

STEMPER Global Warning. 4 Piano Pieces. Sonata. Klavierstück I. 6 Short Piano Pieces. Sonata No. 2. Blue 13 • Junghwa Lee (pn) • ALBANY 1555 (73:49)

It would seem to me that a large part of the value of *Fanfare* is its status as a platform to bring to the attention of collectors and music lovers the innumerable new composers and performers who are coming on to the musical scene each year. The number of human beings born each year means that a considerable number also reach an age where they begin to make their mark in their chosen fields. Now, mind you, Frank Stemper has been making his mark as a composer in many places for a good number of years, judging from his biography and his middle-age appearance in the photo in the booklet, but as far as I can determine, neither he nor the (apparently younger) pianist Junghwa Lee have previously appeared in these pages. Given the quality of music and performances as evidenced by the present disc, I feel rather keenly my responsibility to make use of *Fanfare* as a means of introducing musicians such as Stemper and Lee to a wider audience. Regardless of the fact that I have not encountered his music previously, the fact that it has been heard in 22 countries and half the states in the U.S. demonstrates the lacuna in my knowledge. So *Fanfare* is a boon for its reviewers as well as for its readers.

Stemper has been the recipient of awards from the George Ladd Prix de Paris, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, ASCAP, and other organizations. He counts Andrew Imbrie, David Lewin, and Robert Silverman as mentors in composition, theory, and piano respectively. The notes for this CD state that his music “is an eclectic blending of the serial composers and jazz performers from the middle 50 years of the 20th Century.”

The first thing that jumped out at me as I put this CD into my player was the “in your face” virtuosity required of the performer, and in equal measure the performer Junghwa Lee’s ability to handle it with seeming ease. The opening work, *Global Warning*, matches (I would guess as a non-pianist) the legendary difficulty level of Ives’s “Concord” Sonata or Richard Meale’s *Corruscations*. There are simply notes all over the keyboard. The substance of the piece is there nonetheless: It is anything but an assemblage of random notes, but displays forward momentum, discernible structure, and a quality that I term “flow,” or compelling continuity in the music. The rationale of the piece is the composer’s conviction that humankind is hell-bent on self-destruction. He wisely questions whether a musical work can cause us to reverse course (as a Christian, I would aver that such things as our self-destruction are not in our hands, but in God’s), but his convictions and concerns drive him to compose, as they do me, and I would guess virtually every other composer out there. I cannot imagine there are too many of our species that are simply satisfied to write a piece of music as music per se, without some extra-musical considerations in mind. In any case, Stemper sees at least the possibility that music can be a palliative for the human race, and in that, I would agree with him. *Global Warning* will sound angry to some, but I hear it more in the terms that I believe its composer meant—as a heartfelt plea for self-preservation.

Quite the antipodes is the opening of *Four Piano Pieces*. The mood of first piece is far removed from that of *Global Warning*, and opens so quietly, one wonders if the composer’s aim was to effect a trance-like state in the auditor. However, the second movement begins to introduce some flights of virtuosity into the flow of subdued notes, eventually reaching a fortissimo zenith in the powerful chords present in the third movement. The arch, if indeed the composer considers it as such, is completed in the subtly evocative and gentle concluding movement. Written in 1976, this work is the earliest in Stemper’s official catalog, and was written under the guidance of David Lewin, mentioned above.

Stemper’s mathematical bent is on display in his almost 10-minute *First Piano Sonata*. His desire in the work was to push the boundaries of musical discourse, and he sought to do that through a sort of deconstruction of the Fibonacci series by building to a climax towards the beginning of this one-movement work rather than the usual positioning at the end. As it turned out, though, his “anti-climax” at the end stole the thunder from the more vigorous early climax. In a case like this, descriptive words by a reviewer can only go so far. This piece—and all of Stemper’s music—must simply be heard. The opening of the piece lies mostly in the piano’s lower register, and the initial slow pitches pick up considerably in the first couple minutes to extremely fast washes of notes. Heard herein are a number of contrasting ideas, one of the most ear-catching of which were the playful, almost jazzy gestures that appeared at about the four-minute mark

that serve to give this section a rather puckish quality. Another device effectively used by the composer in this work is Pointillism, where a series of isolated notes or chords interrupts the general note-rich atmosphere, allowing the ear of the listener to cleanse itself, as it were.

Klavierstück I (more properly, Klavierstück) was written in 1992 during the time Stemper was in residency at the Viktorsberg International Composers Institute in the Austrian Alps. His composing studio, situated above a monastery, gave the composer a feeling of isolation, which he has carried forward to this day given that he considers his music as strictly his own, and not part of any other group or trend. This two-minute work makes its case succinctly, evidencing the stylistic features found throughout Stemper's oeuvre. I'm thankful that Albany put in a good amount of space between this work and the following stylistically similar Six Short Piano Pieces, lest I confuse them in my mind. The latter are Stemper's homage to the Six Short Piano Pieces that comprise Schoenberg's opus 19. Now, if you've read this issue of Fanfare in order, you're thinking, wasn't there another review of a work written in homage to that same piece? Yes, you're correct: My earlier review of a disc by Laurie Altman contained just such a tribute in the form of his Fantasy. So, what are the odds of that happening! In Stemper's case, this tribute was written both because of the influence that the Schoenberg miniatures had upon his own musical development, and also his desire to mark a 30-year celebration of his own first official work, the Four Piano Pieces, reviewed above. Stemper is not seeking to imitate Schoenberg's dodecaphonic style, but the influence of the seminal Austrian composer is not hard to detect in these brief pieces. As in most of the previous pieces, sudden virtuosic figures appear out of nowhere, almost like lightning bolts in a black sky.

The major work contained on this generously filled disc is Stemper's Piano Sonata No. 2, a four-movement work of more than a half-hour's duration. It was written especially for Junghwa Lee, and is replete with precise directions in regards pedaling, phrasing, articulation, and other parameters that Lee follows meticulously. The composer states that his theme in this work is death, but quickly qualifies that instead as "perhaps life," given his optimism. The disintegration of a life is depicted in the first movement, and the three following serve then as flashbacks, in which Stemper attempts to depict "raw energy, fun, romance, euphoria and pathos, success and failure, pinnacle, and finally — Alarm: signaling the end (Movement IV)." The composer admits reticence in his attempt to express what he terms "life's greatest mystery," but it's as good a motivation for a piece of music as I can think of. Innumerable composers have been similarly inspired by the subject, and have thereby produced some of the greatest masterpieces in music history. Death is, I am convinced, a subject that it is wise for every human being to contemplate, as he considers the meaning and purpose of life, and its inevitable conclusion on this earth.

The opening of the Sonata is subdued, and considerably more tonal sounding through Stemper's use of a recurring pitch set of four notes that suggest D Minor. The quiet opening yields to a rather fast motoristic section that almost reminds me of drops of water falling into a bucket, the main difference being that these "drops" occur over the entire range of the piano keyboard. Although the D Minor in the section gets quite lost in the shuffle, a low D remains an arrival point throughout it. Does the note D stand for Death? Perhaps some questions are not meant for a lowly reviewer to fathom. The vigor of the second section of the first movement continues into the second, but it is far less regular—less motoristic—than it is in the earlier movement. In addition, devices such as fluttering trills and effects in the upper register of the instrument are encountered here for the first time. I hear a bit of humor in this movement, too: It's definitely the most jovial music heard on this CD. In the third movement, Stemper introduces a few jazz sonorities into the texture. If the previous movement was the humorous one on the CD, this one is the most relaxed and laid back. Its harmonies are truly gorgeous, and through the skillful pedaling of the pianist, ghostly echoes of those sonorities are occasionally heard. The movement isn't exact tonal, but neither is it atonal, and its improvisatory character almost makes one imagine that the pianist is extemporizing on the spot. I'm sure that was exactly the composer's intention, and the effect is really lovely. The final movement opens with an incessantly repeated minor third in the middle register, over (or under) which staccato chords or quick figuration is added by the other hand. It would sound as though much crossing of hands is required in this movement. This movement, more than the others, also sounds as though the composer is telling a story, but if so, he doesn't specify what it might be. As in the third movement, there are some (not a majority by any means) jazz chords employed. The Sonata ends as it opened, with the "Death" motive (if my assumption about the ascending D-A-B^b-F sequence is correct), and then several runs in octaves to produce an exciting

close. I greatly admire all of the music on this CD, but this Sonata truly achieves masterwork status, and if it doesn't begin appearing on the recitals of pianists around the world, it will only be because of its daunting technical and musical challenges.

The CD concludes with Blue 13, Stemper's most recent piano work (all of the pieces save the first are presented in chronological order), and in it he hearkens back to his jazz roots, hinted at in the Second Sonata, but overt here. This, I should emphasize, is not a jazz piece, but it is the next thing to it. The stylistic hallmarks of the other works on this disc are heard in this work as well, but they are unquestionably filtered through the sieve of jazz.

I've already praised the playing of Junghwa Lee in my comments above, but must reiterate that it is a wondrous thing to hear. Seldom have I heard such cleanly executed runs and articulation in such impossibly difficult music. She surely must be one of the great technicians of our time, but it's not just on the technical front that she shines, for she excels in the musical one as well. Stemper's demands on his performer mean that these pieces would fail in their impact unless they were shaped into logical musical entities, and Lee provides the flow and forward movement that this music requires. This is the sort of CD that should get a Grammy. It's that good, and will be a strong contender for my next Want List. Urgently recommended for those who aren't afraid of pronounced, if very listenable, dissonance. David DeBoor Canfield

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