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Classical KING FM

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Review: Three Northwest CDs

By Melinda Bargreen

One of the pleasures of being a reviewer is hearing creative new recordings by Northwest (and Northwest-trained) musicians – and realizing that their work can stand with some of the best on the national scene.

That is the case with three recent recordings, each completely different from the other. One represents experimentation with new soundscapes blending solo voice and electronically created textures; one is the premiere recording of new works for that most intimate of instruments, the solo guitar. And the third is a new take on holiday classics – many of them completely reinterpreted – by one of the region's highly regarded mixed choruses.

In classical music, there isn't really a "Northwest school," but if there is a defining characteristic of this region's music makers, it is a continued commitment to new work. Here are three new recordings that demonstrate that commitment, and a lot of finesse as well.

-- Aural Histories, Kristin Norderval (Deep Listening): Chosen by New Yorker critic Alex Ross as one his Ten Most Notable Discs of 2012, this new recording by singer/composer Kristin Norderval is all about the imaginative use of voice and electronics together. Norderval, who trained at the University of Washington (with Montserrat Alavedra, Diane Thome and William O. Smith), uses her voice as an instrument – both improvisatory and edited/manipulated – along with such additional sound sources as coffee machines and antique motors. The recording, which also made the top ten on Amazon's "Hot New Releases" in Modern Classical Music, has ten completely different tracks with no lyrics, just soundscapes. Try the skittery, adventurous "Gameplay" or the eerie "Glass and Mirrors" (in which the Norderval's voice seems to be reflected back on itself), the uneasy "Extreme Weather" and the evocative "Circadian Singing," to get an idea of Norderval's imaginative expressive range and near-infinite variety.

-- Michael Partington: 24 Preludes of Bryan Johanson (Rosewood Recordings): Guitarist Michael Partington, who teaches at the University of Washington and has long been one of the region's most respected players, performs the debut recording of 24 solo preludes by the Oregon composer Bryan Johanson, whose work was unknown to me before hearing this disc. These are sparkling, imaginative and challenging works, ranging in length from just under a minute to 4:28, and they challenge the guitarist in both technique and interpretation. The "24 preludes" title will recall keyboard preludes of Bach (the "Well-Tempered Clavier") and Chopin, as well as Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and Scriabin. Johanson's new set of preludes, however, sensibly does not attempt to copy Bach's traversal of all the major and minor keys (some of which don't come naturally to the guitar); instead, he gives each of the first 12 preludes a partner in the second group of 12 preludes. (It's not always easy to detect this partnership; you may need to listen closely, and more than once, to notice the links.) Several of the preludes have a quicksilver quality in which the strings of the guitar barely whisper; some are saucy and quirky, and others (like No. 7) sound like a private meditation. Partington's expressive virtuosity, his variety of timbre and accuracy of pitch, and his technical expertise make the best possible case for Johanson's work.

-- "Joys of Christmas," Seattle Choral Company

Now in its 31st season, Freddie Coleman's Seattle Choral Company has become a fixture on the Northwest scene, known for their commitment to new works as well as the classics of the choral repertoire. Their latest CD, "Joys of Christmas," is the group's first holiday disc, and well worth acquiring – showcasing new and unusual settings of familiar classics, with an international as well as local focus. Some of today's finest choral composers and arrangers are featured here, including Stephen Paulus, Dale Warland, Jackson Berkey, Kirke Mechem, Eric William Barnum, and Northwest composer Bern Herbolzheimer (whose opening "O Come, O Come Emanuel" with harp is a lovely start to the disc). Coleman gets a very nice sound out of his 47 singers: warm and full of life, well blended but still containing distinctive timbres in the various vocal categories. (The smaller chamber ensemble, Cappella, is both nimble and smoothly

accurate.) The repertoire is well chosen, representing several cultures, eras, languages, and styles. The final track, "Stilla Natt" (a setting of "Silent Night" in Swedish, by Anders Ohrwall), concludes the disc like a transcendently peaceful benediction.

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