

New Music Connoisseur

Review By BLC

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Flutist and unofficial general manager Pat Spencer of the Da Capo Chamber Players introduced us to the music of Judith Shatin in New York in February of 1997. On that occasion we wrote, "... one hears nuances that are rare in today's interactive electronics and, though Ms. Shatin's music is highly chromatic, it has its own personality." We were speaking of her composition for solo flute and electronics, *Kairos*, a work inspired by Greek mythology.

We often regret things said in print but need not take that particular assessment back. Judith Shatin has a strong musical personality, an assurance made firmer by this CD; it's a major release. We had held an incorrect notion that she was an electronics specialist. Not the case. She may head such a program at the University of Virginia, but her compositional range is hardly narrowed by that label. The opening work affirms her unique attraction for the flute and winds in general—Shatin is an accomplished flutist—for the timbres drawn from them have a visceral effect on the listener. The title, *Piping the Earth*, inspired by an ancient Chinese text, refers to the wind as both changing and fundamentally unchanging force. The work is highly nuanced; nary a single phrase is repeated verbatim. The whimsical wind, first heard as an ominously approaching drone in the distance, suddenly blusters into high energy and goes through a whole array of musical forms. Snatches of a winsome song can be heard, then a short scherzo, march-like meandering rhythms, all interrupted by climactic moments until the wind goes wild and performs what suggests an awesome dance of death. No, this is not program music, but music that allows the imagination to have a field day.

Also inspired by the wind, but in a much more exalted sense is her three-movement opus for flute and chamber orchestra. The Hebrew word *ruah* (guttural aitch) is interpreted as breath, wind, air, breeze, blowing, animal life, spirit, ghost, soul, mind, intellect and passion in English. (In many languages breath and spirit have the same meaning.) The composer was moved by the Cabbalistic interpretation, which sees *ruah* as, roughly speaking, the force that holds body and soul together. The flutist begins a long, soaring solo passage before being confronted by the orchestra, sometimes with harsh chromatic chords, but at other times with empathy, as when other winds float in consonant harmony with it. Despite the challenges, the instrument continues its passage with head held high until, in the final movement, there is a "furious spin through space." In the last bars the journey reaches home with the spirit surviving and coming to peace and rest.

A much fiercer battle is portrayed in *The Passion of St. Cecilia*. This Cecilia is not in the same image celebrated by Purcell and Handel. Scholars now consider the designation, patron saint of music, as based on a false notion. She is the early Christian martyr who, according to the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, was condemned by the Roman prefect in the fifth century C.E. because of her conversion of many to Christianity. She was mortally wounded by three blows of the executioner's sword, heard unmistakably in the final chords of the work.

The music here holds together well. This is yet another challenging work for both performer and listener, who may find little in the music to suggest piety, except in the meditative second movement. Instead, what the composer produces is music depicting a figure caught up in an atmosphere of violence and arrogance surrounding Cecilia's religiosity, conviction and courage. She is a true martyr, both defiant and accepting. The music suggests that but with a lot of brutality.

If we can safely assess that Judith Shatin comes from an erudite knowledge of history, mythology and traditional concepts and that she doesn't shun the human element in her work, she also has a strong interest in properties, in ideas that have tactility. The second work on the disc, *Stringing the Bow*, is structured in the form of an arc in which rhythmic vibrations are set off, followed by flight (in slow motion), acceleration and finally the climax in which the arrow lands, clearly at its target. On first impression, one feels the composer is not as comfortable with strings as with winds. But soon enough one sees her as interpreting something physical and complex and that strings are well suited to the purpose. (The player's bow, e.g., impersonates the archer's bow.) The many repeated rhythmic chords we hear have roots in a work of great physicality, namely *The Rite of Spring*. So suggestive of Stravinsky are Shatin's chords, one is tempted to rename the work *The Rite of Spring Action*. Despite the metrical shifts, complexity of line and purposeful lack of lyricism, the work suggests the dance; perhaps, some curious choreographer will tune in and feel that as well.

We come away with the impression that this composer imposes a thought process into every component of her music and leaves us to make the connections between theme and details. She requires exceptional interpreters and she surely gets them here. Renee Siebert's flute is to sound what a graceful dancer is to visual movement. Gayle Martin Henry's piano ranges from lyrical reflection to controlled clangor. These works seem to have been written with those capabilities in mind. The two orchestras, led by the late Robert Black and the dedicated Joel Suben, are always supportive and richly attuned to Shatin's demands.