged harmonies. The composer integrates these elements with a sure touch.

The double concerto, *Unforgettable*, is a more subdued affair. Here, two equal protagonists complement each other through imitation (as in the rhythmically vital second movement, “Leapfrogging”), maintaining a conversational relationship throughout. The orchestra provides a somber background, notably in the first movement, “Changing Landscapes,” and while Tsontakis’s textures are as beguiling as ever, they are of a darker hue in this work. The lyrical outpourings of the final movement, “Ballade,” are not far removed from the soaring lyricism of the Violin Concertos by Barber and Walton.

All three of these pieces are more complex and less predictable than my short descriptions may suggest. There is plenty to be explored and relished beneath the surface. The performances are absolutely top-notch, and the sound quality amongst the best from this source. Some early orchestral sessions from the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall sounded dry, but that is not the case here. Conductor David Alan Miller is predictably authoritative and, most of all, Tsontakis’s music deserves to be heard. I see that some of these performances have been “in the can” for a while—*Anasa* was recorded in May 2011—but better late than never. Phillip Scott