

Few musical combinations are as primal or as modern as that of flute and percussion. From Ancient Egypt to classical Greece, from the plains of Africa to the Mayan Empire in the New World, images of flutes and drums are ubiquitous throughout the world's musical cultures. Yet, despite its ancient pedigree, it's only been since the second half of the 20th century this pairing has been explored to any significant degree by western composers, with hundreds of new works written for flute(s) and various percussion instruments, (stay tuned for an obscenely overpriced "Bibliography of Music for Flute and Percussion" from the Greenwood Press)! Among those ensembles eager to explore and grow the repertoire is Caballito Negro, an Oregon-based duo comprised of flutist Tessa Brinckman and percussionist Terry Longshore. Praised by the new music press for their "fearless, ecstatic blend of modern and traditional aesthetics", Brinckman and Longshore bring tremendous credibility and energy to their first recorded project, offering a tantalizing sample of three of the compositions showcased in their multi-media "Songlines" performances: David P. Jones' Music For South Africa, William Kraft's Encounters XVI and This Is Like Jazz! by Ivan Trevino. The remainder of the "Songlines" program (as of yet, unreleased) included works by Howard Hersh, Mark Applebaum and a collaborative composition from Caballito Negro.

The EP opens with David P. Jones' Music for South Africa (2003), a work originally composed for alto saxophone and percussion. For their "Songlines" tour, Caballito Negro arranged the saxophone part for alto flute, adding vocal effects inspired by the Zulu and Xhosa languages and music (as a reflection of Tessa Brinckman's South African heritage). In the program notes, the composer cites the continuing inequities that many South Africans continue to face as an inspiration, but none of this is readily apparent to the casual listener. In fact, the suite is an uplifting show-stealer! I can see it being programmed on a lot of master's recitals in the future! The sensuous breathiness of Brinckman's alto flute and African vocables combined with Longshore's confident handling of the complex polyrhythms inspired by African balafon and percussion music is hypnotic and engaging.

By way of contrast, William Kraft's Encounters XVI, the 16th installment in a long series of "Encounters", a series of chamber compositions begun in 1975, immediately establishes its modernist outlook with the flute's surging, gestural opening and shifting colors from Longshore's battery. Kraft's writing for the duo shows particular sensitivity to percussion instruments, which comes as no surprise considering that Kraft played in the percussion section of the Los Angeles Philharmonic for decades, prior to becoming its composer in residence from 1981 to 1985. Despite the lack of "tonal references" and sometimes disjointed textures, there is a restful, even nocturnal quality to the piece, further reinforced by the dreamy, slightly out-of-focus sound of the vibraphone.

This short sampler concludes with Austin-based composer and percussionist Ivan Trevino's THIS IS LIKE JAZZ!, a duo for contrabass flute and marimba (with spoken word by the marimba player). Written as a musical memoir of a week spent in the reclusive nation of Turkmenistan, where Trevino and his cello-rock band, Break of Reality were invited by the US State Department to perform and teach music. It's thrilling to hear Brinckman coax a playful palette of husky, percussive and seductive sounds out of the ungainly contrabass flute. Unfortunately, I found the spoken word portions a bit distracting, especially given the fascinating sounds Brinckman was making, and Longshore's complex rhythmic counterpoints. It just seemed a bit superfluous. That said, Trevino is a fascinating composer who writes thrillingly and idiomatically for percussion (his SPUR for solo snare drum and tape is one of the most fun percussion works I've heard in a long time) and fans of Apocalyptica, 2Cellos and Tina Guo are urged to check out Trevino's side project, Break of Reality.

Despite its brevity, "Songlines" covers a lot of stylistic (and geographic!) territory. The performances are near flawless! Brinckman plays with an absolutely gorgeous tone throughout the full range of all the instruments - even the sensuous, breathy contrabass flute, which really doesn't call for much bel canto and Longshore's understated virtuosity is percussion poetry at its best.

I look forward to hearing more from this adventurous duo. Unfortunately, "Songlines" is only available as a download at this time but is available through all the usual suspects (CDBaby, iTunes, Amazon).

- Joshua Cheek, 2017