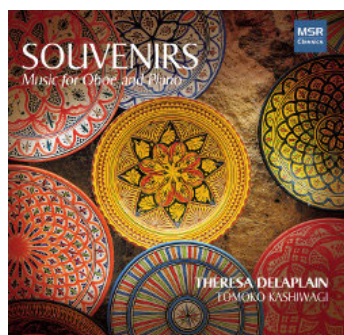




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CD Review by Henry Fogel

ELFMAN Violin Concerto, “Eleven Eleven”.¹
HAILSTORK Piano Concerto No. 1² • JoAnn Falletta, cond; ¹Sandy Cameron (vn); ²Stewart Goodyear (pn); Buffalo PO • NAXOS 8.559925 (65:20) Live: Kleinhans Music Hall, Buffalo ¹10/18–19/2019, ²2/18–19/2022

Danny Elfman inhabits musical territory similar to John Williams. He writes film and television scores, along with music for the traditional concert stage. His idiom is a little more modern-sounding than Williams’s, but not significantly so. Shostakovich is a clear influence in Elfman’s Violin Concerto, with Prokofiev a secondary one. Elfman admits to a preoccupation with the number eleven, and when he and Sandy Cameron (for whom he wrote the work) discovered that the concerto’s score contained exactly 1,111 measures, the title “Eleven Eleven” suggested itself.

Elfman’s film scores include *Batman*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Good Will Hunting*, and *Men in Black*. He has also written themes for the television series *The Simpsons* and *Desperate Housewives*. That background implies a melodic gift as well as a fine ear for orchestral colors for depicting a wide range of moods. Those qualities are evident throughout the Violin Concerto, which was composed in 2017. It is in four movements and takes slightly over 40 minutes to perform. Elfman worked closely with Cameron during its composition.

There is little rest for the soloist, who plays almost constantly. The violin is amplified, allowing Elfman to exploit a large percussion section without burying the soloist. The amplification breaks sharply with classical tradition, but it is not particularly evident when listening to it on a recording. Conductor JoAnn Falletta notes how “the colors of the amplified solo violin bring enormous radiance and great shading and nuance to the work. In keeping with Danny’s famous *Batman* core, the piece has the definite feeling of a voyage through a dark cityscape and is a true concerto noir.”

Much of the music is dramatic, even frenzied, but there are contrasting passages of very quiet music. Here Elfman seems clearly to echo Shostakovich’s uncanny ability to paint a musical picture of desolation, and the third movement conveys a similar sense of eerie emptiness. But then immediately we get an energetic, even tempestuous, finale that shows another side of Shostakovich’s influence, before the concerto ends quietly. Cameron and Falletta are completely in tune with each other, and the Buffalo Philharmonic plays with intensity throughout.

American Black composer Adolphus Hailstork was born in Rochester, New York in 1941, which makes him 12 years older than Elfman. Falletta is music director laureate of the Virginia Symphony, and in 1992, when music director, she commissioned Hailstork’s Piano Concerto No. 1. The composer’s study of Gregorian chant is evident in the shape of the unharmonized unison theme that opens the work. The first movement gains intensity as it unfolds. The heart of the work,

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though, is the second-movement *Adagio*. At 9:30, it is the longest of three movements, its richly beautiful music occasionally recalling Rachmaninoff, particularly in the warm string writing. The finale begins quietly but quickly turns energetic and virtuosic. This fine, entirely accessible work should find a place in the repertoire of American orchestras. Its combination of jazz, African, and Gregorian influences are brought together into a unified and invigorating work. Stewart Goodyear fully embraces the concerto's range. He and Falletta combine for a performance that is both exciting and beautiful.

Naxos claims that this disc "presents brand new concertos from two vibrant and contrasting American composers." I accept the description of Elfman and Hailstork as "vibrant," but Hailstork's concerto is 31 years old, hardly brand new, and Cameron previously recorded the Elfman Violin Concerto in 2018 (with John Mauceri and the Royal Scottish Orchestra for Sony). I did not have the earlier recording for comparison, but without question this disc is a worthy entry in Naxos's important series, "American Classics." Natural, well-balanced recorded sound and helpful notes by Ben Hogwood complete the package. **Henry Fogel**

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