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Wu Han Adds CMS Studio Recordings to Her Juggling Act

BY JAMES REEL

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center is not yet beaming its concerts to movie theaters around the country, like the Metropolitan Opera, but otherwise it's taking full advantage of modern media to relay its performances to those of us who live well beyond the five boroughs. There are radio broadcasts, which at this point seem rather old school; there are digital downloads through Deutsche Grammophon's DG Concerts series via iTunes; and now, of greatest interest to Serious Record Collectors, the organization has launched its own CD label, CMS Studio Recordings. As the name makes clear, these are post-concert studio sessions featuring the society's artists.

One of the people overseeing this is pianist Wu Han, who since 2004 has served as the organization's artistic co-director with her husband, cellist David Finckel of the Emerson Quartet. She and Finckel also have their own personal label, ArtistLed, and they've started issuing CDs from their West Coast summer festival, Music@Menlo, and of course Finckel frequently records for DG as part of the Emerson Quartet. "The other day a staff member came to me and said, 'I can't even count the projects we're doing right now,'" said Wu Han in an interview late last November. "Not including the projects of the Emerson Quartet, we've released six CDs from Music@Menlo, there's a new solo recording of mine on ArtistLed, and the society has three downloads with DG Concerts and two CDs, since September. And we have two recordings in the can for the duo, which still need to be edited, and the Emerson Quartet also has its new Brahms release." She sounds more amused than overwhelmed.

Wu Han—even her husband refers to her by both names to bypass confusion over which is her family name—has always recorded with high sonic standards, thanks to the work of producer-engineer Da-Hong Seetoo, but unlike most audiophiles, she's not about to bad-mouth the sound quality, or any other aspect, of downloads. "We're very honored to have that particular download partnership," she said, "especially since DG Concerts' orchestral selection is the New York Philharmonic and Los Angeles Philharmonic, which is very good company, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center is one of the largest chamber-music presenters in the world. The downloads give us international access to people we couldn't reach from New York. That partnership is incredibly fruitful and adventurous. As David says, right now in the recording industry, you feel like Columbus trying to sail across the Atlantic Ocean, and you don't know where you'll land. Before anyone knows what the new world looks like, you might as well claim all the territory you can.

"The society label is a totally different animal. Right now the download is a wonderful way of reaching people's iPods, but we have this longing of still having the physical disc and having a booklet that can make an artistic statement in design and selection of pictures. The main point with the label is that the society has 35 to 40 international concerts on tour every season, and I can't imagine, after a concert, signing somebody's iPod. Direct contact with people is very important for musicians, and it's much easier with CDs. And Da-Hong Seetoo, our recording engineer, having such incredible technical capabilities, I

wanted to make sure that the CDs produced by the Chamber Music Society let him show off the maximum capability of audio production. That's something you're not going to hear on your iPod, but these CDs are the sort you can use to test-drive your \$300,000 speakers.

"David and I have been very fortunate. The Emerson Quartet has the most prestigious, loyal relationship with Deutsche Grammophon; for the duo, we have this independent ArtistLed label that gives us all the freedom we want, and also a different business model; with Music@Menlo, we've been able to capture that incredible artistic excitement for five years now, and we're building a great recording library; and the Chamber Music Society has such incredibly adventurous programming each season, and to document that in both formats, in terms of mp3 files and the highest recording quality, it's a wonderful thing. So we do have everything covered. And why not? You just have to work a bit harder, that's all."

On the subject solely of CMS Studio Recordings, Wu Han said repertory is decided largely by the society's special projects of the season. The label's second release, chamber music by Elgar and Walton, arose from the society's extensive English music series. "If I could generate the funding, I would record the whole English project," she said, "but that's not possible because of the sheer volume of the music we produce every year. So we chose Elgar and Walton; one needs to be brought back to the forefront, and the other is already known but fits into our mission: to mix standard repertoire and commissioned works, and to serve the repertoire by presenting masterworks by great composers, and masterworks by composers who are unknown. The other disc, the Dvorák and Beethoven CD, is a project we're very proud of, because we brought in a lot of young players when we came onboard, and we want to make sure their work is captured." That disc features, besides Finckel and Wu Han, violinists Erin Keefe and Arnaud Sussmann, and violist Beth Guterman.

"For the DG download project, we wanted to record the Debussy [his three late sonatas, plus new "completions" of his projected cycle by Marc-André Dalbavie, Kaija Saariaho, and Steven Stucky] because that project has three new pieces that cement Debussy's original idea; it was a wonderful experiment and exciting project. Then we did the Baroque collection [Telemann, Handel, Bach, Vivaldi], because that was from our first season of our own programming. We had a Baroque festival, and we wanted to capture another side of Baroque presentation, besides the period instruments you mostly hear now. These projects all have their own space and their own meaning, they're all mission-driven, and they all serve the repertoire well. Each one of these programs I put my heart and soul into."

Wu Han stresses that the potential for recording does not shape the concert season: "I program the season first, before I look at it with recording in mind. The primary season, and how each program is put together, still needs to make sense. Our relationship with our subscribers is the most important thing for us; it's our home base. We want to make sure the season has a sense of balance, its own sense of purpose, its own theme. Only then do we look at what we might record, and it's an embarrassment of riches to choose from."

Post-session artist involvement in recordings is important to Finckel and Wu Han, but that can be tricky with so many of the Lincoln Center artists on the road all the time. Luckily, they are able to listen to various takes and rough edits online, and e-mail their input. "Thank god for the Internet and cell phones," said Wu Han. Once production and packaging are complete, the discs are sold at all Chamber Music Society events (40 to 50 CDs sold at a fall tour concert in Calgary alone), and through its Web site, www.ChamberMusicSociety.org. Participating musicians are also able to buy copies at a deep discount and sell them at the sites of their other concerts. "Then they can make the profit; I don't care," she laughed. "In all our projects, nobody deletes any albums from the catalog. We own them forever, and once we get the production costs back it's all pure profit, and all the extra money we make goes straight back into the organization for mounting more recording projects, grooming young artists, and producing more concerts or educational activities."

The release schedule, however, will be limited. “We’re doing three concert downloads with DG and one CD per season,” she says. “Physically, that’s as much as we can do. I personally listen to all the masters and all the edits, look at all the correspondence, do the post-production work—seriously, I don’t think I could do any more CDs.” The next disc will be drawn from works in the society’s four-concert February festival, “American Voices 1750-2008,” with music from Ben Franklin to Joan Tower. The CD itself will pair Amy Beach’s Piano Quintet with a recent song cycle, *Covered Wagon Woman*, by Alan Louis Smith, scored for mezzo, piano, violin, and cello. Wu Han was inspired to commission that cycle after encountering an earlier Smith vocal work about immigrants arriving at Ellis Island: “It’s very touching and heartfelt, beautifully and perfectly written, dramatic and funny—it has all the ingredients, and when I first heard it I knew immediately I wanted to commission something more from him, for Stephanie Blythe to sing.”

Wu Han insists that she’s not wearing herself out with all these projects—don’t forget that she’s an active performer as well as an artistic director—because, first, she loves the music, and second, she has a “great staff that’s totally in line with what each organization needs to do, and they’re very creative and dedicated and I’m fortunate to have them with me. Artistically, we have a very clear view of what we want to accomplish. Quality is the single most important thing for all of us. Once you have that standard in mind, it’s very, very hard to go wrong.”

DVORÁK Terzetto, Op. 74; Piano Quartet, Op. 87

BEETHOVEN Piano Quartet, Op. 16 • Wu Han (pn); Erin Keefe, Arnaud Sussmann (vn); Beth Guterman (vla); David Finckel (vc) • CMS STUDIO RECORDINGS 82503 (78:42)

ELGAR Piano Quintet WALTON Piano Quartet • Wu Han

(pn); Ani Kavafian, Arnaud Sussman (vn); Paul Neubauer (vla); Fred Sherry (vc) • CMS STUDIO RECORDINGS 82505 (78:42)

Except for the Dvorák Piano Quartet, none of these works have yet been recorded to the saturation point, so these first two releases in the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s Studio series are attractive for that alone. The playing throughout is typical of the current, very high American chamber-music standard: incisive attacks, rather lean tone (not as lush as Eastern Europeans can be), and impeccable technique. The performance can be suitably sweet when necessary, as in the Dvorák Terzetto, but more often than not, intensity and drama are conveyed more strongly than warmth. This means that the finale of the Dvorák Piano Quartet gets an exciting, edge-of-the-seat performance, but the passages that invite a more affectionate approach seem comparatively underplayed, or at least less emotionally involved.

The curiosity on the first disc is the Beethoven, the composer’s own piano-and-strings arrangement of his famous quintet for piano and winds. It’s disconcerting to hear strings where the winds should be—for one thing, this early Beethoven work now seems much more Romantic. The ensemble sound is now mellower, and the piano playing consequently must be more subtle; Wu Han plays with the necessary restraint, without sacrificing character. The Dvorák string trio comes off with good humor (especially the third movement) and a nice variety of tone color. The Piano Quartet gets a big, public performance, yet one that finds the music’s plaintive side when the texture occasionally thins out—but *only* then. The Lento is tightly controlled, nearly as tense as the first movement, and I’ve already described the overall approach in the previous paragraph.

My problem with the second disc has nothing to do with the playing and interpretation,

and everything to do with Elgar, a composer for whom I have little sympathy in large-scale works. He was a superb miniaturist, but, except in the Cello Concerto, was unable to craft a coherent musical argument in a large-scale format (the Violin Concerto being the prime offender, with the Second Symphony not far behind). The first movement of this quintet is a mess; Sibelius and Mahler, to mention two contemporaries, could cause fragments to cohere into something compelling, but Elgar simply cannot. Here, the players don't waste their time trying to pull the bits and pieces together; they emphasize the music's shifting character, moment to moment, from anticipation to bluster to sentimentality; it's a collage of interesting, sometimes haunting sketches that Elgar never properly integrates and develops. Elgar is much more competent in the slow movement, particularly in the passionate central section, between the more tranquil outer parts. The Lincoln Center players underline the contrasts, even while handling the transitions beautifully. The final movement, though, is again compositionally and thematically diffuse (and not just because material from the first movement reappears here). If English pastoral music is said to evoke a cow gazing over a fence, Elgar's Piano Quintet evokes a cow pie; yet I must admit that this performance is as committed, and as extroverted, as can be.

Walton's Piano Quartet exists on a far higher plane. It was written at about the same time as the Elgar, by an inexperienced 16-year-old, yet—granting that it was revised and no doubt improved later—it's much more coherent and consistently striking. The Scherzo, for example, is muscular yet fleet, and the last movement is rustic and rambunctious, thanks both to Walton and to the musicians at hand.

As recorded and produced by Da-Hong Seetoo, an audiophile as well as a fine violinist (he recorded the Tchaikovsky Trio with Finckel and Wu Han on their own ArtistLed label), the musicians seem to exist in a real physical space, heard from a front-row audience perspective rather than a player's perspective. That said, Seetoo doesn't seem to cram microphones under the piano lid and into the violins' f-holes, but lets the sound breathe a bit before capturing it. Despite my dismissal of the Elgar as a composition (but not as a performance), both these discs provide a clear and flattering snapshot of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.