

Clarinet Symphony. János Szepesi, clarinet; Gábor Varga, clarinet; Nathan Giem, violin; Gergely Popa, violin; Tamás Cs. Nagy, viola; Árpád Amirás, cello. G. Vajda: *Clarinet Symphony*, *Alice Études* and *Persistent Dreams*. Budapest Music Center Records BMC 274. Total time 69:38.



The recently released album **Clarinet Symphony** serves as a portrait of composer, conductor and clarinetist Gergely Vajda. Vajda, music director of the Huntsville Symphony (Alabama) and principal guest conductor of the Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (HRSO), conducts the album's self-titled work, a massive 33-minute long piece for clarinet soloists János Szepesi and Gábor Varga with the Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Also featured is Vajda's seven-movement work *Alice Études* for clarinet and string quartet as well as the shortest piece on the album, *Persistent Dreams*.

Clarinet Symphony shows Vajda's intimate knowledge of the instrument. Szepesi, principal clarinetist of the HRSO since 1983, and Varga, principal clarinetist of the HRSO since 1997, also leave a very personal mark with their blended and rich playing – a highlight of the album. Vajda describes the form of the work as a four-movement symphonic form with a prelude, interlude and postlude. This is his self-described attempt to combine his two artistic mediums of orchestra and clarinet into a mammoth piece. The Prelude opens with a groaning, low flurry of notes akin to a more laid-back Corigliano *Concerto* opening or the beginning of Elliott Carter's *Clarinet Quintet*. Szepesi and Varga carefully control languid pitch

bends in the Ballade. Vajda's composition combines the colors of the orchestra with the clarinet timbre, with movements like the Scherzo mixing chalumeau clarinet with low winds as well as clarion register with high strings, percussion and harp. Vajda's rhythmic and harmonic language is soupy, dissonant and primordial. In the Finale, aggressiveness contrasts the solemn Adagio in a captivating journey. *Clarinet Symphony* lets the listener wade through its own enormous stature.

Alice Études features Vajda's more intimate chamber writing. This work, also in seven movements, has more frenetic energy and playfulness that imitates the events of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Although *Clarinet Symphony* gives the listener larger textures and an expanded color palette, the études all share a more open space. The quartet has the ability to show their finesse and character within the pizzicato of "A Mad Tea Party" alongside the quirky clarinet melody. This composition, while not occupying the title position on this album, made me want to listen again as soon as it ended.

One of Vajda's earliest works from 1991, *Persistent Dreams* for solo clarinet, closes the album with a window into the composer's younger self. There is a sense of the later clarinet writing in the glissandi and pitch bends, the fluttering, and virtuosic technical writing from which *Clarinet Symphony* and *Alice Études* evolve. There is both a nice narrative lineage that the listener has the chance to explore along with the petite size of this last track. All of the works stem from his love of clarinet, and so it is fitting we are left with the root of this album, a young composer telling stories through the clarinet.

– Ford Fourquarean