

CD Review

**Massimo La Rosa, trombone —
*Sempre Espressivo***

by Daniel Hathaway



Three years after releasing his CD, *Cantando*, Cleveland Orchestra principal trombone Massimo La Rosa has once again teamed up with pianist Elizabeth DeMio — and added four Cleveland Orchestra string colleagues — for a new solo album entitled *Sempre Espressivo*. Recorded in July, 2013 at Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music and Clonick Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory, the album was shepherded into production by the eminent team of Elaine Marton (Sonarc Music) and Thomas C. Moore (5/4 Productions) and engineered by 5/4's Michael Bishop.

The playlist is an intriguing mix of music intentionally written for the trombone and arrangements of solo pieces originally conceived for other instruments. The original works are Frank Martin's *Ballade*, Camille Saint-Saëns's *Cavatine* and Ferdinand David's *Concertino*. The arranged pieces are Puccini's *Intermezzo* from *Manon Lescaut* and Antonio Carlos Gomes's *Grande Valsa de Bravura* — both repurposed by Yury Leonovich — and La Rosa's own adaptations of Wagner's *Träume (Wesendonck Lieder)*, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Sinfonia in F* and J.S. Bach's first solo cello suite in G.

That's quite a range of styles to bring together in a single jewel case, but what links these disparate pieces together is La Rosa's unerring good taste, beautiful tone, lyrical phrasing and sensitive musicianship. He invests the original trombone works with the whole range of sounds the instrument can muster, masterfully bringing across the volatility of the Martin, the nobility of the Saint-Saëns and the dramatic, rhetorical qualities of the David. He sings like a fine vocalist in the adapted songs by Puccini and Wagner, and he handles the solo lines in the Pergolesi with much of the litheness and delicacy associated with its intended solo instrument, the viola da gamba. The Gomes — by a Brazilian composer associated with La Scala — is a fun, virtuosic bon-bon.

Players of every instrument regularly warm up with Bach's solo suites, but few except their originally intended violinists, cellists and flutists are brave or foolhardy enough to record them. La Rosa writes, "Developing a convincing idea of how to play this piece on the trombone was a long, difficult and enlightening process." Where to breathe during Bach's long lines is one pertinent issue. If you can forget about how a cellist would bow and phrase this suite of dance movements and put yourself in the position of a wind

player who has to keep a line going amid the need to inhale at regular intervals, La Rosa's solutions make their own internal sense. He also notes that each movement has certain qualities he wants to express — "serenity, calm and respect" for the Allemande, "elegance and poise" for the Minuet. Those attributes come through clearly in his uniformly elegant playing.

Elizabeth DeMio is predictably stellar as La Rosa's keyboard companion, and his string quartet from The Cleveland Orchestra — violinists Amy Lee and Katherine Bormann, violist Stanley Konopka and cellist Paul Kushious, with DeMio at the harpsichord — make a lithe mini-orchestra for the charming Pergolesi that ends the album.

A socially-conscious musician, Massimo La Rosa is donating a portion of the proceeds from this recording to the Distonia Medical Research Foundation; and a dedicated teacher, he replaced an earlier-planned work with the Wagner in memory of his student, Anthony P. Hopkins, who died in an automobile accident the week before recording began.

You don't have to be a trombonist to cherish this recording — it will surprise all music lovers with what that instrument can do in the hands of an accomplished and dedicated soloist like Massimo La Rosa.

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