



AUDIO NOTES

by Christopher Nichols

It was a pleasure to meet many recording artists and reviewers at ClarinetFest® 2016 in Lawrence, Kansas, this summer. I enjoyed finally associating the many faces and live performances with emails and recordings! After a review of this year's festival program, I noticed that certain ensemble combinations have become increasingly popular, such as the combination of flute and clarinet with or without piano. The predominance of this particular medium is in no small part the result of recording, commissioning and arranging projects by the Webster Trio and Buyse-Webster Duo.

Formed in 1988, the trio has always included flutist Leone Buyse and clarinetist Michael Webster. Over the years, Beveridge Webster (Michael's father), Martin Amlin, Katherine Collier and Robert Moeling (current) have served as pianist.

The trio's five recordings have garnered critical acclaim in these pages and from publications such as *The Instrumentalist*, *Fanfare*, *Flute Talk*, *American Record Guide* and *Gramophone*. As a duo, Buyse and Webster have appeared on four other recordings. Webster Trio Japan, with pianist Chizuko Sawa, toured Japan numerous times between 1990 and 2009 with occasional appearances in the United States, most recently at ClarinetFest® 2010 in Austin, Texas.

A significant aspect of the trio's mission is to expand and promote the repertoire for flute, clarinet and piano through commissions and transcriptions. Commissions and dedications include trios by Brett Abigayña, Martin Amlin, Anthony Brandt, Toshi Ichiyangi, Robert Sirota, Kurt Stallmann and Richard Toensing, as well as duos by Arthur Gottschalk and Dan Welcher. In 2000 Buyse and Webster helped to found the

Flute/Clarinet Duos Consortium, which has commissioned compositions by Libby Larsen, Derek Bermel, Valerie Coleman and, most recently, Pierre Jalbert. Twelve of Webster's trio arrangements (music by Bizet, Brahms, Debussy, Dvořák, Fauré, L.M. Gottschalk, Husa and Mozart) have been published by International Music Company, Theodore Presser Company and Schott International. Additional arrangements (Brahms, Grieg, Puccini and Schubert) are slated for release by Presser. Further information is available at the trio's website: www.webstertrio.com.

The Webster Trio's most recent disc for the Crystal Records label, *American Webster*, is almost entirely the result of the aforementioned commissioning activities. Libby Larsen's *Barn Dances*, the first work commissioned by the Flute/Clarinet Duos Consortium for premiere in 2001, opens this disc. As implied by its title, each movement references



a particular dance step used in cowboy dances. Buyse, Webster and Moeling provide the requisite rhythmic energy demanded by Larsen's compositional style in this convincing performance.

Sirota's *Birds of Paradise* dates from 2008 and is a tribute to 20 years of marriage and music-making by Leone Buyse and Michael Webster. As the title implies, the flute and clarinet imitate the sounds of

birdsong found in paradise with ample grace notes, athletic wide leaps and flutter tonguing. In the liner notes, Sirota specifically mentions two locations of inspiration: a bird sanctuary in Singapore and the woods surrounding his home in coastal Maine. Each evokes for him a sense of wonder, peace and communion with God. The subject matter, paired with Sirota's occasional choice of unison scoring, is at times reminiscent of Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

Brandt structures his *Round Top Trio* in three sections. It opens in a brash and tense manner, with a musical argument between the flute and clarinet. This settles into the middle section, which contrasts the opening with a tranquil atmosphere. Gradually, fragments of the opening material transition the piece back to its initial character. The work concludes with a terse, forceful statement of the main theme.

Richard Toensing's *Children of Light* draws heavily from the theology, language and music of the Orthodox Christian

Church. Four of the five movements refer to specific aspects of liturgical life. Toensing alternates instrumentation throughout the composition; the outer movements are for the full trio, framing solo and duo inner movements.

In "Dawn Processional," Webster's *sotto voce* control is exceptional in chant-like phrases with the utmost intent. This is juxtaposed with contrasting birdsong in the flute and piano, ultimately joined by the clarinet. "Song of the Morning Stars," a duet for clarinet and piano, treats the instruments as contrasting emotional states: joy in the clarinet and serenity in the piano. "The Robe of Light," for flute and clarinet, draws its title from the liturgy of Baptism. Toensing symbolizes the descent of the Holy Spirit with tremolos and fluttering passages, which ultimately settles into a final unison. Buyse and Webster display exceptional intonation, blend and ensemble.

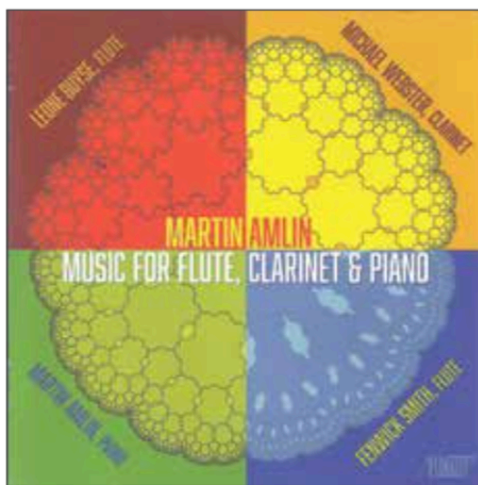
"Golden Rain" is set for flute alone and is the sole movement without an Orthodox reference. According to the liner notes, this movement "is the fulfillment of the composer's long desire to write a short virtuoso work for solo flute." Buyse meets Toensing's roulades with polished, technical facility and clear, sparkling articulation. The final movement, "Phos Hilarion" or "O Gladsome Light," quotes an ancient Kievan chant used for vespers and creates a serene atmosphere. The chant tune is heard in the flute and the clarinet. The piano accompanies with bell-like passages, which gradually diminish into silence to conclude this work in a reflective manner.

Paul Schoenfeld's *Sonatina* is the sole work on this disc not commissioned or dedicated to the Webster Trio, but rather by the Minnesota Commissioning Club for the 50th anniversary of Sam and Thelma Hunter. The composer was close with the Hunter family and stated that "almost every aspect of the *Sonatina* was conceived with the Hunter family in mind." Schoenfeld chose a different genre for each of the three movements: "Charleston," "Rag" and "Jig." Thelma was born in 1924, the year that the Charleston originated. Sam's Irish origin inspired the choice of a jig for the last movement. The selection of a rag for the second

movement was in honor of a request by Thelma, which the composer suspects was motivated by his ragtime performance activities while residing in Minnesota.

Buyse and Webster are also featured on another recently released disc, **Martin Amlin: Music for Flute, Clarinet and Piano**. An accomplished composer and pianist, Amlin currently serves on the faculty of Boston University's College of Fine Arts. This disc offers a sampling of his chamber works. These provide a snapshot of Amlin's compositional style, which pairs traditional forms with contemporary harmonic elements. See September 2016's *Recent Arrivals* for the complete contents.

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, commissioned by Michael Webster in 2001, is set in four movements. Amlin chooses a sonata-allegro form for the first movement, "Dialogue," which opens with a "motto theme" found throughout the piece. The second movement, "Homage," uses a rondo structure. The third, titled "Solfeggietto," acknowledges C.P.E. Bach



with virtuosic streams of 16th notes. The fourth movement returns to the material found in the first, develops it and concludes majestically with a final statement of the motto theme. Webster and Amlin create a formidable duo as they execute this work's technical complexities with apparent ease.

Trio Sonatina for flute, clarinet and piano was written for the Webster Trio in

1991 when Amlin served as the pianist. In this work, Amlin chooses harmonic elements from both the distant past and the more contemporary. "Rhapsody" and "Interlude," the first and third movements, create medievalist sonorities with copious parallel fourths and fifths. The second movement, a lively "Scherzo," creates humor through the combination of a twelve-tone row and major seventh sonorities. Amlin closes his work with a lyrical movement titled "Aria."

I strongly recommend **American Webster** and **Martin Amlin: Music for Flute, Clarinet and Piano**. These discs should be of particular interest to flute, clarinet and piano trios looking for new repertoire possibilities. Both discs are well engineered, with excellent balance of the characteristic sonorities of each musician. The performances are artistically masterful. Every phrase is rendered with commitment accompanied by impressive ensemble, blend and intonation. I look forward to future contributions to the discography from the Webster Trio. ♦