



Colin Clarke, May 2019

Released to coincide with Women’s History Month, Project W comprises a sequence of world premiere recordings by five women composers. Founded in 1987 by Paul Freeman, the Chicago Sinfonietta has always reflected the broad cultural diversity of its home town. The Taiwanese-American conductor Mei-Ann Chen has been Music Director since 2011; her previous disc, *Delights & Dances*, was reviewed, positively, by myself in *Fanfare* 37:2.

Recently, I enjoyed a Naxos disc of Florence B. Price’s First and Fourth symphonies (*Fanfare* 42:5). Here, we have the suite *Dances in the Cornbrakes*, originally for solo piano and orchestrated with a light touch by William Grant Still. The central “Tropical Noon” is particularly fetching; slinkily so, some might contend. The bulk of the extrovert writing is in the first movement, “Nimble Feet”; the finale is a restrained cakewalk. The original piano version can be found on a fascinating multi-composer disc entitled *Asa* on MSR Classics, performed by William Chapman Nyaho (reviewed *Fanfare* 32:6, where I described that disc as a “Want List candidate”). Still’s orchestration of the finale includes some marvelous woodwind writing, rendered with real character here by members of the Chicago Sinfonietta.

Brazil-born composer Clarice Assad (b. 1978) furnishes the second offering, *Sin Fronteras* (Without Borders), conceived as a dance piece for Chicago’s Cerqua-Rivera Dance Theater. Assad’s utopian idea of a world without borders is mapped onto the idea of an America(s) without borders (South America, Central America, North America). Something of the joy she evidently feels at the idea comes through in the music. The scoring is as bright and optimistic as the music itself; whenever the music threatens to turn inwards, an interruptive gesture seems to bring it back on track. There is sophistication here, too.

The vibrancy of the music of Jessie Montgomery can be found throughout the disc of her music on the Azica label (reviewed *Fanfare* 39:5). Her *Coincident Dances* reflects the multicultural nature of her native New York, and the list of musics encountered gives one an idea of what is on offer: English consort, samba, mbira, Zimbabwean dance, swing, techno. It is a heady mix, intoxicating in its layering (expertly negotiated by the Chicagoans throughout—no mean feat of stamina), occasionally veering, somewhat ecstatically, towards a modern jazz jam session.

Blending Western and Hindustani musics, Indian-American composer Reena Esmail offers two pieces, providing her own vocals in *Charukeshi Bandish*. A “bandish” is a short melodic piece that a musician then uses as the basis for an improvisation; the raag used is Raag Charukeshi, with its references to what on paper look like major and minor scales. In #metoo, the bandish serves as the root of a very Western contemporary voice. The juxtaposition of languages is acute. There is a major dramatic stroke in this piece: At one point the dynamic movement is halted, and after a poignant silence, the womens’ voices

enter one by one, in the order in which, chronologically, they joined the orchestra, metaphorically “finding their voice.” Ghostly, keening gestures take over. Esmail offers a fascinating juxtaposition of languages resulting in an astonishingly powerful experience; this appears to be the sum total of her works in the catalog, so one awaits more eagerly.

A far more familiar name, Pulitzer Prize-winning Jennifer Higdon (who has ties with both ensemble and conductor here), offers *Dance Card*, a suite of five movements, each of which may be performed as a separate entity. There is some glorious solo string work from the principals of the Chicago Sinfonietta in the second movement, “Breeze Serenade.” For all the bravado of the more extrovert movements, perhaps it is the introversion of “Breeze Serenade” that lingers onwards. Lines tumble fetchingly over each other in “Jumble Dance,” while an internal pulsation enables “Celestial Blue” to seem to glow. The brief finale, with its wonderful title “Machina Rockus,” brims over with life. Previously, I enjoyed Higdon’s Naxos disc *Sky Quartet* (Fanfare 37:3); her piece *Dance Card* continues the joy of discovery.

The recording (made in Naperville, IL, and overseen by the experienced James Ginsburg) is brilliant, with real presence and a laudable avoidance of over-reverberation.