



SIMS Piano Sonatine¹. Cello Sonata^{1,2}. AEDM in mem². If I Told Him³. Musing and Reminiscence⁴. Concert Piece II⁵ • ¹Eric Moe (pn); ²Ted Mook (vc); ³Christine Ascher (alt), Christoph von Erffa (vc); ⁴Richard Pittman, cond; Boston Music Viva, (live: Boston 11/31/03); ⁵Amy Advocat, Michael Norsworthy (cl); Gil Rose, cond; Boston Modern O Project • NEW WORLD 80709-2 (60:47)

Ezra Sims (b.1928) has lived much of his mature creative life in the Boston area, and he's most closely associated with microtonal composition. Unlike some composers who use "just intonation" (a system that preserves intervals in the form closest to how they actually occur in the overtone series, unlike the "compromised" post-1800 system of equal temperament we all know from the piano), Sims has worked out a highly personal compromise that takes aspects of this practice, but blends them with personal discoveries. His intervals of a nine-tone scale are derived from overtone relations (and hence are of differing distances), but he also uses "chromatic" microintervals to fill the gaps, creating an ultimate 24-note scale.

The result is an interesting blend of the exotic and the abrasive. There can be sections of new-found harmonic beauty, such as the fluid microtonal chorale that opens the second movement of *Concert Piece II*, and corresponding passages of almost unbearable intensity, as the music gets further and further "stretched" by the intonational strategy, a bit like bending a piece of steel towards the point of rupture (cf. the conclusion of the same movement).

The first two pieces of the program, however, are much earlier and very different from this template. The Sonatine and Sonata (both 1957) are serial, though much more under the influence of neo-classicism than expressionism. The former, for solo piano, is elegant and stresses fluidity and continuity. The latter, for cello and piano, is more spare and pontillistic, and while it sounds a little more like the "standard" serial work of the era, in fact it has a real gravitas and nobility of utterance that moves me. It makes me think a bit in its rhetoric of Carter in his transitional period between tonality and atonality.

ADEM in mem (1988) is a solo cello work in memory of the cellist's mother, and uses the tradition of translating a name into musical pitches (*sogetto cavato* in the Renaissance). This is the first piece on the program to use microtonality, and is exceptionally pithy. Five movements, the longest two minutes. The rhythms tend to be simple and "straight," allowing the pitches to articulate clearly. The intervals always sound "right" rather than out of tune, which is a tribute both to Sims's ear and craft, and the precision of Ted Mook's playing. *If I Told Him* (1996) is a romp, a setting of Gertrude Stein's verbal portrait of Picasso. The vocal part is a subtly inflected speech, a kind of minimalist *sprechstimme*, mirrored by the narrow microtonal range of the accompanying cello's range. The composite sound and strategy seems perfectly suited to Stein's text, the best I've ever heard outside of Virgil Thomson's settings. It's also surprising, in that it ultimately moves into very intense and affecting sung text and vocalise, as though discovering a hidden treasure beneath the blithely ironic surface of the text. Christine Ascher is stunning in her delivery, both in spoken and sung passages.

Musing and Reminiscence (2003) is scored for flute, clarinet, and string trio. It's elegiac in tone, its lines limpid, its tempo moderato, and its impact subtly cumulative. The 2005 *Concert Piece II* is probably the most impressive and magisterial work on the program. It has enormous rhythmic drive, and its contrapuntal complexity is exhilarating. It's impressively performed by not only the soloists but the whole ensemble, who dispatch the intonational intricacies confidently. It makes more and more sense to me on each successive listening, one of the best results a composer can hope for his music's effect.

Sims had almost no music on CD before this disc, as far as I can tell, so this is a very welcome release. It makes a great argument for his music. I admit that his version of microtonality, strongly rooted in modernist practice, is less attractive than that of such more maverick composers as Partch, Harrison, and Johnston. To my ear, they tend to tease out greater beauty in the old-fashioned sense. But this is still adventurous and "subversive" music, as Julia Werntz's enthusiastic notes proclaim. An important document for an underrepresented American composer, still at the height of his powers at age 82. **Robert Carl**