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How She Danced - String Quartets of ELENA RUEHR - Cypress String Quartet - Cypress String Quartet Performing Arts Association

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American composer Elena Ruehr has the rare gift of writing music that is immediately likable (fragmented melodies that stick in the mind), but clothed in rhythmic and harmonic complexity that engages the emotions and stimulates the musical mind. Then there is a third level of engagement – she attaches a story or an inspiration to many of the movements of these three string quartets. In the third movement of her First String Quartet – titled “Let’s Sit Beneath the Stars,”

Ms. Ruehr uses a melody that was passed down from her relatives that came from a refugee slave that was staying at a family house that was part of the underground railway. It’s a beautiful slow movement that is contrasted by the finale – a rhythmically wild “Estampe.”

Elena Ruehr’s musical interests were formed in her youth from the recordings of Morton Subotnick, Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin and Paul Simon. She studied ballet and modern dance for nine years and played in a rock band. In academia, she studied with William Balcom and Vincent Persichetti. In her Third Quartet, Ruehr integrates interests in African drumming and South American pan flutes. Most memorable is the nostalgically gorgeous “The Abbey,” imbued by Hildegard von Bingen’s music and the third movement, “How She Danced,” inspired by Ruehr’s daughter dancing after dinner.

The Cypress String Quartet commissioned Ruehr’s *Fourth Quartet* as part of their Call and Response project in 2005. They asked the composer to write a quartet that responded to Beethoven’s Op. 59, No. 3 and Mozart’s ‘Dissonant’ Quartet that would be part of that program. Ruehr used the same tempo markings for her *Fourth Quartet* as Beethoven did. It’s the least programmatic and the longest of the three quartets on this disc. The first movement is somber and questioning, a profound emotional statement. The sadly ruminative Aria has a Middle Eastern sound and the *Minuet* is an ‘off kilter’ waltz, almost as if the dancers get progressively drunk and then sober up. The finale is more aggressive, with a “very insistent ‘motoric’ rhythm.”

Part of the Cypress String Quartet’s commissioning philosophy is to “champion the music we like – by playing their music a lot and playing a lot of their music,” noted cellist Jennifer Kloetzel in the program notes. “Elena’s become a real part of our musical lives, she added.” They have her music under their skin and perform it magnificently. The recording is close with enough room to let the music breathe. These are very impressive contemporary quartets and I look forward to hearing more music from Elena Ruehr.

-- Robert Moon

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