



## Marimba Concerto

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Albany Troy's CD is called "Paul Freeman Introduces Exotic Concertos." Actually none are really "exotic". Three are just very, very different, for solo "instruments" virtually never featured as soloists, and the fourth is indeed often heard as soloist as well as an integral part of the symphony orchestra. This is the Harp Concerto by Gustavo Leone who was born in Buenos Aires in 1956 and, after studies in Argentina, went to the University of Chicago, studied with Ralph Shapey and Shulamit Ran and received a number of awards for his work. His 19-minute three movement concerto, written in 1994 on a commission from Concertante di Chicago, has three movements: Danza, Cancion and Marcha. It is incredibly dull in every way, devoid of melodic interest and goes nowhere. However, the other three works far more successfully meet the description of "exotic."

Dimitri Mitropoulos was a friend of Morton Gould and conducted many of his works including Spirituals for Orchestra with the Boston Symphony. With the New York Philharmonic he performed Fall River Legend and Philharmonic Waltzes, recording both with the NYP for Columbia; also for the same label, but not with the NYP, he recorded the Concerto for Tap Dancer and Orchestra. Mitropoulos' suggestions for Gould, although well intentioned, were not always for the better - it was he who suggested Gould write a different finale for his Symphony No. 3, just released in its premiere original version on Albany Troy. The Tap Dance Concerto was written in 1952 and was premiered that year with the Rochester Philharmonic. There are four movements, a vigorous opening Toccata followed by Pantomime, delicate by comparison in which the dancer follows the composer's stage directions and rhythmic indications but has considerable leeway in doing so. A clever Minuet follows and the work ends with Rondo, a splashy display of virtuoso tap-dancing over rhythmical orchestral sonorities. This recording features Lane Alexander as dancer, and he sounds superb. Recorded live at the Rudolfinum (date not given), the sound is stunning, vividly capturing the soloist's varied sounds - and the low bass floor impact sounds will delight audiophiles. There are a few not-too-disturbing audience sounds.

Jan Bach (b. 1937) wrote his Concerto for Steelpan and Orchestra in 1994 for the young Trinidad musician Liam Teague who is soloist in this recording. CD notes give little information about the steelpan as an instrument, but do state this concerto was actually written for "soprano pan" - without saying why it is here played on "steelpan". The 22-minute concerto has two sections with an extended solo cadenza in the middle. Sounds produced are distinctive and recognizable for what they are, not particularly attractive although often percussively exciting. Teague's performance is quite remarkable.

Now we come to the true "exotica". Ricardo Lorenz (b. 1961, Venezuela) admits the

idea of a concerto for maracas and orchestra "sounds preposterous", so he titled his work Pataruco, which is Venezuelan slang for the nickname given to someone or something provocative and cocky to the point of appearing ill-mannered or in bad taste. CD notes state, "Those silly-looking, avocado-shaped gourds seen in vintage LP covers of pseudo-tropical music - and most often heard clumsily shaken by Carmen Miranda wannabees - do not even begin to compare to the beauty and sonic depth of the instrument...playing the maracas in Venezuela has developed into a highly virtuosic art form which is considered by connoisseurs as one of the world's most sophisticated vernacular percussion techniques". I cannot understand the reference to "beauty and sonic depth". Ed Harrison, Chicago Lyric Opera percussionist, is a specialist in this "instrument," and Lorenz's concerto was written for him in 1999, premiered the same year. It begins in rather pretentious fashion and when the maracas appear it is strange-sounding indeed. Recorded rather distant, they produce an odd rattling sound that almost sounds as if there are a dozen angry rattlesnakes in the room. There's a big cadenza toward the end with strings effectively entering softly at the conclusion - and a very odd sound at 19:10, repeated at 19:25, later as well. I have no idea what this is. A cutesy, comic ending closes the piece. From an aural standpoint you'll find that your tweeters are given the supreme workout—all those scintillating high frequencies produced by the maracas!—it's just as well they were recorded distantly.

The marimba of course is a much more familiar instrument and incapable of making an ugly sound. Katarzyna Mycka (b. 1972) apparently is to the marimba world what Arcadi Volodos is to the world of piano. She's won countless prizes, has given numerous solo concerts and orchestral appearances, and in 1999 was awarded the honor of "Ambadress of Polish Percussive Arts" by the Polish Percussive Arts Society. An obvious misprint in CD notes indicates she made her American debut in Los Angeles in 1977, probably twenty years off the mark. None of the music on this CD is particularly thought-provoking, but all of it is surely pleasant. Anders Koppel first came to my attention with his evocative Moonchild's Dream concerto for recorder virtuoso Michala Petri (once available on RCA 62543). He wrote his three-movement marimba concerto for the finals of the 1995 International Percussion Competition in Luxembourg and was amazed at the dazzling performance Mycka gave of it at that time. Eckhard Kopetzki's Concerto for Marimba and Strings, written in 1999, is dedicated to Mycka. There are four movements, the two outer ones each with a formidable cadenza taxing the soloist to the extreme. Keiko Abe's Prism Rhapsody II originally was written for solo marimba; Mycka requested the composer write a version for two marimbas, which is heard on this recording. No question, in this collection this is the most challenging music for listeners with its wild, frenzied outbursts of sound. The music's 15:30 performance time provides much stimulating listening. The only "pop" sounding music on this CD is Karl-Heinz Köper's Samba Classique for two marimbas, string orchestra and percussion - a sheer delight. All performances are superb. Katarzyna Mycka proves her accolades are justified. Franz Bach joins Mycka in Samba and Prism Rhapsody. Audite's sound is excellent, with the orchestra appropriately balanced against the solo instruments.

Both CDs are highly recommended—just overlook the mundane harp concerto on the "exotic concerto" disk.