

RECORDING REVIEWS

Music of Ursula Mamlok, Vol. 1. Bridge 9291, 2009.

Spanning more than five decades and a variety of mediums, *Music of Ursula Mamlok, Vol. 1*, is a strong initial disc in a projected series devoted to this German-American composer (b. 1923). After fleeing Nazi persecution in 1939, Mamlok arrived in the United States by way of Ecuador to study composition at Mannes School of Music. A precocious child, she had already studied piano and composition for several years. A 1944 summer institute at Black Mountain College in North Carolina provided the opportunity for Mamlok to connect with composers—especially German and Austrian immigrants—who were writing atonal and twelve-tone music, and she realized that she wanted to move her own style in a new direction and develop a distinctive musical language as a composer. During the following years, Mamlok struggled to find her own new voice while studying with various people, none of whom taught a twelve-tone system. Finally, after listening to a great deal of modernist music in New York and studying with Stefan Wolpe (1960–61) and his former pupil Ralph Shapey (1962–64), Mamlok achieved a musical approach and language that combined “flexible rhythmic structures”¹ with her own version of twelve-tone technique, which she described in an autobiographical sketch: “My own ‘recipes’ for using the twelve-tone system, which change from work to work, give me the harmonic structure I need for unified compositions.”² Mamlok has also identified several principles as consistent throughout her oeuvre: clarity, balance, simple closed forms (e.g., ABA), engagement with audible melodic/thematic material, and emotional expression that is experienced by the listener.³

Mamlok’s compositional journey is audible in this CD, beginning with Woodwind Quintet (1956), the earliest work represented and, according to a 1994 interview, the only work among her early compositions that she still liked.⁴ It is distinguished from the other included repertoire by its neoclassicism and its foundation

¹ Mamlok in an autobiographical sketch prepared for David L. Sills, “Three Sides of the Coin: An Appreciation,” paper presented at *musicALASKAwomen*, Fairbanks, Alaska, 10 August 1993; quoted in a revised version published in *ILWC* [International Leagues of Women Composers] *Journal*, October 1993, 7.

² *Ibid.*

³ For relevant interviews with Mamlok, see quotations in Roxane Prevost, “Conversations with Ursula Mamlok,” *Ex tempore: Analytical and Theoretical Papers from the Department of Music, the University of California at San Diego* 11/2 (2003): 124–33 (excerpts from five interviews at the composer’s home in New York, January 2002–March 2003); Janelle Magnuson Gelfand, “The Pioneering Spirit: Women Composers of the Older Generation,” *Contemporary Music Review* 16/1–2 (1997): 5–19 (telephone interview 13 November 1994); Gottfried Eberle, “Jüdin aus Berlin im US-Exil. Das Schicksal Ursula Mamloks. Die Komponistin im Gespräch mit Gottfried Eberle,” in *Verfolgung und Wiederentdeckung*: *Protokolle der Gesprächskonzerte des Vereins “Musica Reanimata” über die Komponisten Max Brand, Alfred Goodman, Józef Koffler und die Komponistin Ursula Mamlok*, ed. Bettina Brand (Saarbrücken: PFAU-Verlag, 2001), 59–71 (interview 29 February 2000 plus an addition from a conversation in November 1998). See also Sills, “Three Sides,” 7–9; Ursula Mamlok’s contribution to *Recollections of Wolpe*, <http://www.wolpe.org/page10/page10.html>; and <http://ursulamamlok.com>.

⁴ Gelfand, “The Pioneering Spirit,” 11.

in tonality, albeit with some spiky dissonances. The performance by Windscape, Ensemble-in-Residence at the Manhattan School of Music, is well balanced and appropriately playful in the first and last movements. *Designs* (1962) for violin and piano, Mamlok's first work after commencing study with Shapey, reveals her new compositional vocabulary. The two movements are linked through very similar closing segments that are connected with the opening of the first movement, and they have a cohesive sound although the compositional techniques used are different from one another. The first movement utilizes a constantly varied pitch collection, whereas the second employs a twelve-tone row, but not in the manner of the Second Viennese School. David Bowlin (violin) and Jacob Greenberg (piano), members of the innovative and much-praised International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), show strong technical and musical skills, creating expressivity even in disjunct, angular segments.

Coming later the same year, *String Quartet No. 1* (1962) is a major, compelling work in Mamlok's new language and demonstrates her comfort and maturity with this new approach. Despite independence among the four instruments, as well as rhythmic fluidity and diversity, linear gestures emerge. This work exhibits high levels of complexity and virtuosity in the service of dramatic expression. The performance by Daedalus Quartet shows why they are acclaimed for performances of contemporary music, especially repertoire that is twelve-tone, serial, and technically demanding. The four fine young American players are extremely effective in capturing the essence of the third movement title: "Still, as if suspended."

Mamlok composed *Haiku Settings* (1967) for soprano and flute/alto flute as a true partnership, which is beautifully realized by the excellent performers, again members of ICE: soprano Tony Arnold, noted for her interpretation of contemporary repertoire, and flutist Claire Chase, an active and successful recitalist and chamber musician. At times, the two single lines complement each other in their independence (e.g., during much of movements 1 and 4); elsewhere, they blend as if one (e.g., movement 5, performed on alto flute). *Haiku Settings* highlights Mamlok's attention to effective contrasts and expression that go beyond text painting, which she identified in commentary with the score. Although the voice articulates the words, the flute is at least as much a conveyor of the meaning as is the voice. The clarity of Arnold's voice is fitting and effective for these cryptic poems. Like haiku poetry, the depth of this composition is in its careful crafting rather than in length, with movements ranging from thirty-five seconds to almost three minutes.

Concerto for Oboe and Chamber Orchestra is a 2003 version of an oboe concerto for large orchestra written in 1974–76 and then arranged in 1980 for oboe soloist, two pianists, and a percussionist. As seems appropriate for an orchestral work, Mamlok's handling of texture and rhythm is different from her approach in chamber works. Here the interweaving and independence of lines take place more often between the soloist and the orchestra than among the members of the orchestra, who now function more traditionally as a unit and ground for the soloist. On the other hand, the oboe line retains Mamlok's characteristic virtuosity, angular leaping melodies, and rhythmic variety. Because the original work was written for Nora Post, a champion of extended oboe techniques and especially of multiphonics, the latter figure prominently in the work. Oboist Heinz Holliger is at his best

performing these avant-garde techniques and in the taxing, athletic passages. The Freiburg-based Ensemble SurPlus, led by its founding conductor, the late James Avery (1937–2009), is quite impressive in this challenging work both in terms of precision and in the creation of meaningful musical gestures from the sometimes dense orchestration. This performance is surely a tribute to the musicianship and insight of James Avery as well as the ensemble members.

In *Concertino* (1984, rev. 1985–87) for woodwind quintet, string orchestra, and percussion, Mamlok favors continuity with more compact melodic lines and more regular rhythmic figures than in the preceding oboe concerto. Stylistically, the aural impression draws more heavily on Mamlok's earlier neoclassicism, yet the music retains elements of modernism. The orchestration and wide timbral palette are among this work's most effective features. *Concertino* may be less challenging for listeners as well as performers than the concerto; however, for me both the score and the performance lack the drama and excitement of the concerto. The performance by an active regional Danish orchestra, the Odense Symphony, and American guest conductor Scott Yoo seems prosaic and without sufficient shaping of the score.

2000 Notes (2000), Mamlok's most substantial piano solo work, is cast in four short, musically related movements. The first is titled "Gruff," whereas each of the subsequent movements is referenced only by a metronome marking. The music teems with all manner of energy that belies these abstract titles. The array of musical detail spans the spectrum of dynamics, utilizes the full range of the piano, and includes variety in activity or pacing. The work offers contrasting textures: virtuosic filigree, chains of chords, isolated tones, sweeping gestures, and audible motivic material. Pianist Garrick Ohlsson's performance conveys both the drama and the unity within this work.

The articulate liner notes by Barry Wiener provide excellent guidance for listeners by drawing attention to important compositional details and offering background information for each work, as well as situating Mamlok's style in context with other U.S. composers. The texts of *Haiku Settings*, which are in English, are included in the liner notes. The complete notes and haiku texts are also printed in a German translation. The skillful engineering and sound production for this recording add to its merits.

Despite Mamlok's substantial discography, most of the works presented here are first-time commercial CD recordings.⁵ Mamlok's works compare quite favorably with those of other U.S. twelve-tone and/or serial composers, many of whom have received considerably more attention from historians, critics, and musicians.⁶

⁵ Only *Designs* has been previously issued on a CD that is currently available and in a complete version: *American Women Composers*, Gasparo GS CD-300, 1995, performed by Catherine Tait (violin) and Barry Snyder (piano); Woodwind Quintet was issued on CD but is no longer available from the publisher: *Never Sing before Breakfast: A Decade of New Music*, Newport Classic NPD 85512, 1991, performed by the Quintet of the Americas; only the third movement of *Concertino*, "Elegy," is included on *Journeys: Orchestral Works by American Women*, Leonarda LE 327, 1987, performed by the Bournemouth Sinfonietta and conductor Carolann Martin.

⁶ For further information about these composers, see Joseph N. Straus, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), which begins with analyses of thirty-seven works by thirty-seven diverse American composers before moving toward a newly envisioned history

Hopefully, this CD, with such strong performances by major concert artists as well as exceptional younger performers, will help elevate the visibility of Mamlok and her music.

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Padre José Maria Xavier, *Ofício de Trevas: Matinas de Sábado Santo, Matinas da Ressurreição*. Governo de Minas et al., MR02. 2005

1992 sparked an abundance of recordings of Latin American choral music, with CDs such as *Nueva España: Close Encounters in the New World* (Boston Camerata) and *Mexican Baroque* (Chanticleer), two especially well-known musical commemorations of the encounter between Europe and indigenous America. Many recordings have been made subsequently, some by Latin American artists such as Exaudi (Cuba) or the Coro de Cámara of the University of the Americas in Puebla (Mexico). As for Brazil, which celebrated its encounter in 2000 (Pedro Álvares Cabral sailed into Porto Seguro in 1500), an array of choral CDs are available. Composers such as Jose Mauricio Nunes Garcia, *mestre de capela* of Rio de Janeiro cathedral, and groups such as the Associação de Canto Coral or the Camerata de Rio Janeiro have been represented; an especially interesting CD, *Negro Spirituals au Brésil Baroque* by the French ensemble XVIII-21 Musique de Lumières, reflects Brazil's mixed-race heritage by featuring compositions by slaves freed either before or after emancipation in 1888.

Sacred choral music of what is now Brazil has been concentrated in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais. (The name means “General Mines” in Portuguese, so called because of the gold and diamond deposits discovered there.) Minas Gerais boasts the highest concentration of colonial baroque churches in the country, many with organs by local builders. Its church music is correspondingly rich. Prints of music by Haydn, Boccherini, early Beethoven, and others testify to a wealth of performance materials, as do the works of several composers, most of whom will likely be unfamiliar to listeners in the United States: Marcos Coelho Netto (1746–1806), Ignacio Parreiras Neves (ca. 1730–ca. 1793), and Manoel Dias de Oliveira (ca. 1735–1813). In the 1940s, the German-born Uruguayan musicologist Curt Francisco Lange laid the groundwork for research on Minas Gerais and its church music. Subsequent scholarship, as well as performance, has tended to focus on the eighteenth century.

of this music. Mamlok's *Panta Rhei* (1981) for piano trio is included (pp. 140–45), along with comments throughout the book about her individualistic approach to twelve-tone composition.