



## Critical Acclaim for Riverside Symphony's Latest CD, Featuring Music by Anthony Korf

### Fanfare Magazine Nov/Dec 2009 2009 "Want List" of Top Recordings

"Anthony Korf, cofounder and artistic director of Riverside Symphony, works the traditional elements of musical composition in astonishing ways that result in a wholly original sound world. The music on this Bridge release is so cerebral as to become downright sensual, and so fastidiously constructed as to sound completely spontaneous."

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The foremost challenge in trying to write about music that is not yet in our standard repertoire is to describe the tactics and strategies of the composer at hand. Toward that end, I can do no better than to cite ideas provided by Mark Swed in his review of a New World disc (80383) containing works by Mario Davidovsky, Anthony Korf, and Maurice Wright published by *7 days*. Swed describes the then music scene in Manhattan as bifurcated. Downtown, one found the more accessible and trendy Minimalists. Uptown, focusing on the Manhattan School of Music (Anthony Korf is an alumnus), one found the more intellectually rigorous and musically doctrinaire composers—Mario Davidovsky and the like. He then, wisely, concludes that such observations are merely snapshots taken in a world that is forever in flux, and continues by citing Anthony Korf's underlying humanity and utter lack of pretension (read as accessibility) as demonstrated in his Second Symphony.

When listening to a work by Korf, one is first struck by its seemingly acerbic posttonal language. Repeated hearings begin to unearth its lyrical underpinnings and subtly subsumed jazz inflections. Yet further hearings reveal the gracious warmth of this man's nature.

The two main works on this disc—*Presences from Aforetime* of 1999 and Symphony No. 3 of 2007—deal with change through time and the specter of mortality. The first is a two-movement piece of chamber music for oboe (from time to time interchangeable with English horn), cello, guitar, harp, and piano that was inspired in part by the purchase of an old Hudson Valley, N.Y., farmhouse years before the work's inception, and a poem by Thomas Hardy, "The Two Houses," which gripped the composer in the course of the piece's composition, and from which its title is drawn. The underlying theme is, to quote Korf, "the inevitable transformation of new to old." The work starts with a passacaglia-like theme first given by the guitar, with a balancing answer from the piano. What ensues is a quasi-passacaglia with the guitar occasionally closing a phrase with a delicious jazzoid lick. The counterpoint is well crafted, with a good deal of augmentation and diminution. The affective range is large, but the last feeling one is left with is that of a pensive resignation, which is further amplified by the somewhat more free form and thematically rich, but, in the end, deeply meditative closing movement.

The two seemingly improvisatory and disarmingly quirky, inner works—*Six Miniatures for Flute with Piano* of 1997 and *Three Movements for Clarinet Solo* of 1992—were composed, according to Korf, as exercises in compositional decompression. Put another way, as sort of vacations from his generally more deliberative mode of composition. *Six Miniatures* was composed for flutist Keith Underwood, and in it one first encounters an allusion to *Tea for Two*, which will also serve as a structural element in his Third Symphony. *Tea for Two*, in a quite highly developed guise (or more to the point, disguises), also appears as the first subject of *Three Movements for Clarinet Solo*. I hope I'm not hallucinating here, but the hallucinatory is an important element in Korf's music. Writing for an unaccompanied wind instrument presents formidable challenges, not the least of which is the need to imply harmonies only via a horizontal musical line. This Korf does masterfully, and he holds interest by means of an inexhaustible thematic development. Like *Six Miniatures for Flute with Piano*, the piece feels jazz inspired, though in its tightly reasoned structure, it is the product of a fastidious composer, albeit in a comparatively unbuttoned mood. The titles of its three movements provide an extramusical insight into the music—"Don't be Ridiculous!" "Meditation," and "Of Differing Minds."

Everything on this CD leads to the last, most ambitious, and finest piece—Korf's Symphony No. 3 of 2007. A transitional passage from his *Three Movements for Clarinet Solo* finds its way into the work, as does *Tea for Two*. It starts with a bit of hymnody and develops in a post-tonal manner that evokes both Ives and, from time to time, Schoenberg. It is the work of a master contrapuntalist who weaves his lines in such a way that the result is far greater than the sum of its parts. Jazz elements underpin a good deal of the piece, and its instrumentation is both sure-handed and superb. As in the case of *Three Movements for Clarinet Solo*, the titles of the two movements offer a glimpse into their affective meaning—"Dust unto Dust" and "Return to Forever." The last movement ends with an allusion to *Miserere nobis* from the High Mass. Whenever confronted by unfamiliar music, I make it a point to immerse myself in its sound before opening the liner notes. Without the tip off of those two movement titles, I was left in a mood of irreconcilable nostalgia for a world long gone.

The Riverside Symphony was founded in 1981 by George Rothman and Anthony Korf. Its mission was, and continues to be, to provide advocacy for young and unknown artists, and for unfamiliar works by established composers. The orchestra members under Rothman, along with its principal wind-players who perform the first three pieces, are all world-class and deliver insightful readings that are far more than merely simpatico. The illuminating recording is up to Bridge's high standards.

As a postscript to this piece, I found it odd that Anthony Korf (b. 1951) doesn't seem to have a Web site. Apparently he is content to let his music speak for itself. And that it does most eloquently. **William Zagorski**