

**July-August 2012**

**WARNING: MAY CAUSE MOOD SWINGS** • The St. Michael Trio • PRESENTATION PARTNERS 26513 (71:02)

**BERNIE-PINKARD** *Sweet Georgia Brown*. **MORRICONE** *Cinema Paradiso Suite*. **BOLLING** Suite for Flute & Jazz Piano Trio: *Javanaise*. *Irlandaise*. **C. WILSON** *Milonga: Nocturna*. *Hiccup de Tango*. **J. WILLIAMS** *Remembrances*. **GERSHWIN** *Porgy and Bess: It ain't necessarily so*. **M. FINLAYSON** *Release*. *Pas de Chat*. **PIAZZOLA** *Oblivion*. **KERN** *The Way You Look Tonight*. **K. BUNCH** *Intersections*. *Swing Shift: Magic Hour*. **WONDER** *Isn't She Lovely*. **LAURIDSEN** *Dirait-On*. **LED ZEPPELIN** *Stairway to Heaven*. **ARLEN** *Over the Rainbow*.

I'm willing to bet you that most people looking at the header of this review (including my esteemed and well-loved editor) will immediately throw it into Jazz. "Sweet Georgia Brown"? "Over the Rainbow"? Two movements from Claude Bolling's suite for flute and jazz trio? Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven"? Heck, maybe they're not a jazz trio. Maybe they're a rock band that dabbles in jazz.

But you are all badly mistaken. This is a classical piano trio: Daniel Cher on violin, Russell Hancock on piano, and Michel Flexer on cello. And yes, they also play Mozart, Brahms, and Beethoven trios. Yet they also throw in the *milongas*, blues, tangos, jazz and rock pieces into the same concert—and not just as encores, either. It's part of the main entrée.

Let me introduce you to the Saint Michael Trio: Silicon Valley techies by day, musicians by night. The promo blurb for the album says that "In no time whatsoever they have vaulted to the front ranks, irascibly, irrepressibly, providing a badly needed update to the chamber music scene." Since they're classically trained musicians, I'll bet they were somewhat influenced by the Kronos Quartet. Since they're Californians, they've probably also heard—and dug—the Turtle Island String Quartet, the first and best jazz string quartet in the world.

Whether those influences come directly from Kronos and Turtle Island or not, these are their musical children. I'm sure the academics are already writing them off, somewhere in their dusty, moth-covered dens of antiquity, but if this CD is any indication, the Saint Michael Trio will win the day—because they're good, *very* good, and quality always trumps academia.

You don't need to hear their Mozart or Beethoven to know how good they are; you can judge as much from their sensitive performances of Ennio Morricone's *Cinema Paradiso Suite*, the exquisitely melancholy Piazzola tango *Oblivion*, or, yes, even such movie soundtrack ephemera as John Williams's *Remembrances* from the film *Schindler's List*. Saint Michael obviously takes the idea that there is no bad music, only bad performances of music.

Occasionally they might catch you off-guard, as they did me with Cameron Wilson's *Hiccup de Tango*, a piece in which the unusual upward glisses played by Cher are both funny and musically astute, or with their surprisingly delicate, almost lace-like arrangement (written by Cameron Wilson) of Jerome Kern's *The Way You Look Tonight*. Listening to Wilson's arrangement of *Sweet Georgia Brown* which opens this CD, you may legitimately wonder one thing: are those really improvised passages they play, or were they all written out for them? Whatever the answer, the trio plays it with zest and sparkle. Cher's violin solo, however, has more echoes of Stephane Grappelli than of Joe Venuti.

Oh yes, Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*? Well, I have to be honest with you, I never heard the piece before. My rock 'n' roll listening pretty much ended with the Beatles' *Abbey Road* and *Let it Be* albums in 1971, so I missed the entire Heavy Metal scene (yes, I know, it's my loss, cough cough). Anyway, the Saint Michael Trio plays it with balladic tenderness in the first half, then switch to what I'd best describe as a "soft rock" beat for the second half. It's a nice, tuneful piece to my ears, at least until the second half. Then it gets, well, raunchy, and I don't particularly like raunchy. But that's a small blemish to a recital that ends with a gorgeous rendition of *Over the Rainbow*.

This is a remarkable disc, well worth exploring. The CD can be purchased at CD Baby, iTunes, or Amazon. **Lynn René Bayley**