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CD REVIEW: ROBERT SIROTA'S "CELESTIAL WIND"

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Robert Sirota's music seems ultimately conscious. The variety of sounds he manages to draw from the organ is staggering. On *Celestial Wind*, a new album from Albany Records, this crazily expansive palette is combined with clear musical polyglottism; the overall effect leaves the listener with a sense of limitless possibility. The music on this release stretches from the playful, mischievous, and profane to the somber, introspective, and sacred.

One instance of the composer's understanding of the organ is his clear awareness of the qualities of traditional organ music. He resurrects and references harmonies of the past at several points on this disc. However, these moments of time travel occur without any derision toward their traditional sounds in the service of a rigid modernism. On the contrary, these moments are deftly woven into the arcs of their pieces, stitched together with the rest of Sirota's omniscient musical lexicon. A standout example of this is the final two movements of *Letters Abroad*, which begins with a glorious homage to Fanny Mendelssohn. This track alone includes a satisfyingly multifaceted set of sounds that wryly flows from the congenial, charming, and victorious to the anxious and haunting before finally moving to a delicate, peaceful intimacy.

Robert Sirota's mastery of the possibilities allowed by the organ would not be possible without his 45-year "collaboration" with his wife, who is the performer on this release. Organist Victoria Sirota, who is also an author and an Episcopal priest, among other things, deftly executes Robert's music. She plays with an evident mastery and flexibility that obviously both inspired this music's composition and made its realization possible. This is especially evident in the opening piece, *Toccata*, which Robert Sirota himself notes is his "most difficult organ piece."

Easter Canticles, *Two Lenten Chorale Preludes*, and *Celestial Wind* are the three sacred pieces on this release. Musically, however, these three pieces differ dramatically. Two of the pieces have concrete sacred sources; the chorale preludes are based on pre-1800 sacred music, and *Celestial Wind* is inspired by a passage from the Book of Acts. Despite this similarity in source material, these two pieces differ dramatically; *Celestial Wind* is the more progressive of the two. The other sacred piece, *Easter Canticles*, which also includes a solo cello part (touchingly performed by Norman Fischer), is not based on a specific musical or textual source, but rather, inspired by the story of the Passion of Christ. Interestingly, Victoria Sirota cites this as "the most religious piece" on the album.

Lest this release seem to be all gravity and reverence, do not overlook the *Four Pieces for Organ*. They are just plain fun! Written as a show piece, these short romps explore Klangfarbenmelodie in the tradition of Schoenberg and Webern, splitting lines across the vast array of voices available on the organ. Although that idea may seem esoteric, any concerns will quickly dissipate in the face of the Sirotas' playfulness. These pieces show that Robert Sirota's global understanding of the organ is certainly not limited to the serious.

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