

QUATERNITY • Thomas G. Leslie, cond; University of Nevada Las Vegas Wind O • KLAVIER 11223 (65:25)

MACHAIN *Bite the Bullet*. **BROUGHTON** *Quaternity*. **YUPONCE** *Letters from the Heartland*. **LABOUNTY** *Prophecy*. **HERRMANN** (transcr. Lavender) *On Dangerous Ground: The Death Hunt*

Except for the closing number, all of the selections on this disc are newly commissioned works for the University of Nevada Las Vegas Wind Orchestra, an ensemble which under its longtime conductor, Thomas G. Leslie, has been at the forefront of commissioning and premiering new repertoire. As I mention in my accompanying interview, three things immediately stand out in this varied and engaging program: the extraordinary virtuosity of the players, the deep emotional and interpretive expressivity of their playing, and the stellar recorded sound. In addition, all of the works here, while drawing upon a full panoply of modern compositional resources, are unapologetically tonal, readily assimilated on an initial hearing without being the slightest bit condescending in quality. This is a demonstration disc for why concert bands rather than orchestras are in the forefront of promoting worthwhile new repertoire in the classical music world.

Jorge Machain's *Bite the Bullet* was inspired by the colorful painting of the same name by the Italian-born (but longtime Californian) artist Carlo Marchiori of two scarecrow-like harlequins shooting pistols at each other, with a colorful exploding cloud billowing between them as their bullets collide. It opens with energetic, exciting flourishes, and then unexpectedly subsides to more quiet material—albeit with an eerie, disquieting, mysteriously ominous quality that at one point brought to my mind passages from the “Saturn” and “Neptune” movements of Holst's *The Planets*—before segueing to themes with a Spanish-sounding twist that lead to a rapid-fire close.

The disc's title selection, *Quaternity*, is a four-movement concerto for solo trombone and wind orchestra, based on the ancient Aristotelian primary elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The punchy opening movement presents a motif that recurs throughout all four movements, signifying earth as the basis on which all things rest. I admit that I found the motivic repetition here (from about 1:30 to 3:20) somewhat overdone and uninteresting, though more engaging material is then brought in. The aery second movement is mostly quiet, lyrical, and floating, but with a single fortissimo climax introduced near the close before returning to repose. A succeeding fiery scherzo uses a muted trombone to convey a sense of “anxiety and distraction,” in the composer's words. This is a particularly virtuosic section, requiring much from the soloist in the way of precisely executed glissandos and repeated rapid tonguing. The finale begins quietly at a slow tempo and gradually accelerates in speed and force, signifying the slowly accruing but unstoppable momentum of a flowing body of water, and brings the entire piece to a dramatic, forceful close. Throughout, justly celebrated virtuoso trombonist Joseph Alessi demonstrates why he is at the pinnacle of his particular instrumental art, playing with ravishing tonal splendor, brilliant technique, and keen expressiveness. My minor reservations about the opening movement aside, this is a most worthy addition to the trombone repertoire that other soloists are sure to take up eagerly.

Letters from the Heartland is described by the composer as being “a pastoral of mid-20th-century life on a farm as metaphor for our lives and relationships.” This is indeed peaceful, bucolic music of great beauty, mostly quiet but occasionally rising to solemn climaxes, which

remarkably avoids any hint of the Coplandesque; instead, there is perhaps a distant echo (not more) of Sibelius to be heard at a few points. Its four movements are, respectively, titled “Provenance,” “Knee High by the 4th,” “Nightfall,” and “Harvest Celebration.” The first movement, based on the Parable of the Sower from the Gospel of Matthew, invokes seeds of influence planted early in our lives which gradually grow to fruition. The second refers to the height of corn stalks by the Fourth of July as a sign of the nature of the year’s harvest to come, here a metaphor for the excitement of youthful expectations. The third, “Nightfall,” symbolically invites mature contemplation of transience in the destiny of our lives, as some things pass away after having their season while others endure. The finale, “Harvest Celebration,” refers to the twilight of our lives, in which we gather together a harvest of memories, with the meaning of life found in moments shared with others rather than in material things acquired. While I thoroughly enjoyed this piece, I personally found the music far more evocative of a rural countryside in a tone-poem mode—e.g., the chirping crickets that open the first movement, the trickling woodland stream that starts the third—than of the underlying symbolism referenced by the composer. This work is my favorite of the five on this release, with Machain’s *Bite the Bullet* running a fairly close second.

Anthony LaBounty’s *Prophecy* is an invocation of various oracular pronouncements found in the Christian Scriptures. Psalm 89:17 (“For You are the glory of their strength and by Your favor our horn is exalted”) is punningly used as a justification for the use of a French horn soloist as the protagonist who proclaims the words of the Lord. Other texts referenced by the composer are Numbers 24:17, Deuteronomy 18:13, Psalm 118:22–23, and Psalm 72 in its entirety, all of which are traditionally read by Christians as Messianic prophecies. In addition to the horn part—superbly played by Chris Castellanos—prominent use is made of tubular chimes to symbolize a warning tocsin. The character of this music is extroverted and dramatic, with rhetorical phrases clearly shaped to suggest oracular perorations.

“The Death Hunt” is a very brief (2:25) selection from Bernard Herrmann’s score for a now mostly forgotten 1950 *film noir* flick, *On Dangerous Ground*, transcribed for wind orchestra by veteran arranger Paul Lavender. The excerpt is suitably atmospheric for a deadly chase scene.

The accompanying booklet provides tracks and timing information, detailed notes by the various composers (except for the Herrmann selection), the roster of the UNLV Wind Orchestra players and staff, and artist bios for the two soloists, conductor, and ensemble. If you have any interest in concert band music (and, if you are reading this review, you presumably do), you should acquire this release forthwith. This is a winner on every count; strong recommended.

Five stars: A stellar release of world premieres by Thomas Leslie and the UNLV WO, with two superb soloists—**James Altana**

QUATERNITY • ¹Joseph Alessi (tbn); ²Chris Castellanos (hn); Thomas G. Leslie, cond;
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MACHAIN *Bite the Bullet*. **BROUGHTON** ¹*Quaternity*. **YUPONCE** ²*Letters from the Heartland*. **LABOUNTY** ²*Prophecy*. **HERRMANN** (arr. Lavender) *On Dangerous Ground: The Death Hunt*.

The University of Nevada at Las Vegas clearly has a fine, well-drilled ensemble in its wind orchestra. As bright and colorful as the painting that inspired it and from which it takes its name (Carlos Marchiori's *Bite the Bullet*), Jorge Machain's piece is brilliantly orchestrated and performed. The painting shows two Venetian clowns (pulcinelli) shooting at each other, the bullets meeting in the middle and creating a white and pink cloud. It is a striking image, and the artist's strong yet sophisticated way with color is reflected in Machain's orchestration. The composer depicts not only the gunshot but, in the woodwind writing, he attempts to reflect Marchiori's brushwork. The perfect brief concert opener (less than seven minutes), it receives a whirlwind performance by the Nevadans, caught in brilliant sound.

Scored for solo trombone and band, Brice Broughton's *Quaternity* is a virtuoso piece in four movements, one for each of the four elements (Earth, Air, Fire and Water, in that order). Broughton is another expert orchestrator and master of gesture. It comes as no surprise that Broughton is also a film composer: his suite *We'll Be Back*, taken from the score for the Western *Silverado*, was reviewed in *Fanfare* 12:5. There is a sophistication to Broughton's writing that takes the disc's trajectory into more profound spaces than those afforded by the Machain. The first movement, "Earth," presents a theme that acts as a thread throughout the entire piece. Energetic and grounded, it leads to the suspended, elusive and ethereal textures of "Air," in which Alessi's trombone sings a beautiful aria. Alessi's breath control and legato are little short of miraculous (he is, after all, Principal Trombone of the New York Philharmonic): anyone who has ever doubted the lyrical qualities of the trombone needs to hear this. Broughton knows how to shape a movement so the climax of "Air" appears naturally but powerfully, while the angularities of the solo line of "Fire" are negotiated with consummate ease, particularly impressive as the trombone is muted throughout. No less impressive is the pinpoint contribution of the Las Vegas ensemble here. The strength of water as an unstoppable force is the generating idea of that element's movement, and Broughton translates that idea into sound perfectly. The work was premiered in February 2019 and so receives its first recording here.

Described as a "pastoral of mid-twentieth century," Wendell Yuponce's *Letters from the Heartland* was inspired by the 1792 *Farmer's Almanac*. Other inspirations include the Bible (a quote from Matthew heads the first movement, "Provenance") and Keats (*Endymion*). The strength of this piece is its beauty: the meditation on harvest, "Knee High by the Fourth," is scored with consummate mastery and realized with the utmost sensitivity. The horn solos in *Letters from the Heartland* are brilliantly done by Chris Castellanos.

Anthony LaBounty's *Prophecy* was inspired both by Alpine landscapes while vacationing in Saint Moritz, Switzerland, and by Psalm 89. The music breathes contentment and spirituality in equal measure. It was commissioned by John E. Tucker for Castellanos and the Las Vegas ensemble. I see my colleague Merlin Patterson in reviewing LaBounty's *How Deep the Father's Love for Us* (on the disc *Marquee Mojo*, with the same band and conductor as here: *Fanfare* 35:1) noted a pronounced influence of Copland. The American Master's hand is to be encountered here too, although here it seems to me to be well integrated into LaBounty's vocabulary (Patterson found the influence too pronounced in the earlier piece, which sadly I have not heard). LaBounty seems to have an added layer of ruggedness that is most appealing, while Castellanos' playing is simply beyond criticism. A native of Las Vegas, he joined his home town's Philharmonic Orchestra aged only 18. He plays on a

Yamaha (an 871D), which characteristically has the wide open sound we hear here. Castellanos' confidence is inspiring (he almost makes me want to pick up my instrument again after a gap of decades); his tireless high register positively gleams, his agility knows no bounds (each note is hit square in the middle). The rhythmic verve of the wind orchestra's contribution is positively alive; dialogues between solo horn and trumpet are superbly managed. The trajectory of the piece from the opening "espressivo e rubato" to the end is one of an ever-changing, lively landscape. The solo line frequents the upper reaches of the horn's register, to put it mildly: top Ds and C sharps are all part of the fun: and while we're on subject, the slide from top C to top D in measures 305-6 is magnificent. The piece seems to end on a sustained high E flat (a semitone below the highest pitch in the Schumann *Konzertstück* for four horns and orchestra and therefore the highest pitch in the accepted standard repertoire; although Schumann never asks the player to sustain it like LaBounty does. In fairness, LaBounty does give the A flat a fifth lower as an alternative). Quote how Castellanos has any lip left by that time is beyond me. By quite some way this the best horn playing I have heard in years.

Finally, and in the manner of an encore, an arrangement of some film music by Bernard Herrmann, "The Death Hunt" from *On Dangerous Ground*. Breathlessly, magnificently performed (and with pinpoint ensemble), this account also showcases the demonstration-standard recording.

Unaccountably, the booklet notes do not discuss the works in performance order. Instead, the LaBounty is discussed before the Yuponce, and actually we hear the reverse, something potentially discombobulating. Nothing whatsoever wrong with the performances though, and Castellanos' playing puts this in line for at last a mention, if not inclusion, in my Wants Lists this year. **Colin Clarke**

five stars: The University of Nevada at Las Vegas clearly has a fine ensemble in its wind orchestra: superb

MACHAIN *Bite the Bullet* BROUGHTON *Quaternity*¹ YUPONCE *Letters from the Heartland*² LABOUNTY *Prophecy*³ HERRMANN *The Death Hunt* • Thomas G. Leslie, cond.; UNLV Wind Orchestra; ¹Joseph Alessi (trombone); ^{2,3}Chris Castellanos (horn) • Klavier K 11223 (65:00)

Jorge Machain, born in 1993, is a very talented composer. He is also known as a successful arranger. Based on his piece, *Bite the Bullet*, he has a firm grasp of instrumentation. Machain is currently completing his Master of Music in Jazz Composition. *Bite the Bullet* is not a piece of jazz, but a straightforward work in the tradition of composers Nelhýbel, H. Owen Reed, Clifton Williams, and McBeth. This is exuberant, extroverted music. According to Machain, the work “was inspired by the Venetian artist Carlo Machiori’s painting of the same name. The painting depicts two Pulcinelli, Venetian clowns dressed as bakers, shooting at one another with guns, bullets meeting in the middle, creating a white-orange-pink cloudburst.” The music is a fine reflection of the source of inspiration. In some ways I am reminded of the amazing music of Ron Nelson. While Machain might not have the melodic gift of Nelson, he isn’t far behind.

Bruce Broughton is a composer of magnificent scores for motion pictures, television and concert works. Reflecting on those works of his that I have heard, they are always full of attractive thematic materials and written with a fine sense of structure. As for his work *Quaternity*, the composer writes, “A quaternity is simply a group of four, but a group that represents wholeness. This particular quaternity is one that represents the classical elements of antiquity: earth, air, fire and water with musical connections that are often subjective.” While the composer calls the work a suite, it really is a concerted work for trombone and band. It is very colorful music, tuneful, and expertly scored. According to the program notes, this is its first recording. It is music that is likely to find favor with any band that has a fine trombone player deserving of an opportunity to be a soloist.

Also coming from a commercial music background is Wendell Yuponce. Currently he is on the faculty of Sacramento City College. The composer writes, “*Letters from the Heartland* is a pastoral of mid-twentieth century life on a farm as metaphor for our lives and relationships. The work is in four movements: Provenance; Knee High by the 4th; Nightfall; and Harvest Celebration. The music presents the band in ways to make great use of the instrumental variety. Each movement is something of a tone poem. The final movement seems a bit Coplandesque, but has a character of its own.

Anthony Labounty is Professor of Music and the Associate Director of Bands at UNLV, as well as a composer and arranger. His *Prophecy* for solo horn and band was inspired by texts from the Old and New Testaments. The music is more serious in tone than the other works on the disc. It speaks with great power and a sense of purpose.

The Death Hunt comes from Bernard Herrmann’s score to the film *On Dangerous Ground*. This two and half minute piece was expertly transcribed for band by Paul Lavender. Lavender serves as Vice-President of Instrumental Publication for music publisher Hal Leonard. He is one of the most respected arrangers. It makes one want to have Lavender make a suite for band derived from Herrmann film scores. This arrangement is terrific.

Are these works on the level of pieces like the Symphonies for Band by Hindemith, Persichetti and Gould? No, but they are fine works, tuneful and wonderfully scored. With the exception of the Herrmann, all of these works have received their first performances in the last two years. They are all most welcome additions to the repertoire. The playing of the UNLV

Wind Orchestra is beyond reproach. Under the expert leadership of Thomas G. Leslie, they give these works a wonderful introduction to the repertoire. Joseph Alessi is Principal Trombone of the New York Philharmonic and teaches at the Juilliard School. His musicianship is of the highest order. He brings his great musicality to the music of Broughton. His playing is magnificent. Chris Castellanos is a first-rate horn player. He demonstrates a fine sense of the music and clearly has a magnificent technique.

The audio is what one would expect from a Bruce Leek production. It is clear, well-balanced, and displays the ensemble to great advantage. **Karl F. Miller**

Collections: Orchestral

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The Wind Orchestra at the University of Nevada Las Vegas has been well received in the pages of *Fanfare*, and this disc should only add to the acclaim. One suspects that the international profile of this ensemble has brought much benefit to UNLV through its recordings and tours. All of the composers here are American save for Jorge Machain. He was born in Mexico and is a student at UNLV and graduate assistant in the band program. Machain's *Bite the Bullet* is inspired by the Venetian artist Carlo Marchiori's painting of the same name. It depicts two Venetian clowns shooting bullets at each other, which meet in the middle and create a multi-colored cloudburst. The music is a witty piece that conveys the spirit of that painting. One can almost visualize it from this brightly colorful score.

The longest work is the piece that gives the CD its title, Bruce Broughton's *Quaternity*. The composer explains that the word describes any group of four. In Broughton's case it is the four classical elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The piece is a 24-minute concerto for trombone and wind orchestra, written for Joseph Alessi. Alessi is the quite extraordinary principal trombone of the New York Philharmonic, and hearing him play *Quaternity* is a joy from beginning to end. For me, the highlight is the exquisitely beautiful second movement, "Air," a peaceful and lyrical piece that will stay in your head long after it is over. Much of the rest of the piece is more extraverted and brilliantly virtuosic, and Alessi has a ball with it. This is, to my ears, the finest music on the disc—consistently inspired.

Wendell Yuponce's *Letters from the Heartland* is the other major-length work at a bit over 18 minutes; it is a concerto for French horn and winds inspired by mid-twentieth century life in the American farmland. The overall mood is pastoral, with a greater variety of colors than you might have expected from a work for winds. The piece was commissioned for Chris Castellanos, a UNLV alumnus who is now a member of the Boston Brass. Like Alessi, he gives a performance of total commitment and panache.

Anthony Labounty's *Prophecy* was also commissioned for Castellanos and the UNLV Wind Orchestra. It takes its inspiration from nature (specifically a vacation that Labounty and his family took to the Swiss Alps) and from the Bible. The music begins very quietly and lyrically, but splashes of contrasting color help to maintain the listener's interest, as does Castellanos's virtuosic playing. I did feel that this work and Yuponce's *Letters* operated at a somewhat lower level of inspiration than the Broughton. This should not be taken to imply that they are not worth your time. It is more a statement of how good the Broughton piece is than a denigration of Yuponce's and Labounty's scores.

A final lagniappe comes in the form of a brief (under three minute) transcription of film music by Bernard Herrmann. "Death Hunt" is excerpted from his superb score for the film *On Dangerous Ground*. It makes for a brilliant and exciting conclusion to the disc.

The UNLV Wind Orchestra, under the baton of their music director Thomas G. Leslie, plays with precision, energy, beauty of tone, and a sense of occasion. Nothing ever seems phoned in by this highly accomplished student group. The recorded sound is also extremely effective—potent, rich, well balanced, and clear. One complaint: the program notes by the composers are helpful but fiendishly difficult to read because of the tinted paper on which they are printed. Additionally, it would have been useful to have included some biographical information about the composers. Nonetheless, if you enjoy the music of wind ensembles, this disc gets an enthusiastic recommendation.

Henry Fogel