

ARTHUR LEVERING *20 Ways Upon the Bells*

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This review gives me particular pleasure to write, as I have been aware of Arthur Levering's music for several years now, and welcome the opportunity to bring it to others' attention. Levering (b. 1953) is a composer based in the Boston area, and this is his debut CD, which features of series of brief but concentrated works that show off his strengths handsomely.

Levering's music is not easy to classify (happily for him), but that does not mean one cannot describe it. Among its qualities are:

Clarity: The composer has a gift for writing music that is lean, to the point, and brilliantly scored. One hears every note in any texture, no matter how dense. While Levering is not afraid of repetition, neither does he use it in classic minimalist fashion. Rather, his ostinatos become a sort of template on which he can work continuous variants that keep the music engaging.

Though the music does not sound like Stravinsky on its surface, it shares a good deal with the master in its general approach to musical sound and sense.

Rhythmic interest: Levering is one of the few younger composers I know who is able to write truly convincing fast music: not just a quick tempo, but music that projects an authentic propulsion derived from real harmonic rhythm as well as surface

densities. The music dances.

Imaginative orchestration: This music often sounds as though it is being played by more instruments than are actually involved. This comes from both the composer's taste for brilliantly focused timbres and from his skill in breaking up individual instruments into subgroups of sounds that can recombine in various ways. A perfect example is the opening of *Clarion/Shadow* where—within a trio of flute, violin, and percussion—the piano's two hands play very different materials (with different dynamics and articulations) combining with the piercing interjections of the flute and the more subtle line of the pizzicato violin to create the illusion of a quartet.

Wit: The music has a genuine sense of play. Only *Uncle Inferno*, a hilarious three-movement work for piano six-hands (already a funny medium by itself), makes deliberate fun of itself through its variations on what the composer calls an "insipid tune." But all the pieces have a lightness of touch and a wry, sly tone.

Some readers may have noticed that I sometimes remark on the fact that many composers' albums seem to be collections of smaller works, most in single movements. I've also often noted that this sort of presentation is good for a "sampler," but still leaves room for deciding later whether or not the composer can (or even wants to) deal with larger forms and musical architectures. Levering's music is also

similarly concentrated, but in this particular case I am left less with a greater sense of what is not present than is usually the case. The reason is: All these pieces are so tightly constructed and concentrated in their materials that they leave an impression of greater breadth than mere timings would suggest. Nothing sounds "occasional" here.

All of these performances are excellent. Donald Berman, whose superb Ives recital I review elsewhere in this issue, handles the demanding etudes of *School of Velocity* brilliantly, as well as the piano part in every other work on the program except *Roulade*. Scott Wheeler (himself an accomplished composer and a former *Fanfare* reviewer) maintains a tight, precise grip on every note of the works he conducts, and his Dinosaur Annex Ensemble shows why it is one of the most prominent and enduring new-music groups around. Wheeler has long been an advocate of Levering, and this generosity has borne fruit in performances that are carefully considered and fluently rendered. Finally, so as not to create a headnote logjam, here are the players in two unconduted works: *Roulade* features Christine Fish, flute; Susan Robinson, harp; Clayton Hoener, violin; Scott Woolweaver, viola; and Andrew Mark, cello. *Clarion/Shadowing* features Ian Oreitzer, clarinet; Cyrus Stevens, violin; and Berman on piano.

This is the best debut album by an American

composer I've heard this year. **Robert Carl**