

Classical Music Review

By Steven Mark Kohn

Where do we go from here? We finally have enough Beethoven and Brahms symphony collections. Every note written by Mozart, Mendelssohn, Bach and the other great masters has been recorded. So what's next? How about music by long forgotten masters? Composers who achieved some recognition in their day, only to be forgotten shortly thereafter. Well, It seems like everyone is jumping on the bandwagon, as this month's offerings will attest.

We begin with the long awaited release of the complete overtures of the 19th century Austrian-born Italian composer of German opera, Giovanni Poggibonzi (Schlumpf-Kragenschlager Records, CD #100-21). Poggibonzi was best known in his day for being Rossini's fastest copyist. This soon led to engagements copying parts for some of the most notable opera composers in Italy, Vienna and Paris. Poggibonzi would eventually move in with Meyerbeer who nicknamed him "lightning quill", and allowed him to occupy the guest house rent-free. The onset of tendinitis ended Poggibonzi's promising career as a copyist, and he was forced to compose to make a living. His original works found little favor with audiences of the day and it was not until the neoclassic revival of the 1920's lead by the British musicologist Sir Tindle Amadeus Pertwee, that the public was again exposed to these musical gems, which have struggled to find an audience since.

In this recording, Dutch conductor Jorgen Hugenhagen leads the Klangfarbenschpritzgewandhauspiel Simfionietta of Nerdheim in a series of spirited renditions, owing much to the athletic interpretive leanings of Hugenhagen's mentor, the late Furdeener Aggehn. Represented are the overtures to the operas "The Trollops of Tunisia", "A Palestinian in Antwerp", "The Fairy King", "The Crossdresser" ("Titzenherr") and the comic masterpiece "A Frog in Her Panties" ("Ein Kermit im Blumers"). This recording is sure to find an audience as a "must-have" for serious opera buffs, and is a marvelous introduction to the long-neglected works of this minor master.

Another new release, this one by Ichbineinberliner Records (# 005) contains the entire compositional output of Gunther Putz, a student of Anton Webern. Putz was intrigued by the economical writing style of his mentor, and strove to express himself "with as few notes as possible." A prime example is his Solo Violin Sonata of 1949, here performed by Swedish virtuoso, and Duschbegeh Award winner, Tig Toorgsen. The sonata, a milestone in musical brevity, consists of only three notes. "The second note is the climax, and the third note is a postlude" Putz once told Arnold Schoenberg. His "17 Dootles for solo piano" (ably performed here by 11 year-old prodigy Svetlana Svetlanikov) have a performance time of just under two minutes (including dramatic pauses). After the premiere in Vienna in 1951, the audience burst into ribaldous fits of laughter, and Putz left the auditorium depressed. He then hid in the basement for two weeks, where he completed his darkest work, "3 Clumps for Soprano Recorder, Celeste and Euphonium." The Wootzmannspairdat Trio perform it here capably, but only hint at the uberangst that lies beneath the written notes. Putz's "Suite for Large Orchestra" is probably his most well-known work, and the one which best exemplifies his condensed style of writing. The work is in seven movements, each movement containing only one note. The movements are titled "Eighth," "Quarter," "Staccato Sixteenth," "Whole note with Fermata," "Tenuto Half," "One Hundred Twenty Eighth" and "Dotted Half With Crescendo." Of the last movement, Putz exclaimed in a 1963 interview, "That was the best damn note I ever wrote." The Schwantzenschtuke Philharmonium perform the suite under the baton of music director Helmut Klansmer-Blunkt. Even though the recording took only 10 minutes to complete

(including rehearsal), the musicians were paid union scale, making those the most expensive seven notes ever recorded.

In stark contrast to Putz is Russian composer Yuneva Popova, whose epic symphonic poem "Slum Maidens of Blinska" receives a stirring performance by the Moscow Heights Symphony Orchestra led by music director Ivad Jostaboutenov. (Torn Curtain Records, CD # 100132) The sheer length of this titanic opus (it's 138 minutes cover two CDs) lead Stalin to refer to it's composer as "Plotknya" (chowder head), and after falling asleep at the premier, he banned the work from any future public performance. Popova was able to avoid exile to Siberia by promising to write only up-tempo nursery tunes from that day forward. After Stalin's death, "Slum Maidens" was reinstated into the repertoire, although it is seldom performed today due to it's great demands on the stamina of the listener. The massive single movement unfolds gradually as the opening Largo Molto gives way to a lyrical Adagio Sostenuto which, after a long series of Meno Mossos, ultimately takes us to a somber Lento Doloroso e Lugubrioso before returning to the original Largo Molto Possible and the extended Coda Ad Nauseam con No Mo Mosso. This release will also be included in the New Age crossover series "Music to Listen to While Dying."

A multi-cultural offering: "Third World Masters" (Charbroiled Beastie Records, CD # 1-331) brings together chamber music from Africa, Southeast Asia, South and Central America and Bali. Few will recognize the names of any of these composers, but one must admire the chutzpa of conductor Reginald Poot, in seeking out and bringing to light music from such disparate locations and cultures. Nigerian composer N'go M'butu's "Serengeti Night" written for two flutes, kalimba and nose drum is an evocative sonic tapestry, while South African Peer Hoag's "Apartheid Serenade" for tenor and organ is based on the angst-laden poetry of white supremacist Horst Vanderpoove. Bantu Mogwash of Bali is represented by the haunting "When Conchs Dream", a seven movement work for bass clarinet and two-stringed harp. Other composers represented are Pedro Cabasa, Alvero DeNada, T'xo X'ianjo and Frankie Lin. I must be honest and say that this recording is not for everyone, but for the eccentrics out there, this collection certainly offers something new and different.

Chinese composers No Go, Can Poo, Can Pee Tu, Did Poo, Du Wun Mo and Pud Hang represent the first of the previously censored "red" composers of the late 20th century to have their music issued on an international release. (Yan Kee Got Big Buk Records, CD #001) The People's Orchestra of Ho Boy is lead by it's music director Wun Sik Pup. While the recording quality and performances are poor, the cover art is really quite striking.

And now for my favorite. Maverick conductor Tannhauser Lohengrin has taken upon himself the daunting task of creating the definitive recording of Reinholt Blurt's 1927 expressionist operatic masterpiece "Der Tode Fenster" (Geutche Crammophone Records, CD # 3114). The 5 disk set includes every note of the six hour, five act opus, including the originally excised ending in which Marta sings the gripping aria "Meine Leben ist eine Scheisse Peil" from a rocking chair with a bucket on her head while cradling the partially decomposed body of her dead hamster. Considered technically unplayable (some musicians stormed out during the first rehearsal) and socially and politically scathing (a riot ensued at the premier) it has taken over 70 years for the sensibilities of the listening public to catch up to the tremendous complexities and power of this monumental work (Berg and Webern slept outside the composer's door for a month eating only biscuits in a display of worship). The Orchestra of Lieblingstadt is joined by the Lieblingstadt UberChoir and soloists Gert Schlugg, Martina Heilgamerk, Gotta Schenker, Pinkus Ursatz and Lotta Flab-Hangenonertuchas.

The story is a familiar one. A seamstress' apprentice (Marta) yearns to own her own garment shop. After borrowing money from a Jewish dwarf, she promptly loses it all and must go into hiding. She soon joins forces with a one-legged hog butcher (Hans) in the hopes of starting a new life. The plot then takes a bizarre series of twists and turns as a

traveling gypsy troupe and three Armenian tourists stumble into a fascist schnitzel factory during the Oktoberfest celebration and set against the backdrop of a depressed post-World War I Germany in the painful process of rebuilding. Mistaken identities and random acts of mayhem further complicate the lives of Marta, Hans and their friends down at the sausage works, while an illicit love affair emerges between Hans' sister Gertrude and a lower military official with mild brain damage who stutters. (Note the heart-wrenching aria "Ich b-b-b-bein ein Lunk-k-k-ken K-K-Kopf") By the end of act 4 all of the character's lives have been completely destroyed and act 5 serves largely as a postlude, with writhing agony and wretched human suffering being elevated to nearly intolerable levels in an expressive commentary on the existential futility and brutality of life on earth as seen through the eyes of an unemployed German composer and his 50 year old librettist who still lives with his mother.

Next week: "Taking a chance on chanson". Garth Brooks, Willie Nelson, Jewel, Tracy Chapman, Courtney Love, Joe Cocker, the Beastie Boys and Johnny Rotten sing Poulenc.