



FEATURE REVIEW by Colin Clarke

ROBERT MARTIN *The Gorky Pieces: One Year the Milkweed*; 1 *Water of the Flowery Mill*; 2 *Charred Beloved*; 2 *Nighttime*; *Enigma*; *Nostalgia* • 1 Lisa Hanson (fl); 2 Jordan Dodson (gtr); Max Lifchitz, cond; North-South CO • NORTH/SOUTH 1063 (73:03)

It's good to have a second disc of music by Robert Martin in one issue: My review of his wind quintets outlined Martin's history in finance and his subsequent blossoming as a composer in retirement. Here, a set of pieces for orchestra with foregrounded flute and guitar reveals Martin to be finding inspiration in the art of Arshile Gorky (1904–1948). Gorky came originally from Armenia, but arrived in the States around 1920. He died by suicide in 1948. What appealed to Martin were the contradictions inherent in Gorky's art: It is abstract, yet with an awareness of history and tradition—"playful spontaneity contrasted against a sense of organized inevitability," as Martin puts it. The paintings are helpfully reproduced in (small) color plates.

The concertante piece for flute and orchestra "One Year the Milkweed," premiered in 2011 by the current performers, examines the philosophical point of the question "When is a flower at its most beautiful?" According to the Japanese aesthetic of Wabi-Sabi, it is not when in full bloom, but rather at two other points, one when it comes into existence and the other when it vanishes from existence (a lot to unpick when one maps this onto the human life cycle, one might suggest).

Martin's work is cast in two movements, the first of which considers the end of the plant's life, the second the beginning. The alto flute's deep tones add to the valedictory sense, and layered lines to the lachrymose; the more celebratory, yet harmonically intense, second movement focuses on the moment when the milkweed's seeds are released from their pods. Found under the genus *Asclepias*, milkweed (*Asclepius syriaca*) is perhaps an apt choice for the reframing of significant points, given that its flowers are particularly magnificent. (Incidentally, according to Mrs. Grieve's famous 1931 *A Modern Herbal*, at one point in history, milkweed was used in herbal medicine as a purgative and emetic. Magically, it is associated with the autumn equinox, or Mabon. Please note that milkweed is not the same as the better-known milk thistle, the latter famed for its liver-boosting properties.)

On first glance at the Gorky painting, there seems to be an immediate impression of left-right symmetry. It is actually more like a balance, just as Martin's two movements balance each other out. The performance here is exemplary, Lisa Hanson an agile protagonist capable of, when required, heart-breaking lyricism. The recording, close and clear, enables all detail to chine through; it also means there is nowhere to hide for the performers, so all credit to the razor-sharp reflexes of the North/South CO in the second movement.

The second painting at this particular Martin-curated exhibition is "Water of the Flowery Mill," premiered in 2003. Scored for a sextet of flute, guitar, percussion (including vibraphone, glockenspiel, four timbales, and three cowbells), violin, viola, and cello, the music attempts to reflect the beautiful interplay of freedom and spontaneity of the painting. Beauty is the keyword for Martin's response, achieved through a tangible sense of space created by the natural unfolding of the melodies and textures. Although identifiably by the same composer as "One Year the Milkweed," the emotional Affekt is far removed: calm, placid, profound. If the melding of

vibraphone, glockenspiel, and flute brings Boulez to mind, the intersection is in both composers' admiration of and utilization of sonic beauty; the vocabularies are quite different.

The dark painting "Charred Beloved" elicited a response from Martin (written in 1998), scored for flute (piccolo/alto), oboe/English horn, guitar, violin, and cello. Gorky's end was a notably tragic one, and the sense of lament hovers over the entire piece. Here, as in the second piece, Jordan Dodson is the excellent guitarist, but one should also make special mention of the cello contributions of Maisol Espada. The rhythmic accuracy of the more animated sections from all is most impressive, too.

The final three pieces are all scored for flute clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. While they have a stand-alone life, they can be performed as a triptych and come from one Gorky painting, *Nighttime*, *Enigma*, and *Nostalgia*, a beautiful piece with a figure on the left side of the painting that seems reminiscent of Dalí. All three of Martin's pieces were composed in 1979. With "Nighttime" we certainly enter into the more shadowy aspects of the psyche: The music flickers mysteriously, even threateningly. The music for "Enigma" does what the title says on the case: It also describes in sound the idea of a creative cul-de-sac that artists may use to force their material in a different, perhaps unforeseen, direction. The musical representation of forcing against a barrier is brilliantly conveyed, along with the frustration that such moments bring in their wake. The final piece, "Nostalgia," is beautifully interior, and special mention should go to violinist Mioi Takeda's superb eloquence and purity of tone, especially when her violin sings in its upper registers.

Catalysts seem to be important to the flow of Martin's creative juices. One thinks of the Fifth Wind Quintet's inspiration (the deserts of the American Southwest), and now the paintings of Gorky. Whatever the starting point, one hopes for much more.

Colin Clarke

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