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CD Review by Walter Simmons

GALBRAITH *Other Sun*.¹ *Traverso Mistico*.² *Island Echoes*.³ *Night Train*.⁴ • 1, 2,

⁴Stephen Schultz (electric Baroque fl); ^{1, 2}Barney Culver, ^{1, 4}Simon Cummings, ^{1, 4}Ben Muñoz, ^{1, 4}Nicole Myers, ⁴Tate Olsen (electric vc); ¹William Yanesh (pn, hpd); ^{1, 4}Brandon Schantz, ³Brandon Kelly, ³Zachary Larimer, ³Andrew Wright, ⁴Marcus Kim (perc); ²Carnegie Mellon Contemp Ens; ²Walter Morales, cond • CENTAUR CRC-3106 (53:41)

Nancy Galbraith, now in her early-60s, is a prolific composer who has written for a wide range of musical media. Born in Pittsburgh, she studied in Ohio and West Virginia, and is currently professor of composition and theory at Carnegie Mellon University. Only during the past few years have I become acquainted with her music. The dozen or so pieces I've heard have inhabited a pleasantly accessible postmodern tonal language, more or less mainstream for a composer of her generation. I don't know whether what I've heard is representative of her large body of work, but what is found on this recent release is of a decidedly different nature, and I've been wrestling with just how to characterize it.

On the one hand I might identify it as falling somewhere toward the middle of a continuum with Rick Sowash at one end and Paul Moravec at the other—a continuum that might also include Joseph Schwantner somewhere around the middle. But some readers may not be familiar with those composers, and that characterization fails to take into account a certain “crossover” into the world of rock music. But the kind of rock music suggested is of a rather rarefied nature, along the lines of the Mannheim Steamroller (for those familiar with this ensemble). The featured performers, chiefly Stephen Schultz, who plays the “electric Baroque flute” and also teaches at Carnegie Mellon, and Cello Fury, an ensemble of electric cellos, have ventured into



the world of refined rock before. There is also the flavor of “world music,” along with whiffs of such associated composers as Lou Harrison and Harry Partch. So the music is a sort of fusion of these various aesthetics, and tends to be modal, with a harmonic language of minimal dissonance, and textures that occasionally suggest Minimalism, with lively rhythmic asymmetries and appealingly fresh instrumental sonorities. Its immediacy has a New Age flavor—much of its impact can be grasped from a single hearing, although I am not sure it will wear out its welcome as quickly as does much highly accessible music, because there is a good deal of activity of various types going on.

I will say unequivocally that while I could not term this “great” music, I enjoy everything on the CD immensely, and it’s hard to imagine anyone *not* feeling similarly. Perhaps its avoidance of weighty matters, its failure to fall into a neat stylistic category, and its general avoidance of intellectual confrontation may not appeal to the typical *Fanfare* reader (as I imagine him/her to be), but I am confident that it will appeal to a much larger number of listeners than does most of the music covered in this magazine. In fact, I am tempted to say that, while this CD may not appeal to many *Fanfare* readers, it is very likely to appeal to their friends and relatives, and would no doubt make a wonderful gift for them.

As for some comments about the individual pieces, *Traverso Mistico* (2006) seems to be the work that inaugurated Galbraith’s collaboration with Stephen Schultz. This piece is bit less consonant harmonically than the others, exhibiting a slightly Asian/Impressionistic flavor, so here is where the scent of Harrison is strongest. The second of its three movements evokes a beautiful sense of rapture, while the subtle treatment of instrumental timbres—especially the electric flute and harpsichord—is exquisite. The first movement of *Other Sun*, the disc’s title piece, is wonderfully lively and sonically fresh; the second is pretty and lyrical, while the third introduces a slightly jazzy element. Similar in many ways to *Other Sun*, *Night Train* is enormously appealing; of all the pieces it displays the richest, fullest treatment of the instrumental ensemble, although it is also the one with the strongest strain of rock style. It is perhaps my favorite piece on the program, with felicitous combinations of sonorities that can only be described as delicious. *Island Echoes* is scored for percussion only, and features the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Percussion Trio. It is an imaginative, inviting piece that features mallet instruments, so that melody and harmony are not overlooked, although, of course, rhythmic factors predominate.

All the music is performed impeccably, and the quality of the recording gives great immediacy to the irresistible timbral combinations. **Walter Simmons**

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