

FISCHER *Pensamientos* for Alto Saxophone and Chamber Orchestra¹. *Miniature*². *Realización* for String Orchestra³. *Interlude for Piano*⁴. *Coming Home*⁵. *Reflection for Piano*⁶. *Suddenly* (arr. B. Fischer)⁷. *A Moment of Silence*⁸. **B. FISCHER** *Weekend in Stockholm*⁹. *Retrograde Orbits for Vibraphone*¹⁰. **MANCINI** *Two for the Road* (arr. C. Fischer)¹¹ • ^{2,5,8}Clare Fischer, cond; Brent Fischer, ⁷cond, ^{2,9}vib/mmb; Gary Foster (1^a-sax, 7^a-cl) ^{1,3}cond; ^{1,4,6}Bryan Pezzone (pn); ^{1-3,5,7-9,11}Studio O • CLAVO 201309 (72:22)

In the course of my reviewing career I've heard a great many modern American composers, some of whom combine jazz elements with classical structure, whose music I can only really describe as "clever." What I mean by that is that once you penetrate the form of their works, they have no under-layers, no backbone to the work, and therefore do not produce anything of lasting substance. The music of the late Clare Fischer (1928–2012) is anything but shallow; rather, it has tremendous substance even in the simplest form and piece.

This particular disc, given the title *Music for Strings, Percussion and the Rest*, starts off with one of Fischer's densest and most ambitious works, the *Pensamientos* for alto sax and chamber orchestra. Begun in the 1950s and finished in the 1990s, it lay dormant for years until his son Brent found it in the Clare Fischer Music Library. Recorded while the composer was still alive (and in the studio at the time) with Fischer's longtime friend Gary Foster as conductor and alto sax soloist, it miraculously won a Grammy for Best Instrumental Composition in January 2014, four months after its release.

Fully revealing Fischer's lifelong love of Stravinsky, Bartók, Berg, and Villa-Lobos, *Pensamientos* is not so much an atonal work as a multi-tonal one. The alto sax enters over subdued but ominous-sounding percussion in C, but tends more towards C Lydian rather than C Major, and before eight bars are completed the tonality has slithered over to D. This sleight-of-hand in transposition (a trick that owes as much to Eddie Sauter as to Stravinsky) continues, with some of the later string passages actually playing multilayered tonalities in the manner of Ornette Coleman's *Skies of America*. Yet Fischer, as a composer, tended towards a tonal center even at his most complex, and so we eventually move into a lyrical section in E \flat with cellos and violas underpinning the plaintive alto solo. Upper strings come into play as well, along with piano, as the music transposes several more times (first to G \flat , then to other keys), the rhythmic pulse stops, and the music "floats" in the key of D. (Without being able to see the score, I am going by my ears and a pitch pipe to determine tonality.) The music develops still further in passages for winds (flute, clarinet, and oboe) with, surprisingly, piano underpinning. One should point out, however, that when Fischer hovers around a certain tonality he is still inventing, varying the chord positions underneath in such a way that he can "pivot" from one key to another more easily. (This is where some jazz critics without sensitive ears often get lost in listening to Fischer's music, believing that he is writing in conventional forms when in fact the music is highly inventive.) Pizzicato cellos in the manner of Villa-Lobos also enter the picture, but I hasten to point out that none of this sounds forced or artificial. Fischer, quite simply, had such a good feel for this music that it all flows naturally, as if he wrote it over a period of four months instead of 40 years.

One of the most arresting things about *Pensamientos* is that it is the soloist who carries not only the themes but also the development; the orchestra acts primarily as commentator and accompanist, occasionally shifting the rhythm and tonality but otherwise following the soloist's lead. This may sound unusual, particularly in the last section where Stravinsky-like polytonality and ostinato rhythms are set up by the strings (again, similar to *Skies of America*), leading eventually to a surprisingly brief final statement. This is a major work.

Miniature, composed in the early 1970s, was written for soprano and standard vibes, standard and bass marimbas, plus keyboard. After its dedicatee decided not to play it, Fischer gave it to his son Brent and at that time scored the piano part for a small string ensemble. This is a true jazz-classical fusion piece, the solo parts sounding improvised even when they aren't and the string ensemble swinging in a Bartókian way.

Realización for string orchestra, the second major work on this disc (running a little over 19 minutes), was also composed over a long period of time, begun as a string quartet in the 1950s but developed in the 1980s into a concert piece for full string orchestra and recorded as such with Foster

conducting. This, too, is a meaty piece, less variegated in its multiple sections than *Pensamientos* but far from simplistic. It, too, contains strong elements of Bartók and Villa-Lobos, but again, never in the form of mere imitation; Fischer absorbed these elements in such a way that they became part of his musical language, like a speaker of American English who has absorbed every region's dialect. Like *Pensamientos*, *Realización* has so many layers that it is best listened to several times, following a different thread of the music each time in order to absorb all its complexity. One of the highest compliments I can pay to Fischer is that his music is American in the best sense of the word, yet he managed to avoid the formulaic "American" sound of Copland, Harris, and Diamond that came to dominate much classical music in the U.S. that wasn't trying to sound like Schoenberg or Milton Babbitt. Eventually fugues enter the picture, and fairly thorny ones at that, yet Fischer had such a clear vision of what he was trying to do that the music sounds all of a piece, as if inspired from start to finish in one sitting. (Brent Fischer also points out, in the liner notes, elements of Shostakovich, Ellington, and Berg in this work, and I hear those too, but I also hear in it the kind of form Roy Harris used in his fascinating one-movement symphonies.) The music slowly but surely rises in pitch until the strings, now playing loudly, reach almost a fever pitch of intensity before suddenly, unexpectedly, ending on an ominous-sounding D-Minor chord.

The brief (four-minute) bitonal Interlude for Piano is played with great expression by Bryan Pezzone, who brings out its lyrical character along with its emotional content. Consisting mostly of block chords in the beginning, it eventually branches out into a lyrical melody that tends towards, but does not stay in, C Major. The piece ends in G. The next work is particularly interesting, a Fischer string arrangement of Henry Mancini's relatively simple tune *Two for the Road*. Once again, Fischer's mastery of chromatics and use of altered chord forms make this music particularly rich-sounding beneath its rather simple melody.

I found Brent Fischer's own composition *Weekend in Stockholm*, written for vibes and chamber orchestra, to be a particularly charming, inviting piece. It, too, uses altered chord sequences, generally in five- and six-part harmonies, the difference being that here the vibraphone almost acts as a member of the orchestra rather than as a lead soloist, adding to the overall musical texture. Only towards the end does the vibes player move away from a constantly-repeated double-time rhythmic pattern to play the lead voice, and in this section the orchestra reacts like members of a jazz band around the soloist.

Coming Home, written by Clare Fischer after suffering a concussion and being confined to a hospital bed, is a bittersweet, wistful, almost post-Romantic piece. The melody is particularly lovely, the harmonies typically fascinating and adding meat to the bones of the melodic structure. *Reflection* for piano again features Pezzone as soloist in a quiet but polytonal work. It is too harmonically dense to be considered "ambient" classical music, yet conveys to the listener an unusual feeling of reflection tinged with melancholy and, at one point, perhaps a fleeting feeling of angst. Brent Fischer's *Retrograde Orbits*, written for solo vibes, has the same kind of feeling as some of Clare Fischer's own piano work, both classical and jazz (listen to some of his solo piano or piano trio jazz recordings from the 1960s and 70s for comparison). I really enjoyed this work, particularly as it evolved into complex rhythmic cells using melodic ideas from the opening section.

Suddenly has the sound of many of Clare Fischer's bossa nova-related jazz pieces, yet again with fascinating chord structures. Perhaps its beat and use of an electric bass leads the ear to think of it as more pop-related, but if you pay attention to those chords and the way the piece develops you will appreciate its richness. Brent Fischer did the orchestration and added it to the original quartet recording. The CD ends with *A Moment of Silence*, one of the last pieces Fischer wrote and conducted himself. This, too, has an almost pop music feel to its gentle, genial opening melody, played in G, and here at last one actually hears the influence of Thomson and Copland in his work. Brent Fischer points out in the notes that, at this stage of his life, he was composing to please himself and not to impress anybody; thus this piece may be heard as a natural expression of his own sensibilities.

Perhaps because the two meatiest pieces come early in this CD, it has the feel of a major concert followed by several encore pieces, but that is the only caveat I have of this extraordinary disc. Clare Fischer was quite evidently a major creator, and one whose work we cannot conveniently

ignore just because he spent so much of his life working in the pop and jazz fields. Highly recommended. **Lynn René Bayley**