

“Both composers, while very different creative personalities, write music that is fresh, imaginative, and rooted in the physicality of performance.”

CD Review by Robert Carl

CHIEN Hush. *Chimers. Beneath A Trace of Vapor. Mobius.* DAVIS *Ghostlight. On speaking a hundred names. On the Nature of Thingness* • International Contemporary Ensemble • STARKLAND 223 (65:00)

The International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), founded by the visionary flutist-musical entrepreneur Claire Chase, has become a gold standard of sorts for what a 21st-century new music ensemble should be: a collective of virtuosos who can form, dissolve, and reform in flexible numbers and instrumentations for projects that are commissioned, and for which they themselves search to present. Not only does this disc show the group in fine form, it also highlights two composers who also happen to be performing members—Chien is a pianist, and Davis a percussionist. Their creative profiles are very different, but the music of each has strong character, great imagination, and above all, a finely attuned sensitivity to sound itself as a compositional parameter.

Phyllis Chien is fascinated by “little” sounds. By this I don’t mean those that are trivial or dismissable, but rather fragile, delicate, toy-like. She is particularly interested in the toy piano as a sound source, but rather than playing it alone (and there’s a real repertoire here, albeit small—i.e., Cage wrote a beautiful suite for the instrument), she finds all sorts of imaginative ways to manipulate and reconsider it. In *Hush*, parts of a broken toy piano are used in turn as a means of preparing a piano, and the resultant sound really is a synthesis of the two (I found myself trying to pin down its “genealogy” unsuccessfully until I read the program note). *Chimers* takes a mix of instruments, attaches pitch rods from toy pianos to some, and then strikes those with tuning forks, which creates a bell-like sound that’s almost like a gentle electric guitar. *Beneath a trace of Vapor* is (ironically), the most “traditional” work, as it’s for flute and tape. As with many such works, there’s a seamless blend of pitched with breath sounds. And finally *Mobius* is the most conceptually elaborate and experimental piece of the batch. It involves real-time creation of miniature piano rolls that are then fed through a player toy piano; once passed through, the rolls are twisted like the title and fed through a second instrument, with the music accordingly inverted. And finally, another player processes the sounds in real time to create a burbling accompaniment. In a sense, all these works accumulate in memory into a sort of “metapiece,” that creates dreamlike delight.



Nathan Davis (b.1983—neither composers’ birthdate is on the album; I found his on the internet but Chien’s—as well as her pieces’ dates—is better concealed, though she seems to be of a similar generation) casts a wider net in terms of his sound sources, though a slightly more traditional one. *Ghostlight* (2013) is a work for solo prepared piano, which gradually introduces the altered notes into a nervous repeated-note texture. In turn it opens up into an ecstatic throbbing texture throughout the instrument’s entire register. *On speaking a hundred names* (2010) is for solo bassoon and processing. Once again it begins with a simple motive, a lyrical three-note arch, though there’s a catch—the notes are constantly played with different fingerings, often on a single breath, so that the color of the line is constantly changing. Over time this melodic texture morphs into a polyphonic field, and then increasingly rough and powerful waves of dark sounds emerge derived from the bassoon’s input. Finally, *On the Nature of Thingness* (2011) is a meditation on objects, and their relation to the ideas and words that represent them. Texts are by Zbigniew Herbert, Hugo Ball, Arthur Rimbaud, and Italo Calvino. The first movement sets Herbert’s text (eponymous with piece-title) with the greatest range of gestures and most traditional vocal and instrumental writing; it’s very powerful in an Expressionist tradition, and expertly calibrated for maximum sonic impact. But I feel almost as though Davis felt he needed to establish his compositional “cred” at the outset before moving onto the succeeding three movements, which are far more adventurous in their restrictive simplicity. Ball’s Dada nonsense text (alternating with English translations of the *Dada Manifesto*) is accompanied by an ensemble of jaw harps, making for an infectious ridiculousness. Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” surrounds a monotone vocal line with delicate plucked and struck sounds. And the Calvino “An outside with and inside in it” is the most reductive of all, a repetitive chant accompanied by a low rumble of double bass and bass drum, at times harmonized by chords following the melodic contour. The whole thing has the effect of a deeply breathed prayer.

While the ICE personnel are varied and not included in a headnote due to *Fanfare* guidelines, special attention should be paid in Nathan’s pieces to soloists Jacob Greenberg, piano; Rebekah Heller, bassoon; and Tony Arnold, soprano. Chien is a prominent performer in three of her works, along with Cory Smythe on keyboards, and Eric Lamb, flute. And in *Mobius*, the design of her roll-punching is shared with Robert Dietz, whom she credits as co-author.

The sound of the recording is spacious and sensuous. Both composers, while very different creative personalities, write music that is fresh, imaginative, and rooted in the physicality of performance. **Robert Carl**

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