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TWO • Elisabeth Kufferath (vn, va) • AVI 8553109 (60:21)

ZIMMERMANN Violin Sonata. Viola Sonata. ENCKE Outline for Violin Solo. Inner Voice for Voice and Viola Solo. SCHACHTNER Epitaph for Violin Solo. Patheia: Epilogue for Viola Solo. EÖTVÖS Para Paloma for Violin Solo. Désaccord 2 for 2 Violas

Elisabeth Kufferath is second violinist in the Tetzlaff String Quartet, and professor of violin at Hannover's Hochschule for Music. The quality of her playing and her repertoire suggest that not being an international star playing audience favorites is a personal career choice.

I first heard Bernd Alois Zimmermann's music in 1990, writing a review for Fanfare 13:6. It was his Requiem for a Young Poet, an immense, confusing montage of music, politics, and the kitchen sink. That and his opera Die Soldaten gained him a reputation as a difficult, avant-garde composer, which is a shame, for it has scared us off his music, much of which is rich, solid, and satisfying—his Violin Concerto made my 2019 Want List. His 1951 Violin Sonata is loosely based upon 12-tone rows; it encompasses an extraordinary range of pitch and dynamics, but not much of tempo; there are no presto episodes in the Italianate manner. Elisabeth Kufferath says in the notes "The Violin Sonata is an incredibly expressive, multifaceted work ... it contains everything." The finale, Toccata, includes multiple-stops having a wide pitch range. What could be called the sonata's anti-Paganini stance serves to emphasize its traditional Germanic character, perceivable through its imaginative harmonies. What Kufferath does with it all is breathtaking; from sleek, silvery highs to rich, woody lows, her playing is perfectly clean, with never a squeak nor an awkward moment. No sign of "technique" is apparent, just thoroughly musical expression.

The 1955 Viola Sonata's subtitle, "In Memory of an Angel," refers both to Alban Berg's Violin Concerto and to Zimmermann's daughter, who died shortly after her birth. It is a lengthy (11:32) single movement in which stop-and-start fragments finally coalesce into a Bach chorale, Gelobt seist Du, Jesu Christ. The composer stated that the sonata "expresses musical ideas which contemplate the foundations of human existence, of birth and death, of becoming and expiring, and of love, and of everything that moves the human heart." That's a heavy burden to lay on a solo viola sonata, and I hear none of it. It's hard to believe that both sonatas were written by one composer, in spite of their 12-tone origins.

Thorston Encke (b. 1966) is a German cellist, conductor, and composer. Although his Inner Voices is a thoroughly modern piece that "employs experimental instrumental techniques" and has "improvisatory features," it often breaks into lyrical flights depicting "innermost sentiment." Outline was written, at Kufferath's request, as a companion piece that "illustrates the silhouette" (all quotations are from Kufferath's program notes). Inner Voices runs smoothly, whereas Outline is a series of outbursts linked by silences.



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Johannes X. Schachtner (b. 1985) is another German conductor/composer. His Epitaph for violin solo is also an homage to Bach. It opens with exciting double-stops “well into the upper violinistic stratosphere,” but loses interest as it proceeds (Schachtner was only 21 when he wrote it). His Patheia for viola, also composed for Kufferath, is filled with currently fashionable long silences but does reach an exciting climax. Kufferath says it “plums the instrument’s rich depths”; even her pizzicatos are lovely.

Peter Eötvös’s music is always winning; his Para Paloma is a celebratory piece for solo violin that contains more music in its 2:38 than the four previously played works. Désaccord 2 is a three-movement work for two violas. Kufferath recorded the second viola part and submitted it to the composer, who offered “extremely helpful” comments, before adding the first viola part. The work is “in memoriam B. A. Zimmermann,” with whom Eötvös had studied. It is “jammed full of quotes and references to Zimmermann’s Antiphonen, as well as to various works of Frescobaldi,” a favorite of both composers. More conventional than other works here—in harmony, rhythms, and lyricism—it is also a more consistently satisfying work.

Such suave tones are due to the instruments as well as the performer; Kufferath plays a violin and a viola made by contemporary luthier Stefan-Peter Greiner (as does her string quartet partner Christian Tetzlaff, who gave up his Stradivarius for a Greiner). Warm, intimate recorded sound adds to Kufferath and Greiner’s achievements.

I’ve long had a vague sense that I preferred the Tetzlaff Quartet to Christian Tetzlaff’s playing; now I know why. Although the total timing of 33 (Anm: ???) minutes is extremely short for a classical CD, we cannot complain about such a fine recital, only wish to hear more. New music is so often performed by second-rate musicians; that’s part of what gives it a bad name. It’s a delight to have these four contemporary composers (Zimmermann died 50 years ago, but his music remains contemporary) represented by such a fine artist as Elisabeth Kufferath. James H. North