

Recording Reviews

Jace Saplan, Editor

of radiance & refraction

Notus, featuring Zorá String Quartet

Dominick DiOrio, director

Innova Recordings

1-002 (2018; 73'19")

O*f radiance & refraction* is the first commercial release by the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music's contemporary vocal ensemble, Notus, under the direction of Dominick DiOrio. The album includes five world premiere recordings, as well as a stunning performance of Stravinsky's *Trois pièces pour quatuor à cordes* by the Zorá String Quartet. Unapologetically avant-garde, it is rich with dissonance and disorienting rhythms, yet there are moments of tenderness and humor that draw in the most tonal aestheticians among us.

The disc opens with Claude Baker's first major work for choir. "Hor che'l ciel e la terra" is a reimagining of the second work from Monteverdi's eight book of madrigals, set for a twenty-four-voice chorus and four percussionists. Baker adeptly conceptualizes the "wild beasts," "burn(ing) and weep(ing)," and "sweet and bitter" springs in the poem. Notus' performance is full-throated and startling, brilliantly capturing the allegory of war.

The second track, *The Giver of Stars* by Sven-David Sandström, is a genuine standout. Sandström expertly paints lines such as "let the quiet of your spirit bathe me" and "let the flickering flame of your soul play all about me." Notus employs an array of timbres ranging from aspirated and vulnerable to dark and robust.

The Giver of Stars is surprising and new while maintaining the qualities appreciated by many in Sandström's earlier music.

Virginia: The West by Aaron Travers is the most "hollow" track on the album. Travers employs octave planing above low pedal tones which draw out some intensely focused overtones. He chooses circling, disquieting themes that elicit images of chaos and war. Perhaps the most apparent element of this piece is its technical difficulty, which at times causes even the consummately skilled Notus to sing with ragged entrances. Still, *Virginia: The West* is a proficient setting of the Walt Whitman text.

John Gibson's five-movement *In Flight* is a refreshing soundscape of electro-acoustic clusters. Pairing five poems from various authors, each of which touches upon different types of flight, provides the framework for a cohesive aural journey. Every movement exploits a unique set of ethereal electronic sounds which are overlaid with translucent singing. Notus's choral tone, despite the intentional aspiration, is clean and crisp, and the scattered solo interjections are effective in their characterization of the varied aspects of flight.

The true highlight of this album is the pairing of Stravinsky's *Trois pièces pour quatuor à cordes* with Dominick DiOrio's *Stravinsky Refracted*, a

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setting of Amy Lowell's poem, *Stravinsky's Three Pieces "Grotesques", for String Quartet*. In DiOrio's composition, themes from *Trois pièces* are played while the choir portrays the inner monologue of the poet. The inclusion of organ and marimba provide a sense of whimsy highlighting the humorous nature of the text.

Of radiance and refraction, may not be the favorite recording of the casual audiophile, but it is a superlative collection of modern choral music. Neither too lofty nor too breezy, it is a satisfying example of engaging contemporary music. Notus and DiOrio have given us a masterclass on the future of Western choral music.

— Matthew Bumbach

Translations

Portland State University Chamber Choir
Ethan Sperry, conductor
Naxos
8574124 (2020; 59')

In *Translations*, Ethan Sperry has curated a sonic journey through the ineffable process of transformation; the compositional voice of Ēriks Ešenvalds could not be better suited to the craft. This album follows Portland State University Chamber Choir's 2014 album, *The Doors of Heaven*, the first American recording of works exclusively by the Latvian composer.

Ešenvalds' works have become staples in contemporary choral repertoire; the meditative *A Drop in the Ocean* (2006) and the nostalgically bittersweet *Only in Sleep* (2010) are familiar introductions to his sound. The tonal center is rarely completely obscured, and yet the depth of harmony and sophisticated use of dissonance is invigorating, evocative, and occasionally

disturbing. Extensive divisi, ostinato-like passages, and wide ranges create dense sonorities, contrasted with highlighted solos and open intervals.

Sperry's vision for *Translations* is centered around "the idea of 'translation' or the transformations that occur within us when we encounter the power of nature...legends...or the divine." He specifically cites Oregon Poet Laureate Paulann Petersen, author of two tracks on this album, on the topic of translation:

"Art is translation. Art translates the ineffable into what we can see and hear, what we can experience, what touches us. Art translates mystery for us without destroying that mystery. As translation, art truly is a vehicle for transformation. Art enters and transforms us: lucky, lucky us."

The listener will encounter this translation-transformation first in *O Salutaris Hostia* (2009), which opens with a gentle burst of sonic light. It is as though the first crack in the heavens has opened, and soloists Ledington and Stier float down on a river of sustained chords. The richness of the ensemble is complimented by the purity of the soloists. *The Heavens' Flock* (2014) seems to be earth's response to this invitation from heaven. The exquisite execution of the other tracks on this recording outshine this one, but only just. The diction is quite good, and is only weakened by the relentless legato line.

The first real standout is the title track, *Translation* (2016). The sensation of entering into mystery increases from here through the rest of the album. The soloists' voices are well-balanced, with each other and against the warmth of the ensemble. Ešenvalds' sudden pauses are breathless, complemented by dynamic shifts in the large ensemble. Truly Ešenvaldian is the repetition of "found their tongue," as the handbells are played.

The mystery of nature gives way to the divine in *My Thoughts*, opening with low and static motion. Occasional bites of dissonance enhance a long, glorious crescendo. The soprano section begins the crescendo in earnest, joined by the choir's lower voices. The warm breadth of range continues to expand outward, reaching a climax on a minor chord. A cooler resolution follows, maintaining the wide space with the majority of the ensemble cradled in the foundation of the basses, with a soprano descant glistening four octaves above.

Vineta (2009) returns our gaze to earth, in a legend of a city swept away by the Baltic Sea. The submerged city calls sailors to their deaths through the church bells. The prayerful voices frequently sound as bells, enhanced by the ringing percussion. The unearthly breaks between stanzas are enriched by the subtle overtones in the choir, creating a watery sustain while chimes in the foreground shine out. The insistent bass drum builds as the bells of the choir ring out in sequence. The effect is evocative and, in Sperry's words, finds "the spaces beneath the surface of the water or perhaps the surface of consciousness."

From this watery story, we are taken to the *Legend of the Walled-In Woman* (2005). Lamenting at the bridge over the river, a mother speaks to her sons' wives. The sons have agreed to sacrifice one of their wives, in a story similar to Jephthah. The youngest son's wife brings them food, and she is consigned

to be built into the foundations of the wall they are constructing in order to prevent it falling again. The keening portamentos give way to the sustained choir. Sustained dissonances melt into primal sonorities, and timbral color shifts create a frame for the story. The soprano solos, evocative of the courageous prayer of the youngest wife, sing the text from poet Martin Camaj's *My Land* over organ-like chords in the ensemble. Her prayer evaporates into the return of the keening and final open octave.

The recording culminates with *In Paradisum* (2012), a fitting text to complete this journey. Marilyn de Oliveira, cello, and Charles Noble, violist, exemplify the soul's ascension. The moment of translation happens with string melodies over the well-balanced choral ocean. Extended string techniques bring us in and out of consciousness, as if in a farewell to prior life. Each repetition of the text is newly-treated; we are being encouraged to go further up, further in. The final rocking "requiem" translates to ethereal harmonics.

Portland State University Chamber Choir's sensitivity to Ethan Sperry's vision of translation and mystery is exquisite. Ešenvalds' compositional language is stewarded well by their thoughtful phrasing, balance, and passion. It is a joy to experience.

— *Bethany Lynn Alvey*