

stereophile

BIMSTEIN

Larkin Gifford's Harmonica

Phillip Bimstein, sound manipulation; Stephen Caplan, oboe; Larkin Giffords, voice, harmonica; Tom Martinet, Robert Logan, voice; Sierra Winds; Abramyan String Quartet
Starkland ST-214 (CD). 2006. Phillip Bimstein, prod.; Thomas Steenland, exec. prod., mastering. DDD.? TT: 58:10
Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★★

Phillip Bimstein (b. 1947) is an American original. The leader of the 1980s new-wave band Phil 'n' the Blanks has evolved into a singular musical entity who has found his voice in the storytelling of folks around him. Around him happens to be Springdale, Utah, where Bimstein has served a couple of terms as mayor.

This theory-composition-orchestration grad of the Chicago Conservatory and UCLA has created a stylish merging of found sounds, interviews, and written material for traditional soloists and instrumental ensembles, weaving those elements—spoken, performed, or sampled and keyboard-manipulated—into quirky, moving, and delightful musical journeys. An earlier Starkland release, *Garland Hirschi's Cows*, was the ear-opening CD of 1997. *Larkin Gifford's Harmonica* is, in its own way, just as stunning and heartwarming.

In *Casino*, a 13-minute, three-movement suite, Bimstein's focal point is an interview with Tom Martinet, a Vegas dice caller who had studied for the priesthood—a calling that lends him a particular perspective on the sacred and profane qualities of gamblers. Cut and spliced, Martinet's words on everything from the superstitions and habits of gamblers to his own casino-floor patter form both basic rhythm and storyline, complemented by an artful dance of the electronic and mechanical noises of one-armed bandits and roulette wheels, interspersed with Bimstein's own score for wind quintet. Joyful and cartoonish to dark and witty, Bimstein's juggling of disparate sonic elements captures the personality of the speaker in a disarming and thoroughly musical way.

The 14-minute *Bushy Wushy Rag* takes you to St. Louis' Busch Stadium, where the crack of the bat, the thud of the glove, and the struttin'-with-some-barbecue voice of long-time beer vendor Robert Logan dance off with Bimstein's funky variants on Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag."

But the disc's centerpiece is the three-movement title work, cast entirely from spoken and sung reminiscences of harmonica player Larkin Gifford, who was born in 1906. Along with Gifford's stories of his boyhood and family and homemade entertainment, Bimstein has dissected, manipulated, and reassembled fragments from Gifford's harmonica renditions of American folksongs to create beds of sound that propel the storytelling and add a sense of mood and atmosphere.

By the end, you wish you could meet all these guys, as well as Bimstein himself. You feel as if you have a sense of them and the things they love—that you've intersected their worlds at a unique and penetrating tangent. —Dan Buckley

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