

CD Review —
Oberlin CME:
Norman | Trigos | Broening

by Jarrett Hoffman



After highlighting music by three members of the Oberlin composition faculty, Timothy Weiss and the Conservatory's Contemporary Music Ensemble (CME) have continued their Oberlin Music label offerings with another triptych of works by composers from the present day.

Norman | Trigos | Broening, released in May, begins with Andrew Norman's *Gran Turismo* for eight violins. And if you're familiar with the auto-racing video game series that gave the work its title — one among a few inspirations — you won't be surprised by the blazing speed. Even the

few slow sections, beautifully written and sensitively phrased, provoke a sense of suspense: thrills await around the corner.

The concept is accessible, but in the pen of Norman and the hands of CME, never once feels routine. The octet's attention to dynamics is constantly engaging, and if you were to pick a musical postcard from the piece, you'd do well to choose from any one of the ensemble's dramatic swells — timed perfectly, with a big rush of energy right at the last.

The album continues with Juan Trigos' *Ricercare de Cámara VI*, that special brand of concerto in which solo lines are not so much intended to stand out on their own, but are woven into fascinating dialogues. At the center of it all is guitarist Dieter Hennings, who is constantly in touch with different instruments that seem to move in orbit around him — this one lining up in an eclipse, then that one.

With his keen powers of communication, Hennings expresses Trigos' language as if it were his own. And what an inventive language that is, drawing on such familiar elements as hand-clapping, tapping on the frame of the guitar, and twangy pitch bends, but making them central to the musical vocabulary — building blocks, not pieces of flair.

Another feat is Trigos' orchestration, utilizing colors with obvious thought and intention, as if each instrument is a character actor entering the scene with just the right line at just the right time.

The performance is both clean and deeply expressive, with excellent balance to boot — the guitar ringing out clearly through it all, and the spotlight shifting respectfully among the ensemble under the direction of Weiss.

The closer is a work that was written for CME: Benjamin Broening's *What the Light Was Like*. Even if you aren't familiar with Amy Clampitt's poem of the same name, which inspired the piece, you get the distinct feeling of something traumatic, reflected upon from different angles — in different light — across its movements.

One of the first impressions is the work's palpable rise and fall of tension, charted expertly by Weiss and the ensemble, whose precise intonation also proves key in the first two movements, with their moments of mysterious unisons.

With skittering strings, low winds digging out trenches, and brass calling out over an open landscape, the tumult of the third movement leaves a powerful impression. Broening leans into the drama with the fifth and final movement, deeply operatic in its sense of fate. But after listening, you might find yourself wishing to revisit the fourth.

There, with a gentle gathering of a few instruments at the end of the movement, the music best matches the spirit of the poem. Clampitt doesn't so much focus on the tragedy of a man found dead out on the water in his boat, but rather a quiet question: at the moment when "the iridescence of his last perception...gave way to unreversed, irrevocable dark," what was the light out there like?

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