

CD Review

Maria A. Niederberger: *Säntis Thoughts*. René Kubelík, violin; Patrizio Mazzola, Piano. World Premiere Recording by Magnonrec, Switzerland. 2011

By Susan Erickson

The CD recording of Maria A. Niederberger's *Säntis Thoughts* for violin and piano marks a collaboration between the eminent Swiss-Italian pianist Patrizio Mazzola and the distinguished German violinist René Kubelík, the latter a member of the famous family of musicians whose roots go back well over a century and include violinist Jan Kubelík (1880-1940) and conductor Raphael Kubelík (1914-1996). Pianist Mazzola has performed Niederberger's works in the past; listeners may recall his CD *Live at Wigmore Hall "A Musical Journey Around Lake Lucerne"* which featured the composer's *Vernissage (1998) (Musical Thoughts and Sketches)*. The present world premiere recording brings together the talents and expertise of these two world-class performers in a compelling work marked by assured craftsmanship and remarkable evocativeness.

The inspiration for this work, according to the composer's liner notes, was a weekend visit to the Säntis, which is the tallest peak in northeastern Switzerland, Niederberger's home country. Currently a professor of music theory and composition at East Tennessee State University, she had the opportunity to re-visit her country of origin during a sabbatical in 2008. In the liner notes, Niederberger declares that "while writing programmatic music is not my objective, nature continues to inform, renew, and inspire me nonetheless." While all three movements are descriptive to a large extent, only the second movement (in this reviewer's opinion), based on a poem, could be said to be programmatic in the true sense of the word. All the movements are marvelously descriptive, however.

The first movement, *Shapes (Gestalten)* is the longest of the three and this is appropriate, given that this movement establishes the imaginings of the remaining two. As Niederberger declares on her website, "I find the chronological course of a composition to be crucial. The flow should be carefully structured by contrasts and accents, and supported by modulations of various kinds. To put it this way: I construct and deconstruct sounds." *Shapes* lives up to this premise. Even on first listening, one feels senses continuation, expansion, some kind of connection to what came before. In delineating the mountain peaks, there is a jaggedness as well as a lyricism. The instruments' wide ranges give expression to the peaks and valleys, with their light and shadows. This is by far the most expansive and complex of the movements. Like most of Niederberger's music, *Säntis Thoughts* is very demanding, and directions in the score leave nothing to chance. The composer herself is a trained and experienced violinist, and this is evident in the very explicit directions to the instrumentalists.

The second movement, *Premonitions (Tiefe Ahnung)*, is inspired by a "life-embracing" poem by Annette Droste-Hülshoff, *In the Meadows (Im Grase)*, which hints, in later stanzas, at the inevitable end of life, causing the composer (and listener?) to reflect on one's mortality. This appears to be an almost tonally-oriented movement with colorful chromaticism. The very song-like initial theme is presented by the violin as if in G major, moving then to B flat. While the opening is lyrical, the middle section is more

agitated, with the violin and piano both playing very Bartókian rhythms. In a return to a more serene recapitulation of sorts, the violin again states the opening theme, now in D flat major, and the movement concludes in this key, embellished by added tones which serve to enrich the expansive statement of this movement.

The final movement, *Flight of Alpine Birds (Bergvögel im Flug)*, is perhaps the most explicitly descriptive of all the movements. The composer notes that birds “often assume spiritual roles in literary works.” They do in music as well; there is a long and honored history going as far back as the Middle Ages and continuing throughout music history (recall the cuckoo theme in J. S. Bach’s *Art of Fugue* and more recently, Respighi’s arrangement of birds after Rameau and Pasquini). While Niederberger’s writing here may not be programmatic as such, it is definitely evocative and well suited to the instruments. The piano begins in the lower register with a nervous, fluttering, four-octave bird-like ascending figure (reminiscent of the opening of the first movement, thus providing a cyclical element), answered in the violin by a more soaring, graceful arabesque. This exchange continues, marked by the occasional violin solo and moments of agitation in both instruments. A remarkable violin solo near the end of the movement is followed by a fluttering reply in the piano, with a joyous collaboration at the end.

This is a very substantial work of music (total length is just under 19 minutes), and the choice to issue its performance on a single CD, standing alone, is most appropriate. The performance itself is not only flawless, but inspired. The CD itself is enhanced by the composer’s informative liner notes and beautiful cover art by Petra Micova.

Anyone wishing to obtain a copy of this CD should contact the composer at niederbe@ETSU.edu.

Dr. Susan Erickson is a musicologist who specializes in 17th- and 18th-century keyboard music. A harpsichordist as well, she has recorded the Violin and Harpsichord Sonatas of Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre with Robert Samson Bloch and Steven Lehning (Demeter Recordings 1827) and is a contributor to the Historical Anthology of Music by Women (Indiana University Press, 1987, 2004). She was formerly a tenured member of the musicology faculty at the Sydney Conservatorium in Australia and taught the first courses in women composers there and at the University of California, Davis.