

Daugherty: Dreamachine - Trail of Tears - Reflections on the Mississippi (2018)

Written by bluesever

Sunday, 23 September 2018 12:51 -

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Trail of Tears 1. I. Where the wind blew free 00:10:00 2. II. Incantation 00:06:06 3. III. Sun dance 00:06:45 Dreamachine 4. I. Da Vinci's Wings 00:09:26 5. II. Rube Goldberg's Variations 00:04:56 6. III. Electric Eel 00:10:32 7. IV. Vulcan's Forge 00:09:01 Reflections on the Mississippi 8. I. Mist 00:05:33 9. II. Fury 00:03:43 10. III. Prayer 00:06:43 11. IV. Steamboat 00:04:39

Amy Porter (flute) Dame Evelyn Glennie (percussion) Carol Jantsch (tuba) Albany Symphony
David Alan Miller (conductor)

GRAMMY® Award-winning composer Michael Daugherty explores the relationships between machines, humanity and nature in three unique concertos. Dreamachine for solo percussion and orchestra is a colourful tribute to the imagination of inventors who dreamed of new machines, both real and surreal. The flute concerto Trail of Tears dramatizes the tragic governmental forced relocation of Native Americans in 1838 and meditates on how the human spirit discovers ways to deal with adversity. Reflections on the Mississippi for tuba and orchestra is a musical voyage down the legendary Mississippi River from Iowa to Louisiana. The Albany Symphony, conducted by David Alan Miller, delivers mesmerizing performances by three outstanding women soloists: GRAMMY® Award-winning percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie, flutist extraordinaire Amy Porter, and Carol Jantsch, the remarkable principal tuba of The Philadelphia Orchestra. ---Editorial Reviews, naxos.com

Michael Daugherty is one of the more engaging and imaginative composers now operating in the US – or anywhere else, for that matter. He first piqued my interest with Sunset Strip, which headlined a terrific BIS collection, American Spectrum. After that came a couple of Naxos

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issues, among them Mount Rushmore and Tales of Hemingway. With their focus on landmarks and their references to pop culture – superheroes, celebrities, the cinema – these albums are most entertaining. And no, that's not damning with faint praise for the quality and range of Daugherty's writing is never in doubt; all these performances are pretty good, too.

What we have here are three spanking new concertos, for flute, solo percussion and tuba respectively. Of the soloists, Dame Evelyn Glennie is probably the best known. I last heard her in *The Conjuror*, an extraordinary work by John Corigliano (Naxos). In a two-handed review, John Quinn and I agreed to make that a Recording of the Month. Flautist Amy Porter, who premiered *Trail of Tears* in 2010, is new to me, as is Carol Jantsch, principal tuba with the Philadelphia Orchestra since 2005. Ditto the Albany Symphony and their conductor, David Alan Miller, so this really is an 'innocent ear' review.

In his booklet notes, Daugherty explains that *Trail of Tears* is a 'musical journey' that charts the removal of Native Americans living east of the Mississippi, a process that began with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This shameful period in American history saw the relocation of the Cherokee, who were forced to march 800 miles to Oklahoma in the winter of 1839. Nearly 4,000 of them died during the five-month trek, which has become known as the 'Trail of Tears'. The composer writes movingly about this event, which has powerful resonances with other times and places in more recent history.

The title of the first movement is a poignant quote from the Native American leader, Geronimo: 'I was born on the prairies where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun.' Porter's opening solo – mournful, yet strangely uplifting – is greeted by an expansive orchestral riposte that speaks of big skies and wide horizons. It seems Daugherty insists on every flute technique available, a challenge to which this flautist responds with fluency and feeling. That said, she – and the piece – wear their virtuosity quite lightly, so the deeply expressive nature of this music is never compromised. As for the orchestral writing, it's both eloquent and forceful, and that creates a compelling soundscape.

In my review of *The Conjuror*, I commended Naxos for their exemplary sonics, and I must do so here. This is a full, immensely dynamic recording that ekes out every last detail of Porter's performance – the calls and cries of *Incantation* are especially well caught – not to mention the weight and warmth of the orchestra in the jubilant *Sun dance*. Miller directs it all with authority and insight. As so often with Daugherty, one is subliminally aware of a much broader musical/cultural influences – the work's breath-taking vistas bring to mind the plains and rivers of Virgil Thomson and the unspoilt prairies of Aaron Copland – and yet his language is always arresting and original.

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Dame Evelyn was the soloist in the 2014 premiere of the second concerto, with the WDR Rundfunkorchester Köln under Frank Strobel. Written for a festival that focused on humans and machines, the piece starts with Leonardo's detailed sketches of bird and bat wings. The second delights in the weird 'contraptions' of cartoonist-engineer Rube Goldberg, and the third fixates on a surreal drawing by the artist-scientist Fritz Kahn. The fourth deals with the constant battle between logic and emotion that defines Mr Spock, the half-man, half-Vulcan from the iconic TV series, Star Trek.

As its conjoined title implies, Dreamachine is about fusions; in fact, Glennie's marvellous marimba playing in Da Vinci's Wings is itself a hybrid, of forensic detail and undoubted feeling. As for the Goldberg Variations – Rube's cartoons featured bizarre combinations of man, beast and machine – it demands quirky contributions from all concerned. Just like the syndicated strips, this is a pleasant diversion, designed to intrigue and amuse. Similarly, Kahn's picture of a light bulb plugged into an electric eel gives rise to some very unusual sounds. And Trekkies will be thrilled by Daugherty's rat-a-tat finale, which, tightly constructed, includes a nod or three to Jerry Goldsmith's sweeping score for the original ST.

The third concerto, Reflections on the Mississippi, begins with a darkly resonant solo that recalls Paul Robeson's Old Man River. Jantsch, who premiered the piece in 2013, is always full, firm and fearless – not a given with this instrument – and she's wonderfully nuanced in Mist. In complete contrast is Fury, a reminder of 1927's catastrophic floods; cue muscular writing and some highly virtuosic playing from Jantsch, who modulates from turbulence to sudden tenderness with ease. The pealing bells of Prayer are nicely done – the tuba part is suitably hymn-like – and Steamboat celebrates the vessels that once plied this great waterway. (As an aside, anyone interested in this bygone age should read Tim Gautreaux's epic novel, The Missing.)

This is a splendid addition to Daugherty's growing discography. Superbly played and very well engineered/edited by Silas Brown and Doron Schächter, it doesn't match the musical or technical excellence of The Conjuror; that said, it comes tantalisingly close. My review is based on a 16-bit press download, although I did subsequently buy the 24-bit version from Qobuz. I was disappointed to find the latter is sampled at the basic 44.1kHz; not only that, the presentation now seems brighter, perhaps even a little hard edged. So, forget about the 'high-res' files and stick with the 'CD quality' ones, which are more than adequate here.

Daugherty at his inimitable and engaging best; don't hesitate. ---Dan Morgan,

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