

BRESNICK *The Planet on the Table*¹. *Parisot*². *Bird as Prophet*³.
*Bundists*⁴. ¹Brentano SQ; ²Ashley Bathgate (vc); ³Elly Toyoda (vn); ^{3,4}Lisa Moore (pn) • CANTALOUPE 21166 (61:06)

Martin Bresnick (b.1946) has carved out a body of work that I think will stand the test of time. He is a “composer’s composer”, not because the music is in any way overly academic or hermetic, but because it has rock-solid integrity in both its expression and structure. It communicates a deep urgency and desire to connect — with both performers and listeners. It doesn’t aim for easy accommodation with the tastes or issues of the time, even though it has always been rigorously right-minded.

Bresnick, while always a leader in the field, has not perhaps had the highest exposure of those in his generation. Part of this comes from the fact that he is perhaps the greatest teacher we have, and has remained a little behind the scenes as a result. His studio at Yale has produced a dazzling string of important younger composers who have profoundly shaped the discourse. Further, the vast majority of his music has been in chamber media. The pieces certainly can be substantive and expansive, but genres such as symphony and opera have not been a major part of his output (though they do exist!). The flipside is that any work he produces for a smaller ensemble has the feel of something much bigger.

This release combines a work in recorded premiere with some a little older. The newest (2019) is the String Quartet #4, “The Planet on the Table”. It’s in five movements, each inspired by a poem of Wallace Stevens. It has a very satisfying arc: the first movement rings out with the tidal push of chords, and develops into an ever more rich and complex surge. The second opens up into great lyricism, and feels Sibelian to me. The third is more fragmented; there’s a sense that things are falling apart and that silences are invading the texture, though it coalesces into a concerted lyric statement near the end. The fourth is a meditative ramble, and the title “Someone Has Walked Across the Snow” gives away the game. It is a gentle fantasia on the Debussy prelude *Footsteps in the Snow*. (And yet when I first listened to this without notes or knowing the title I didn’t make the connection; proof of the strength of the composer’s own original voice even when channeling a different source.) The fifth has a return of proto-minimalist repetitive synergy. I may be wrong, but I couldn’t help but hear a ghost of a slow movement of the Brahms Fourth Symphony asserting itself near the end.

Bresnick makes an oblique reference in his brief notes to “the music and sounds of a remembered time or of something heard that I liked”. And thus, the things that I’m hearing in the background may well be an artifact of subtle homage that is woven into this testament.

The other three works are more compact, but still have real impact. *Parisot* (2016) is a tribute to the eponymous cellist who was Bresnick’s colleague at Yale, and one of the leading pedagogues of the instrument. It’s for 12 celli, and here is performed by the astounding Ashley Bathgate in a multitracked rendition. It opens with a grand statement that one can justly call noble. Stern repetitive pizzicati drive the music, until it reaches a point of harmonious stasis.

Bird as Prophet (1999) is part of a sequence of works called *Opere della Musica Povera* (“Poor music“, but in the sense of the Italian visual arts movement known as *Arte Povera*, which used simple and ordinary materials). The piece is a passacaglia, whose rhetoric is spacious and pushing toward a sort of transcendent melody. Though this ancestor is lurking throughout Bresnick’s oeuvre, here I think Brahms comes most to the fore (though the composer actually mentions Schumann in his notes—I’ll agree with that too. In fact the title a translation of the title of a work in the *Waldszenen* set). I don’t mean to suggest that Bresnick is piling up postmodern

chits, references to show off his erudition. Just the opposite, one senses a deep personal engagement with tradition that is respectful but never obeisant.

And finally there is a brief solo piano piece, *Bundists* (2015), part of a project of short pieces inspired by Schumann's *Davidsbundlertanze*, that is an almost perfect blending of Romantic spirit with modernist and postmodernist technique.

These performances are passionate and authoritative. All the players have had a long musical relationship with the composer; I've already cited Bathgate, but of course the Brentano, Lisa Moore, and Elly Toyoda demonstrate deep and committed understanding. Bresnick continues to prove he's a national treasure. **Robert Carl, *Fanfare***

****A selection of important works by one of our finest composers.