

## ***"Hurricane!"*** CD Review – James C. Arey

When any composer has his works premiered in front of an audience, the reaction of that audience to new sounds and new ideas is always somewhat up for grabs. Indeed, the entire notion of "new music" can spring minds shut faster than a bear trap. But when a composer is versed in both the techniques of today and comfortable with the sounds of the past, the effect of the "new" is softened - the landscape painted may be unfamiliar, but the colors, the blues and greens, and soft pinks, the gentle brush strokes and canvas, are tools that have been used for centuries. The CD "Hurricane" marks musical firsts for both composer Stephen Dankner and for the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. As the LPO celebrates its 10th anniversary season, the music of Dankner was chosen to represent New Orleans' finest musicians, and all fans of new music, for the first-ever commercial recording released by the LPO. The new CD entitled "Hurricane" contains three works by Dankner: the colorful curtain-raiser "Hurricane", the sweeping and melodic "Concerto for Alto Saxophone", and the grand "Song of Solomon", a symphony inspired by the love poetry found in the Old Testament. The nine-minute "Hurricane" reminds one of the Alpine Symphony by Richard Strauss: still, dark silences, punctuated by the approach of a storm, a martial theme swirling in and out of rich chromatic harmonies. Structured as a continuous orchestral variation, "Hurricane" opens quietly, and then builds toward a series of percussive climaxes. Aided by a wind machine, the music reaches its zenith, and then, just as gradually, softens into the distance, clouds breaking up, an ethereal stillness returning. That is, until the final fugal section, when Mother Nature unleashes her last wrath. Then all is quiet once again. This was the format followed by Dukas in his Sorcerer's Apprentice, and it's the strength of this programmatic idea that helps Dankner unify his evolving palette into a pictorial timeline. (For New Orleanians, the adage that advises waiting fifteen minutes for new and different weather to arrive makes "Hurricane" seem as familiar and comforting as a summer storm.) The next piece on the "Hurricane" CD is Dankner's "Concerto for Alto Saxophone", a work first

premiered by Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz. The tonal vocabulary is decidedly warm and inviting, with the concerto's languorous first and third movements alternating with rapid, humorous escapades in the second and final movements. The long-breathed melodies of the opening movement give way to the second movement's comic perpetuum mobile. The third movement, marked Andante, is a nostalgic chorale reminiscent of a summertime bandstand. The concerto's finale is full of forward momentum, the solo saxophone soaring, in passages, over the orchestra with Bernstein-like brio. The third, and final, work on this CD is the "Song of Solomon (Symphony #3)", based on translations taken from the King James version of the Song of Solomon (as well as selected texts from the Song of Songs in the Tanakh - the Jewish Publication Society Bible). The symphony opens with echoes of Respighi and Barber, sensuous string and woodwind writing that closely follows the selected text: "...let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth - for your love is better than wine..." The opening movement contains some lovely, folk-inflected melodies - you almost feel as if you're in a 1930s black-and-white romance set in Persia: lots of sand-swept dunes, and somewhere, Ronald Colman beckoning to you from atop his camel. As the first movement glides into the second movement, the theme of a martial procession takes over; Solomon is seen in his regal splendor, appearing as if from pillars of smoke, fanfares in the brass section heralding his arrival. The third and final movement finds us back in the scented gardens of young lovers, the softest ping from the triangle reminding us of the symphony's opening movement. The symphony's final pages are a melodic wash of color, with strings tracing out high lines above the joyous orchestra's finale. The rising seventh in the final theme finds us in love's full, lyric bloom, the kind of love Korngold approved of, the sort of emotion that sends you out into the night singing...

**James C. Arey is an announcer/producer at 89.9 WWNO in New Orleans... ©**

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