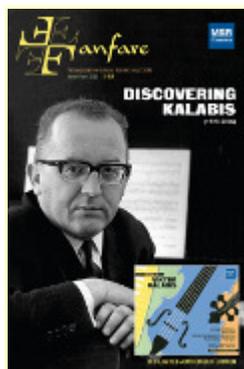


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Angell Pn Tr: FRIBBINS Piano Trio. String Quartet No. 1, "I Have... on GUILD



Classical Reviews - Composers & Works

Written by [Barnaby Rayfield](#)

Thursday, 27 January 2011

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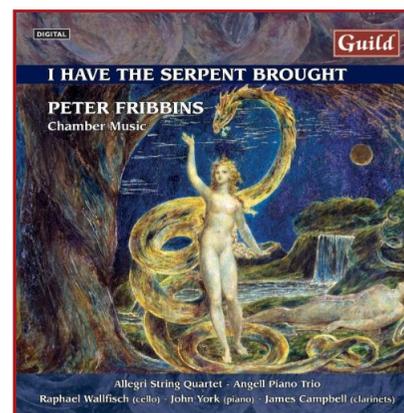
Current Issue Contents



FRIBBINS Piano Trio. String Quartet No. 1, "I Have the Serpent Brought." Cello Sonata. Clarinet Quintet • Angell Pn Tr; Allegri Str Qrt; John York (pn); Raphael Wallfisch (vc) • GUILD GMCD7343 (70:03)

What is it with William Blake paintings this month? This is the second album to have his elusive, allegorical work grace a cover, elsewhere giving a disc of John Plant's vocal works some literary emphasis, and in the case here with Blake's *Eve and the Serpent*, an allusion not to his own poetry, but confusingly to John Donne's *Twickenham Garden*, a line of which supplies the subtitle to Peter Fribbins's First String Quartet. Donne and Blake could hardly be bettered to convey high-minded Britishness to a listener new to Fribbins (of which I am one), but my main impression after listening to this immensely rewarding collection of chamber music is of a continental flavor, with overtones not of Tippett or Elgar, but of Ravel, Debussy, and even Janáček.

There is something especially French in tone about Fribbins's piano trio. Marked *drammatico*, the first movement's hushed, tense violin writing opens out quickly into a rhapsodic melody, punctuated by some very Ravelian piano harmonies. By contrast, the second movement starts off icily with the cello bringing the only lyricism and the bass-note piano chords giving a bell-like, funereal tread, before passion is ignited again in a bustling climax. It is a beautiful trio: poised, lyrical, and poignant, despite the flashes of wit and exuberance. Although I can't quite see the Mahlerian influences that Fribbins



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himself cites, the sardonic flavor of Bartók is apparent especially in the final movement. The cheeky use of pizzicato and the variations around a four-note motif create a more playful, almost salon world than expected from a composer influenced by Tippett.

Fribbins's First String Quartet, commenced when he was just 20, strikes a bleaker note and, in the quieter, more reflective passages, an English chamber-music style, especially true of the second movement's aching, poised climax. It is a concise, angry work, tightly thought-out from its dark, twisty opening to the jagged staccato writing of the final bars, leaving the listener unresolved in midair. Although not intended to be programmatic, the Donne reference is not superfluous, such is the work's uneasy blend of beauty and danger.

Commissioned by the performers here, the Cello Sonata is the most wistful, conventionally lyrical piece on the recital and again very French in its plangent, mellow lyricism, although this is also partly due to the limpid refinement of York and Wallfisch's playing, big-name artists to have on any label. Despite its quicksilver change of ideas and harmonies-repeated figures underlying the other instrument's melodic line, virtuosic flourishes turning suddenly to Baroque spareness, the sonata still maintains a clear linear journey to its splashy finale.

Structure is again key to the quintet for clarinet and strings, very much the spikiest work on the disc, with the formally laid-out four movements paying homage to Brahms's and Mozart's own clarinet quintets, yet Fribbins breaks free from any classical ties, reveling in the contrasting battle of strings and astringent clarinet, while seamlessly working in various motifs. The clarinet, sometimes biting commentator, sometimes mournfully lyrical, becomes Fribbins's ideal tool to confound expectations, conjuring up beauty just where you least expect it, like in the otherwise frenetic second movement. The ending is simplicity itself, with just a simple strummed chord from the cello, the absence of the clarinet becoming like the death of a character. The superb playing from James Campbell and the Allegri String Quartet brings out the color and anarchism of the piece.

Despite my frequent name-checking and Fribbins's own acknowledged influences, I sincerely feel Fribbins is a confident, young (b.1969) voice in composition, respectful of past chamber-music style and secure and inventive with tonality. Just the caliber of the artists participating on this recording proves I am not alone in wishing these works gain wider currency. As ever with Guild, the production values are high, with excellent notes and bios. Sound is airy yet defined, although the piano feels too distant in relation to the closely miked strings. Only the cello sonata sounds noticeably different in ambiance, despite the fact that all four works were recorded in different venues at different times. This is an elegantly performed collection of music that can be alternately wistful, savage, respectful of tradition, and yet also playful. If Fribbins is not the most cutting-edge of new composers, then he is certainly the best-informed and one of the bravest to toe the tonal line. A winner, I hope. **Barnaby Rayfield**

Last Updated (Thursday, 27 January 2011)

[< Prev](#)

[Next >](#)

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