

LESHNOFF Piano Concerto¹. Symphony No. 3² • Michael Stern, cond; Kansas City S; ¹Joyce Yang (pn); ²Stephen Powell (bar) • REFERENCE 739 (SACD: 60:21)

In 44:2, reviewing a Reference recording of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, complemented incongruously by Jonathan Leshnoff's Double Concerto for Clarinet and Bassoon with Manfred Honeck leading the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and soloists Michael Rusinek and Nancy Goeres, no one could have been more surprised than me at my reaction to the Leshnoff. "Gloriously beautiful and quite possibly a masterpiece," I called it. One issue earlier, reviewing a streamed version of the same release, Steven Kruger described the Leshnoff as "a gorgeous, thoroughly tonal and sensuous piece...with dreamy moments which remind you of Rimsky-Korsakoff and Glazunov."

The New Jersey-born (1973), currently Baltimore-based Leshnoff earned his Master of Music degree from the Peabody Conservatory and his Doctor of Music degree from the University of Maryland. At 48, he is one of the most successful and sought-after composers among a number of his contemporaries who have signed on to a post-Modernist movement rooted in melody, tonal harmony, beautifully woven orchestral tapestries, and traditional forms. Leshnoff has proven himself especially adept and exceptionally talented in this regard, so much so that his music has received some criticism for being too backward-looking, too Romantic, and too solicitous of the not keen on modern music matinee crowd.

Huntley Dent, for example, who also reviewed the double clarinet and bassoon concerto in 44:1, described Leshnoff's harmonic language as being "so conservative as to seem retroactive, only a step or two beyond movie music." In any case, my own impression of Leshnoff's Double Concerto for Clarinet and Bassoon seemed to be in accord with everything that has been said about his post-Modernist musical conservatism and traditionalism, and that was incentive enough for me to request this new Leshnoff album for review. Boy, am I glad I did!

Both of the works on this disc are of recent vintage, the Symphony No. 3 dated 2015, and the Piano Concerto dated 2019, so recent that it's the last entry thus far in Leshnoff's catalog.

Joyce Yang, soloist in the Piano Concerto, is familiar from her outstanding collaborations in chamber music ventures with the Alexander String Quartet.

There's something about the opening strains of the concerto that stir remotely stored memories in the brain of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. There's a similar Russian-ness to it that Kruger noted in reference to the clarinet and bassoon concerto, except that here in the Piano Concerto, the opening theme takes on the sort of repetitive chant-like circularity one hears in the opening bars of the Rachmaninoff.

Leshnoff's opening gambit is very striking, memorable, mesmerizing almost. If you had never heard Leshnoff's Piano Concerto before—and you haven't, unless you attended its premiere with these same forces in Kansas City in November, 2019—and I told you that this was a concerto composed by Kabalevsky 85 years ago, you would absolutely believe me, for that's exactly what it sounds like. It's bold, colorful, brightly lit, brassy, and percussive as it struts to a Soviet march, speaks with a Russian accent, and sings bittersweet, proletariat songs of Marxist misery. Leshnoff, who is Jewish, attaches Hebrew words in quotations to some of the movements in his works, and to the slow movement of this concerto he appends the word "Neshama," which means soul or spirit.

I won't hesitate for a moment to say that this is a piano concerto you will listen to as often as you listen to Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1, another work to which Leshnoff's

concerto bears a degree of resemblance. It's not hard to identify past composers and concertos that played a role in influencing Leshnoff's score, but I can't begin to tell you what powers of imagination, creativity, and pure magic were the sources of Leshnoff's inspiration. I predict that this is a concerto that pianists are going to queue up to play and that audiences are going to thrill to. Yang's performance is stunning, as is Michael Stern's conducting, the Kansas City Symphony's playing, and Reference's recording—a triumph all around!

Leshnoff's Symphony No. 3, which carries a subtext, if not a formal subtitle, of "inspired by World War I letters home," was born out of a Sunday morning coffee meeting in Philadelphia between Leshnoff and conductor Michael Stern. Long story short, Stern was looking for a project that "would integrate Kansas City's cultural resources into a symphonic experience." I'm not sure that Leshnoff's symphony was exactly what Stern had in mind at the time, for the cultural institution that Leshnoff thought of was the city's World War I museum, the only such museum in America; and the centennial of America's entry into that the war was approaching in 2017 when Leshnoff and Stern sat down that morning for coffee.

Leshnoff proposed searching the National WWI Museum and Memorial for letters from soldiers on the front to their loved ones back home, and then setting those letters as text to be sung by a baritone voice incorporated into a symphonic setting—shades of Shostakovich's "Babi Yar" Symphony (No. 13) come to mind, though that work recalled a different war and spoke to its brutality and degradation. Leshnoff's idea was different. He sought letters that "stood out for their gentle, longing tone and that avoided bloody accounts of the men's service."

Ultimately, Leshnoff settled on the letters of two servicemen, a Lt. James Kellogg Burnham Hockaday's letter to his mother, dated June 23, 1918, and a Dr. Charles Irons's letter to his wife, dated January 2, 1919. These convey a longing, wistful tone, and in the case of Hockaday, the tone of a not-yet-20 innocent abroad writing home about the wonders he was witnessing. All of this conjures less of Shostakovich's scenes of war's horrors than it does of the humanity and compassion expressed in John Adams's *The Wound Dresser*, set for chamber orchestra and baritone to verses from Walt Whitman's poem about a hospital volunteer during the American Civil War.

In keeping with his practice of using Hebrew words to convey the emotional and spiritual essence of certain movements, Leshnoff gives the second movement of the symphony a performance direction of "Gevurah," a word from Judaism's Kabbalistic mysticism that corresponds to awe and the element of fire. Leshnoff translates it as "with burning intensity."

World travelers and travel agents are keen on telling the less traveled that the two must-see cities before they die are Paris and Venice. I'm sure there are other destinations that make the bucket-lists as well. But I advise you here and now that Leshnoff's Symphony No. 3 belongs on your must-hear list before you die, though I can't guarantee that exposure to its "Gevurah," won't kill you. I survived it, but I'm still awestruck by the inexpressible beauty and ineffable atmosphere of its first movement, the overwhelming, soul-shaking power of its second movement, and the beyond-tears, shattering emotion of its finale in which baritone Stephen Powell sings and intones the wrenchingly moving words of the war letters.

Is it all in Huntley Dent's words "only a step or two beyond movie music?" I don't know, but if it is, I pity the screen writers, the producers, and the whole cast and crew, for with music like this for a soundtrack, no one is going to remember the movie. This tops my 2021 Want List for sure. **Jerry Dubins**

Five stars: There are no words to describe the beauty and power of this music