

Fanfare Magazine

Curtis-Smith: Second Piano Trio, Fantasy Pieces, Sweetest Trio

September/October 2005

By Robert Carl

Curtis O.B. Curtis-Smith (b.1941) attained a measure of recognition in the 1970's as the inventor of a technique by which the strings of the piano are bowed with finishing wire, producing an ethereal sustained sound. The technique has been since taken up by other composers (mostly notably Stephen Scott), while Curtis-Smith has gone on to other things (a wise decision aesthetically, though inevitably it has plunged him back into a certain degree of anonymity). This album, including works from the last dozen years, shows Curtis-Smith to be a composer of fresh, inventive, and eclectic music. If I am reminded of any composer, I would have to cite Curtis-Smith's current Michigan neighbor William Bolcom. There is the same fundamental musicality, the fascination with American popular sources, the willingness to mix "high and low."

The star of the collection is the Second Piano Trio (1992), subtitled "The Secret Heart of Sound" (the second movement is based on a song by the composer, a setting of a Roethke poem by that title). Curtis-Smith states in the program notes that the first movement uses a repeating seventy-five-note melody in a manner analogous to techniques of sub-Saharan music. It is true that one hears in the piece a certain diatonic openness and rhythmic freedom similar to African music, but the music remains very much in the composer's own voice, not an academic imitation of its non-Western source. What is perhaps most striking is Curtis-Smith's use of heterophony. The essence of this technique is to take a single melody and have other lines play it simultaneously, with slight variations of rhythm, ornamentation, etc. out of the differences counterpoint begins to emerge. I noticed this in all the movements of the trio, not just the first, and indeed also in the sextet, which dates from the previous year. While this description may suggest a schematic approach, the technique is used subtly, always in the service of a larger, nondogmatic musical purpose. The remainder of the trio is at the same or even higher level of inspiration. The second movement is heartbreakingly lyrical in its song form, and the third creates a constantly shifting play of harmonies and fragmentary gestures over a steady pulse in the piano.

Curtis-Smith tends to work best with materials that allow one element to repeat while others are varied around it. Two examples are the aforementioned heterophony and the reiterated pulse (or harmonic ostinato) that appear in every piece on this collection. If I have any criticism, it is that at times the lyricism becomes a bit abstract. Like atonal music that relies solely on gesture without an underlying motivic structure, this basically tonal music runs the risk at times of becoming faceless, in the absence of a really memorable tune (as a positive counterexample, Bolcom in his *Graceful Ghost* was able to revivify the rag by writing a piece whose melody is easily the equal of any great past rag). But at his best, Curtis-Smith's openness and imagination win the listener over. All the performances are excellent. The Merling Trio (Renata Knific, violin; Bruce Uchimura, cello; Susan Wiersma, piano) is an ensemble that deserves much more exposure; they seem thoroughly committed to Curtis-Smith's work, and the composer could not ask for better interpreters. Dennis Russell Davies, of course known primarily as

a conductor, acquits himself admirably as a pianist in the sextet, as does Curtis-Smith in the Fantasy Pieces. The album is beautifully recorded, though the sextet's sound seems a tiny bit fuzzier than the other works. This is a composer who has been toiling in relative isolation (Kalamazoo!), developing music that is much more substantial than that of many composers currently more popular and recognized, yet which is in no way hermetic. It is expressively rich and very accessible. At its best it attains a state of rapturous joy. I would love to hear what he does with an orchestra.