

American Record Guide

independent critics reviewing classical recordings and music in concert



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Guide to
Summer Festivals

COLGRASS: *Arctic Dreams; Mysterious Village; Deja Vu; Beethoven Machine; Raag Mala; Winds of Nagual; Old Churches; Urban Requiem; Apache Lullaby; Bali*

North Texas Wind Symphony, Cincinnati Wind Symphony/ Eugene Corporon; Georgia State Symphonic Winds/ Robert Ambrose

GIA 880 [2CD] 142 minutes

Michael Colgrass is an American composer whose beginnings came from the Chicago jazz scene as a drummer. After graduating from the University of Illinois in 1956 with degrees in music performance and composition, he briefly served as timpanist with the 7th Army Symphony in Stuttgart, Germany, before moving to New York City to fine tune his composing and free-lance as a percussionist and drummer. In 1974 he moved to Toronto and has lived there ever since. He won the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1978 for his orchestral composition, *Deja Vu*, and an Emmy Award in 1982 for the documentary *Soundings: The Music of Michael Colgrass*. His dedication to the repertoire of wind music has resulted in 26 works—representing over 40 percent of his entire compositional output.

The GIA Composer's Collection series is the product of years of dedication to the music of famous wind composers by conductor Eugene Migliaro Corporon. His immense catalog of recordings includes more than 600 works for wind symphony. This collection of Colgrass's music is certain to be a reference point for future generations of wind symphony conductors and musicians. Some of these works have appeared in previous releases that we've reviewed.

Written in 1991, *Arctic Dreams* is inspired by the Arctic landscape and its indigenous people, the Inuit or "Eskimos". The work is in seven programmatic movements and uses some interesting colors and new sounds. Unique combinations of instruments and voices depict the icy environment, even animal calls. I would be remiss if I did not give exalted praise to Kyle Mullins, the trombone soloist in the 'Inuit Landscape', the opening movement. His playing is outstanding, with a robust tone, singing vibrato, and very musical phrasing. The vocalizations of the North Texas A Cappella Choir add a primitive character to 'Throat Singing With Laughter'. The sound of wind, created by blowing through instruments, combined with animal calls creates an eerie background for the distant sounds of celebration in 'Polar Night'. 'Spring Light' depicts the color changes in the ice as the sun reflects its light over the course of a day. After 'The Hunt', a celebratory 'Drum Dance' takes place, with the percussion section leading the exuberant festivities.

I found a short video excerpt on the Internet from a new documentary, called *Michael Colgrass: Musical Maverick*, where he discusses the time he spent in the Arctic and how it inspired him to write *Arctic Dreams*. He has a unique voice in wind repertoire, and this piece is certainly an adventure.

Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, *Deja Vu* was scored for percussion quartet and orchestra. Colgrass transcribed it for wind ensemble in 1986. The title has several meanings. First, it serves as a throwback to Colgrass's life as a percussionist and percussion composer; and second, it has strong roots in jazz and older musical styles—just like his early career. The band is separated into two ensembles that are placed together on the stage and play back and forth in an echoing "cat and mouse" game. The University of North Texas is widely known for its Jazz Studies program, so it is no surprise that those elements of the music are utterly fantastic (Klavier 11091: Sept/Oct 1999).

The *Urban Requiem* from 1995 is the second of Colgrass's works for wind ensemble to use a quartet of soloists—in this case a saxophone quartet, here the Great Lakes Saxophone Quartet. The recording is taken from a concert performance with the North Texas Wind Symphony and is every bit as good as the studio recordings on the rest of the album. The piece takes over 30 minutes and explores a wide range of musical styles that include baroque, calypso, minimalism, and jazz. It is not nearly as cohesive as some of the other compositions in this set. It tends to ramble without direction sometimes. But the Great Lakes Saxophone Quartet is top notch, and they are accompanied with conviction.

Several pieces on this set are for younger band. *Mysterious Village*, from 2006, is a mysterious sound painting of an ancient place that could be anywhere in the world. The child-like *Beethoven Machine* was written in 2003 and is based on Beethoven's Sonatina in G. The band is split into two parts, a "Machine" that cranks out the youthful music of Beethoven, and an adult group that is more mature and often plays in minor keys with more nuances in articulation and style.

In the 2002 composition *Old Churches*, Colgrass based the melodic material on Gregorian chant and synthesizes it with 20th Century styles and sounds. The *Apache Lullaby*, written in 2003, is based on a Native American melody that he heard back in 1975. He wrote a theme and variations style work that is very accessible to young players.

One of his most challenging works for young band is his 2005 composition, *Bali*, inspired by an extended stay in Ubud, a town

in south central Bali. It's a creative and playful work that is full of the joy of its people. Percussive dance music permeates much of the work. Colgrass includes a number of ethnic or ethnic-sounding percussion instruments such as clay pots, ceramic and aluminum bowls, chopsticks, and yarn mallets. All of these works are performed with conviction by the North Texas Wind Symphony.

The two remaining works in this set are recorded with different ensembles. The *Winds of Nagual* was composed in 1985 and recorded with Corporon conducting the Cincinnati Wind Symphony in 1990 (Klavier 11064: July/Aug 1991: 179). Corporon began the Klavier Wind Project in Cincinnati. It has since developed into the GIA Composer's Collection and assumed much of the Klavier catalog for these releases. He drew his inspiration from tales by Carlos Castaneda about a Yaqui Indian sorcerer from Mexico. The programmatic work is in seven movements that play along like a film score. The Cincinnati Wind Symphony performance is flawless and exciting. Though it was recorded 20 years ago, there is no audible difference in quality; Klavier's recording team has consistently produced vivid and brilliant recordings.

Raag Mala—"Music of India through Western Ears"—is performed by the Georgia State University Symphonic Wind Ensemble with Robert Ambrose conducting. Colgrass uses the instruments in interesting combinations to mimic the sound of Indian culture and music. He rarely scores for the full band at once, instead writing a series of significant solo passages for clarinet, bass clarinet, saxophone, trombone, and flute that are often accompanied by a drone-like pipe organ. The Georgia ensemble plays very well, if not quite up to the level of their North Texas and Cincinnati counterparts.

The sound quality is fantastic in this excellent set.