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Review by Colin Clarke

SMIRNOVA Joan of Arc • Simona Smirnova (voc, kanklės); Caroline Drexler, Josh Henderson (vn); Trevor New (va); Julia Henderson (vc); Chris McCarthy (pn) • SIMONA SMIRNOVA no catalog number (50:15) Available from bandcamp.com

Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 classic silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, a commission by the Société Générale des Films, remains a masterpiece. The part of Joan of Arc was taken in the film by stage actress Renée Jeanne Falconetti; apparently Dreyer spent some 18 months burying himself in transcripts of Joan of Arc’s trial by the English in the early 15th century. Close-ups from the cinematographer Rudolph Maté allow a window into Joan’s suffering. The negative of the film was lost in a fire in Berlin, but a print resurfaced in 1981 in a psychiatric institution in Oslo, Norway. Robert Bresson was of course to revisit the Joan of Arc story memorably, but there is no doubting the cinematographic power of Dreyer’s film. Falconetti oozes otherworldliness during her times of adversity.

Simona Smirnova’s score dates from 2018; it was part of the 15th biennial Feminist Theory and Music conference in Boston in June 2019 as well as Composers Now 2020 Festival in New York City in February 2020. The recording was made in COVID times at Oktaven Audio, bemasked, socially distanced, and triumphant. Smirnova’s music has a timeless aspect while able to reference a wide range of modes of expression; and her own voice, too, has that otherworldly quality. Heard alone at the outset of “The Quote,” Smirnova’s voice seems to exit time’s continuum, while in “Preliminary Enquiry” the sense of disquiet is palpable. She also plays the kanklės, a Lithuanian plucked stringed instrument (a sort of zither). Smirnova is herself Lithuanian born, and while she is also known as a jazz vocalist, her music here betrays little jazz influence. She is able instead to project a sense of disquiet even when, as in “Interrogation,” a more popular melody peeks through.

The sound of laughter initiates “Judges”; but it is the icy chill of “Torture Room” that finds Smirnova at her most Modernist. “Old Market Place,” the penultimate movement,

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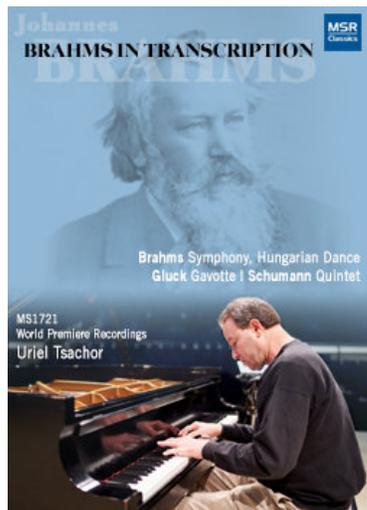
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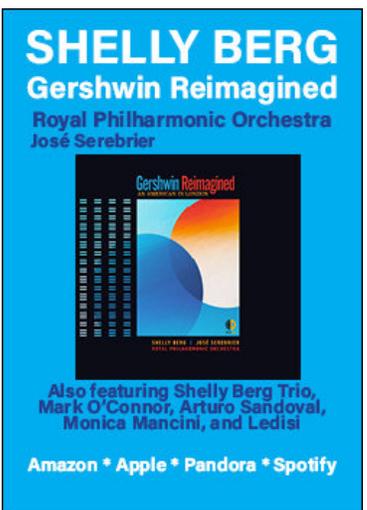
Double Helix
By Colin Clarke



perhaps shows her pluralist side to best advantage, moving from gritty timbres to pared-down, lonely, sustained notes against unsettled pizzicato via varied harmonic terrain. Smirnova’s voice is joined by the piano of Chris McCarthy in the final “Empty Land”; McCarthy’s jazzy solos seem to offer hope before an interruption from a more chorale-like string passage. The work ends hauntingly, hanging in the air.

The performers on this disc play with palpable commitment and technical mastery. The embracing by contemporary composers of silent film seems to be a continuing, a rewarding, phenomenon, and this is one of its finest examples. Smirnova has a clear resonance with Joan of Arc’s single-minded calling, as she herself explains in her preliminary note. Caught in fine sound and with impeccable playing from all concerned, this audio disc comes highly recommended. But do make a point of seeing the film, too.

The disc is available from bandcamp.com, where one may also purchase an organic cotton tote bag with Joan of Arc branding (to my great disappointment, not submitted for review). **Colin Clarke**



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