

CONFETTI MAN • Turtle Island Str Qrt; Nellie McKay (voc/uke)¹ • AZICA 71296 (63:35)

BALAKRISHNAN *Confetti Man. Alex in A Major. MINTZER* *Windspan. SHORTER* *Infant Eyes* (arr. von Gutzeit). **CARISI** *Israel. D'RIVERA* *La Jicotea. BACHARACH-DAVID* ¹*Send Me No Flowers. SUMMER* *Pattern Language: Julie-O Concert Étude No. 1. POWELL* *Bouncin' With Bud*

It's so wonderful to hear the Turtle Island String Quartet once again, even though only two of the four musicians who play here (founder-violinist David Balakrishnan and cellist Mark Summer) were with the group when I last heard them in the late 1990s. The opening work, from which the album takes its title, is a two-movement piece by Balakrishnan utilizing his by-now-familiar mixture of classical, jazz, bluegrass, and Indian (from India) music. As usual, he is able to take these diverse and eclectic strains and intertwine them to the point where the mosaic comes together and it all makes sense. Sometimes I wonder if the music's "catchiness" in rhythm doesn't somehow obscure the tremendous skill and invention that goes into it...when I saw the quartet in person many years ago, they played with so much energy that it, too, was infectious in itself and elicited cheers and whistles out of an appreciative audience, but how many others besides me were really listening to and following the music? It's hard to tell, just as it's difficult to say if the audience who whoops it up for the Italian tenor's high notes in *Aida* really like *Aida* or just the sound of the tenor's voice.

By now, however, Turtle Island's style has become familiar, and that too can be a detriment, for familiarity breeds not always contempt but a feeling of comfort and expectation, and this music tries its best to make one think and at times pursue a different direction. Yet the style always comes back to its jazz/bluegrass roots, understandable because those were Balakrishnan's dual affections when he founded Turtle Island lo these many decades ago, and despite some competition from other jazz string quartets (such as the Greene Machine) and classical quartets who fancy themselves jazz-inspired (like the Kronos Quartet), Turtle Island has gone from brash, new, and innovative to a continuing path of innovation in which their original past methods and devices are recycled.

One of the more interesting things about *Confetti Man* is that it was commissioned by the Nashville Chamber Orchestra, with which he is composer-in-residence. I found a press release online that stated he would be premiering *Confetti Man* and *The Second Wave* at one of the orchestra's concerts, but there was no clear statement whether that premiere performance was by the Turtle Island Quartet or the Chamber Orchestra itself. Nonetheless, there does not appear to be a Nashville Chamber Orchestra performance of this work out there in cyberland.

Following *Confetti Man* is a fascinating piece, *Windspan*, written for the quartet by saxophonist Bob Mintzer of the Yellow Jackets. Here the quartet takes a different step, moving into music with a bluesier, funkier beat. Wayne Shorter's ballad *Infant Eyes* is heard in an arrangement by Benjamin von Gutzeit which utilizes a wide variety of effects and textures within its relatively simple but angular melodic structure. I almost didn't recognize John Carisi's famed signature piece, *Israel*, in this wild and excellent arrangement by Balakrishnan, so changed was the opening rhythm of the work. As is so often the case, the infectious swing of the quartet's performance tends to hide the tremendous sophistication and subtleties in the arrangement, not the least of which is their ability to intersperse written and improvised passages in such a way that they manage to retain an uncluttered texture while still keeping up the classic interplay of four strings in a quasi-classical balance.

Paquito d’Rivera’s original work *La Jicotea*, or *Little Turtle*, presents a Latin feel in unusual meters (the notes say the same thing), but what intrigued me more about this piece was its ability to pull fragments of music together to make a cohesive whole. Like Balakrishnan’s own work, d’Rivera’s piece makes a whole cloth out of a mosaic of sounds. *Send Me No Flowers*, a Burt Bacharach-Hal David pop tune from the 1960s, is a rare down moment on this CD since this is just a pop tune, delivered in an insipid pop style by one Nellie McKay with minimal interest from the quartet’s arrangement.

Happily, things pick up again with Balakrishnan’s original *Alex in A Major*, a fascinating mixture of bluegrass and jazz, but particularly in Mark Summer’s *Pattern Language*, utilizing one of his earlier works, the *Julie-O Concert Étude No. 1* as its basis. This wonderfully complex piece is a real tour-de-force for the cellist, and I would hope that even some of Summers’ classical colleagues are listening and choose to use it as a concert or encore piece. The album ends with an extraordinarily interesting and complex arrangement of Bud Powell’s *Bouncing With Bud*, where once again the introduction misleads the listener, so different is it from the basic material of the original. Once past that introduction, however, we have the Turtle Island Quartet in their patented swinging bop style, gleefully playing with tremendous abandon. I’m not sure if the second violin solo here is Balakrishnan or Mateusz Smoczyński, but his use of vibrato on certain held notes put me in mind of the way Michel Warlop played jazz violin.

Despite my lack of enthusiasm for *Send Me No Flowers*, this is an extraordinary disc and proof once again, if proof be needed, that the Turtle Island String Quartet is still one of the finest, if not the finest, jazz string groups of our time. We should be thrilled that they came about in our lifetime; poor Joe Venuti, Stuff Smith, Ray Nance, Oscar Pettiford, and Michel Warlop never lived to see what their influence hath wrought. **Lynn René Bayley**