

Mona Lyn Reese, Meira Warshauer, et al.: *Chévere*

Apollo Chamber Players (Texas); Sinfónia Nacional de Cuba, Daiana García Silveiro, director; Schola Cantorum Coralina, Alina Orraca, director; Kat Parra, soprano; et al. Ansonica Records, LLC AR0005 (2017)

ELIZABETH L. KEATHLEY

The cover photo on *Chévere* (Cool, 2017) communicates precisely the ethos of this CD by displaying a pristine, pale blue 1950s-era American car, which is parked before a building with chipped, painted concrete steps and plants in clay pots. The image evokes the earlier Batista epoch, when a Cuban-American cultural exchange was commonplace and bespeaks the ability of Cubans to endure, maintain, and adapt. *Chévere* is the sixth CD Ansonica has recorded in Cuba, since the easing of the American embargo that has freed musicians to collaborate across the Straits of Florida. In this respect, Ansonica seeks both to promote this cultural exchange and to record the music of living composers.

Most of the works on the CD bear some relationship with Cuba: Arthur Gottschalk's *Imagines de Cuba* and Mona Lyn Reese's *¡La Habana, Mi Amor!* invoke it by name; the *batá* drums of John Corolla's *In Your Hour of Need* recall the Cuban religious practice of *Santería*; and an arrangement of two well-known Cuban songs, "Son de la Loma" and "El Manisero," features the *tres*: a three-course plucked lute that is used in many of the Afro-Cuban genres.

Yet the most compelling compositions on this recording have little to do with Cuba, except for their performance there by the Schola Cantorum Coralina. The works are *Akhat Sha'alti* (One Thing I Ask) and *Oseh Shalom* (Maker of Peace) by Meira Warshauer. Not new compositions (2010 and 1989, respectively), they are nonetheless beautifully crafted and performed. *Akhat Sha'alti* takes its Hebrew text from Psalm 27:4, associated with the Jewish New Year: "One thing I ask of the Holy Living Essence, this I will seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Holy One all the days of my life." Each of the three movements, 1) "Akhat Sha'alti" (One Thing I Ask); 2) "Ótah Avakésh" (This I Seek); and 3) "Shivti" (My Dwelling), sets one or two phrases of the verse, thus placing a limited amount of text in a limited harmonic palette.

The slower first and third movements appear primarily in the minor modes, with finals on B and E, respectively. However, they do not indulge in functional harmonic progressions. Rather, the harmonic interest comes from carefully controlled dissonance, often introduced through step-wise motion. The lively second movement is predominately in D major and consists of cadences on a D-major triad with an added second and sixth scale degree—no perfect authentic cadences to be had here, which lends this music a pleasing archaism. In all three movements, the rhythm is very much driven by the text. For example, the final, "serene" movement incorporates phrases comprising two 3-beat measures and a 4-beat measure, which creates the sensation that time has expanded on the last syllable. "Ótah Ayakésh," set with rests after each of the first two syllables, is filled with rhythmic play, especially among the various voices. While the resultant rhythm from all six voices—the sopranos and altos are divided—consists predominantly of steady eighth notes, the individual parts overlap and respond to each other antiphonally, sometimes even with a bit of *hocket*, which creates a subtle kaleidoscopic effect. Equally effective is the layered texture of the first movement, which remains anchored by the lower voices singing a repeated text on a melody that rocks up and down within a narrow range in a rather slow 5/4 meter. Swelling and diminishing dynamics contribute to the rocking sensation, but this feeling is counteracted by one

faster-moving line on repeated notes and by a higher, more lyrical voice with larger leaps. In this manner, the choral settings perfectly realize the profoundly spiritual sentiments of the texts. The individual parts are not difficult to sing, but the overall effect is aesthetically quite satisfying. The composition was originally created for a cappella SATB chorus and optional percussion, but that option was neither used nor needed for this excellent performance.

Warshauer's other composition on this CD, *Oseh Shalom*, is the last movement of her setting for chorus and orchestra of the Sabbath morning service, *Shacharit* (1989). The composer created an alternative version for chorus, organ, and percussion in 2015, but re-arranged this a cappella movement for this CD. This setting is based on the last sentence of the *Kaddish*, which concludes the service. According to the composer: "The soothing counterpoint was written during a moment of inner turmoil, as an antidote to conflict. In the context of the larger work, it offers closure for the spiritual journey" (Liner Notes, *Chévere*). Seated on a diatonic musical foundation, the cantorial singing provides a striking interpretation of this sacred text. (*Shacharit* in its original manifestation is available on Albany records, with the organ arrangement accessible on Warshauer's website.)

Spirituality permeates the compositions presented on this CD as a secondary, unvoiced theme. In addition to Warshauer, two other composers invoke religion, the spiritual, and the afterlife: J.A Kawarsky's *Grace Dances*, for oboe and orchestra, responds to the apocryphal "Acts of John," omitted by the Nicaea Council of 787 CE; while John Carollo offers *In Your Hour of Need* in memory of his partner, William K. Dresser, M.D. The former is performed admirably by the Sinfónía Nacional de Cuba, with Frank Ernesto Fernández Neira's oboe playing being especially lovely. Nevertheless, the work is not particularly interesting, and the brief quotation from the overture of Rossini's *Barber of Seville* seems misplaced. Similarly, John Carollo's composition lacks impact and only remains noteworthy due to the percussion added by the Cuban arranger, Dayron Ortega. Although Carollo states that "the ending signifies the departing soul after leaving this mortal vale of tears," the sentiment is not transmitted to the audience due to the banal and overly repetitive music (Liner Notes, *Chévere*).

In contrast, opera composer Mona Lyn Reese's song cycle, *¡La Habana, Mi Amor!* (Havana, My Love!), appeals to the appetites—for food and for romance. Each of the three songs was transformed from another work by Reese and arranged for Cuban jazz band, voice, and percussion. Only the second song, the languid "Mi Postre, Mi Amor" (Food for Love), was originally written for voice—an aria from her opera *The Three Fat Women from Antibes* (1998, 2009)—and it sounds much like an American jazz standard, with some clear inflections reminiscent of Kurt Weill. The other songs were originally instrumental works, but Reese's spouse, Thomas Hassing, fitted the music with new poetry, translated into Spanish by Daniel Helfgot. The first in the collection, "Cena Romantica" (Romantic Dinner), is a humorous story of a person waiting in a restaurant for a lover, who does not arrive, while the third, "¡Chocolate Caliente!" (Hot Chocolate!), quotes several swing tunes. The poems are clever, and the music is enjoyable, although diminished significantly by the vocal performance of Kat Parra, a San Francisco Bay area jazz singer with interests in Spanish and Sephardic Jewish music. She has something of a wobble in her voice, which causes her intonation to be rather hit-or-miss—perhaps not even close enough for jazz.

Ansonica's dual mission, to reconnect Cuban-American cultural alliances and to record music by living composers, is a noble pursuit—one that should be supported. As represented throughout this recording, their musical tradition is steeped in a rich cultural heritage and the Cuban instrumentalists, arrangers, singers, and composers are technically trained, culturally

diverse in their musical tastes, and enthusiastic, as witnessed throughout their extraordinary performances.

Elizabeth L. Keathley, PhD., teaches historical musicology and women's and gender studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her research concerns gender and musical modernity/modernism, including women in Schoenberg's cultural circles, Bernstein's female protagonists, intimate partner violence in the "murder ballads" of Eminem, and Mexicana and Chicana singer-songwriters. Keathley organized the Feminist Theory and Music conference at UNCG in 2009 and headed IAWM's Pauline Alderman Awards Committee from 2005 through 2015.