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Review: The American Chamber Ensemble Plays Peter Schickele.

by Michèle Gingras
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The American Chamber Ensemble: Naomi Drucker, clarinet and co-director; Blanche Abram, piano and co-director; Marilyn Sherman Lehman, piano; Eriko Sato, violin; Deborah Wong, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Chris Finckel, cello; Kurt Muroki, bass; Braden Toan, bassoon; and Eva Conti, horn. Clarinet band: Stanley Drucker, Mindy Dragovich, Mitchell Estrin, Jess Gross, Amy Shapiro, Lawrence Sobol, Peter Weinberg, and Robert Yamis. Peter Schickele: Serenade for Three for clarinet, violin and piano; Quartet for clarinet, violin, cello and piano; Monochrome III for nine clarinets; Octet for clarinet, bassoon, horn, string quartet and bass. ELYSIUM RECORDINGS GRK 725. Total time 59:40. (available from Mid America Productions. Web site: www.midamerica-music.com, and from Qualiton Imports, Web site: www.qualiton.com)

To mark their 40th anniversary, The American Chamber Ensemble released a remarkable recording featuring clarinet chamber music composed by Peter Schickele. Better known as "P.D.Q. Bach," Schickele was born in 1935 in Ames, Iowa. He became a household name by using satire to make classical music more accessible to general audiences. He is recognized as a serious conductor and educator, and has his own syndicated Public Radio International music program called Schickele Mix, where his music is performed by leading symphony orchestras in the country.

Peter Schickele's list of achievements is enormous, including a handful of Grammy Awards, numerous commissions from organizations such as Walt Disney Pictures, the Verdehr Trio, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Boston Pops, and the Canadian Brass. Schickele's music is rich in sound, uncluttered in texture, gorgeous, graceful, fun, and tasteful.

The American Chamber Ensemble is a long established New York organization. Three of the compositions feature its clarinetist and co-director Naomi Drucker. Her playing is full of fire, and she is surrounded by an array of superb musicians. Naomi Drucker is a well-known clarinetist with a busy career as a soloist, chamber and orchestral musician, and educator. She performed for many I.C.A. conferences and as a member of the New York Philharmonic. She and her husband, Stanley Drucker have released three other recordings: New York Legends, Naomi Drucker and Stanley Drucker Play Meyer Kupferman and Music for Doubles.

Written in 1993, Serenade for Three is a relatively short piece for clarinet, violin, and piano, one of Schickele's favorite instrumental combinations. The work is perfect for the concert hall with exciting rhythms, whirling unisons, minimalist and mysterious interludes, folk flavors, and fantastic country fiddling fun.

Quartet for clarinet, violin, cello and piano (1982) is as masterful as a work can be. Naomi Drucker and her colleagues give a virtuoso rendition of this intricate and technically challenging four-movement piece.

Stanley Drucker leads a clarinet nonet ensemble in Monochrome III (1974), with his sparkling musicianship and trademark vibrato. The first part of the work contains a little bit of jazz influence, and the second part revolves around a simple waltz melody.

Schickele wrote a series of pieces for groups of a single instrument. Even though it is labeled third in the series, this is the first recording of any piece from the collection. While a few isolated parts are a little out of center tonally, the entire ensemble is extremely tight, precise, and electrifying.

The Octet for clarinet, bassoon, horn, and strings is yet another of Schickele's masterpieces. It is scored for the same eight instruments that Schubert used in his own famous Octet, and it has interesting birth story. Schickele wrote the 8tet in honor of his mother's birthday when she turned 80 on 8/8/88. The work contains elements reminiscent of all kinds of music ranging from Ravel's Bolero to a Mozart divertimento, to Dionysian dance music. Of particular note is Eva Conti's microscopic precision of staccato on the horn.

The composer was present during the recording sessions, although it is said that he had to drive through a huge snow storm to attend a rehearsal for the recording. The sound engineering is excellent, and the CD liner notes include interesting personal notes from the composer, as well as a wealth of information about the works and performers.

I wholeheartedly recommend the acquisition of this recording. It deserves multiple spins, so I give it my very top four-reed rating for amazing repertoire and virtuosity from Naomi Drucker and The American Chamber Ensemble, plus one horn mouthpiece for the whiz precision of hornist Eva Conti in the Octet.



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