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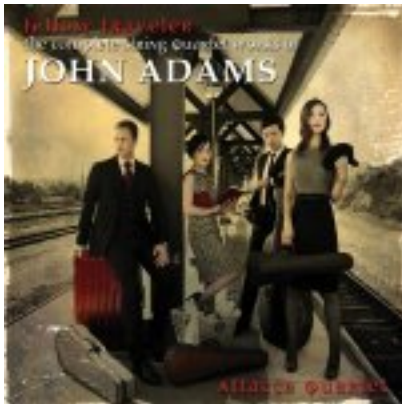
“Fellow Traveller”: The Complete String Quartet Works of John Adams

John’s Book of Alleged Dances – String Quartet – Fellow Traveller

Attacca Quartet: Amy Schroeder (violin 1), Keiko Tokunaga (violin 2), Luke Fleming (viola), Andrew Yee (cello)

Recorded March 12-16, 2012 at the Academy of Arts & Letters, NYC, NY– 67’05

Azica Records ACD-71280 – Booklet in English



Whether a fan of John Adams’ music or not, one must admit that the composer has staying power. Adams is now entering his fourth decade as a major American composer, still composing new works and earning international acclaim as a living master. Since their inception at The Juilliard School, the young Attacca Quartet has closely aligned itself with Adams’ music, particularly his recent string quartet. This new album boasts that it encompasses Adams’ complete works for string quartet, not an overwhelming number of works, but still an achievement nonetheless. More impressive, however, is the confidence and élan with which the works are performed. The Attacca are remarkable in every aspect of performance here. Whether that is reason enough to dive in will certainly be based on one’s perception of Adams’ music.

Adams' musical style has evolved from its West Coast minimalist style of the 80's to a unique fusion of minimalist energy, romantic colors, and 20th-century thematic imitation. Of course, that doesn't even begin to include the influence of American rock and jazz on his music. It all adds up to a style that is immediately distinguishable and engaging. The album opens with *John's Book of Alleged Dances*, a piece for string quartet and recorded prepared piano. Of all Adams' music this may be his most humorous and infectious piece. It is absolutely relentless in its rhythmic assault on the listener, but one that is toe-tapping and raucous like a sort of deranged hoedown. If you like Adams' music (as I admittedly do) and can deal with its occasional repetitiveness, you'd be hard pressed to find it performed and recorded any better than it is here.

The Attacca perform with remarkable stamina, musicality, and verve. The opening "Rag the Bone" is brisk and catchy, played with a smooth confidence of sound. The inner voice ensemble of the group is steady and solid, providing a firm foundation for the first violin to pluck and slice away. It isn't all just musical gymnastics however, as the Attacca have a fine sense of lyrical space and color as in the "Pavane (She's so Fine)." *John's Book of Alleged Dances* is a piece of singular enthusiasm and wit that I find wears well, particularly with such a confident and secure performance by the Attacca. Sure, there are shades (even outright imitations) of *Nixon in China* or *Shaker Loops*, but it is music that is convincing and seriously amusing. I dare you not to tap or hum along to the folksy conclusion "Judah to Ocean."

Adams' formidable *String Quartet* forms nearly half of the disc and this is a performance that is polished and emotionally potent. It is clear by now that the Attacca are not just a virtuoso ensemble with technical proficiency, but they find much in this music to be expressed. The often sparse 20-minute first movement of the *Quartet* displays this more than any piece on disc. It is technically difficult and much more serious in character than the previous piece, and the Attacca perform it with a persuasive fire that grips the listener. Their playing is searing and filled with suspense, transforming instantly to lyrical and thoughtful. This is an ensemble that balances drama with music

in their performance and does both equally well: an impressive performance of an impressive work.

The disc concludes with the world premiere recording of *Fellow Traveller*, a piece Adams dedicated to cohort Peter Sellars. A five minute summation of Adams' style, and a jolting ride, *Fellow Traveller* will either reinforce what the listener loves about Adams or what the listener dislikes about his music. Presumably, if you've made it thus-far in the review or the album, you find his music as invigorating and addicting as I do. Fans of Adams should not hesitate to add this to their collection, and listeners with even a passing interest in his music or those that love fine string playing would do well to check out the Attacca Quartet here. The recorded sound is outstanding with wonderful detail and a clear soundstage. As one of the great living American composers, Adams deserves such a finely executed tribute.

Matthew Richard Martinez