

Chester Biscardi: *In Time's Unfolding*, Naxos 8.559639

On Naxos, a thoroughly gorgeous disc of music by Chester Biscardi (b.1948) is essential for anybody interested in top-drawer American chamber music. The works on the disc span his entire career and range from solos to a piano quintet. Biscardi writes some of the most consistently beautiful music I know, and this disc is a particularly excellent and perfectly paced collection.

Carson Cooman, *Fanfare: The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors* (December 2011)

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BISCARDI *In Time's Unfolding*. ¹ *Tartini*. ^{2,3} *Piano Quintet*. ^{3,4} *Mestiere*. ³ *Di Vivere*. ⁵ *The Viola Suddenly Had a Voice*. ^{6,7} *Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman)*. ^{1,8} Marc Peoloquin (pn); ¹ Curtis Macomber (vn); ² Blair McMillen (pn); ³ Yonah Zur, (vn), Daniel Panner, (va), Greg Hesselink (vc); ⁴ Da Capo Chamber Players; ⁵ Paul Neubauer (vla); ⁶ James Goldsworthy (pn); ⁷ Mark Helias (db) ⁸ • NAXOS 8.559639 (56:47)

I've admired for many years the music of Chester Biscardi (b.1948). On the one hand, he's a scrupulous composer who writes richly detailed music that reflects modernist ideas about form and development. But he's also a romantic, writing music that has inherent sweep and lyricism, and always rooted in traditional tonal practice, no matter how far from that source he gets.

This release covers the entire span of the composer's mature career, from *Tartini* (1972) to *The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice* (2005). Like many composers of his generation, Biscardi's music starts off spikier than it has become, and *Tartini* (for violin and piano) is no exception, though there's an exciting theatricality about its rhetoric. *Di Vivere* (1981) is written for the now-traditional Pierrot quintet, and has the strongest Uptown sound of any work on this program. In its athletic tussle and pitch centers' arrivals announced in ringing unisons, it reminds one of Wuorinen. But in contrast, the 1979 *Mestiere* for solo piano is much more rhapsodic, with highly idiomatic piano figuration throughout, which creates Impressionistic sonic scirms that project lovely layers of harmony. The 1989 *Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman)* feels like a transitional work. Biscardi was close to Feldman (something you might not immediately infer from the music), and this

work, while it has the sustained quiet of its dedicatee, is more openly expressive. Its harmonies are less juxtapositions of beautiful chords but actual progressions, no matter how laid-back. Mark Helias's playing is also exceptional; listening at first without reading any notes, I just assumed a cello instead of bass, as the sound is so light and "flutey."

These are the earlier works of the set, and from here we move to a more open, resonant, and emotionally forward world in the later music. One gathers from both his program notes and the music itself, that Biscardi deeply loves the repertoire, finds inspiration from it, and often builds his pieces as responses to particular works. This is particularly true of *The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice*, which quotes a phrase of Schumann, and integrates it into its own fabric with the seamlessness of a dream. *In Time's Unfolding* (2000) (for piano) opens and closes the program, and again refers to Schumann, but also has a distinctly American flavor. Biscardi mentions Gershwin and Copland as harmonic referents, and I hear Bernstein as well. And the 2004 *Piano Quintet*, while a more abstract work, never stints on its lyrical impulse, and has a *morendo* ending that seems natural, rather than a precious gesture.

I find this quite beautiful music. Biscardi strikes me as a deeply honest composer; he says what he feels necessary, he's curious and exploratory. It also has great range, moving from referents as diverse as Wuorinen, Feldman, and Schumann. In short, the art has integrity. I also remember him as a graduate composer at Yale, buzzing with a sweet energy, and from his picture he looks exactly the same decades later (except for having lost the ponytail, though maybe my memory tricks me there). He also obviously inspires wonderful performers, giving them music that challenges and satisfies. The quality of playing here is testimony to that bond. Highly recommended.

Robert Carl, Fanfare: *The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors* (January 2012)

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BISCARDI: Chamber Pieces

Curtis Macomber, Yonah Zur, v; Paul Neubauer, Daniel Panner, va;
Greg Hesselink, vc; Mark Helias, db; James Goldsworthy, Blair
McMillen, Marc Peloquin, p; Da Capo Chamber Players
Naxos 559639-57 minutes

Seven modest-sized chamber works with piano by Chester Biscardi (b. 1948), written over 33 years from 1972-2005. A Yale grad, with additional degrees in both English and Italian literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he is currently director of the music program at Sarah Lawrence College. He has been the recipient of The American Academy of Arts and Letters' Academy Award and the Prix de Rome.

Mr. Biscardi seems to have begun early on with the usual modern music influences, but his broad musical tastes cultivated a postmodernism that delights in quotes and stylistic references, many to himself. *In Times Unfolding* (2000), for solo piano (also the title of this program), takes off from the opening chords of Keith Jarrett's version of 'Something to Remember You By'. Its title serves as a good description for this dreamy little piece of night music. A number of fragments from other Biscardi pieces as well as a burst from Schumann's *Carnaval* serve to give the work its personal imprint. Pianist Peloquin plays it twice, once to start, and once to end the program. Jarrett's arrangement is, of course, itself a remembrance.

Tartini (1972), the earliest piece on the program, refers to older music as well. This short violin and piano piece is inspired by Charles Burney's account of the *Devil's Trill Sonata*, its material transformed into a short serial fantasy, with references from Schoenberg (the *Phantasy*) and Charles Wuorinen. It makes for a clever graduate student exercise.

The *Piano Quintet* (2004) is at 14 minutes the longest work on the program. Written in memory of the composer's father, and based loosely on the story of Telemachus and Odysseus, the work is touching in its noble lyricism. Like everything else on the program, its secrets seem to be encoded in other Biscardi works, which are liberally quoted according to the composer's notes.

Mestiere (craft) is a short piano piece written for the 1979 New Orleans Festival of Piano Music. Carter (*Piano Sonata*) and Takemitsu (*For Away*) are cited as influences, and there's a reference to Schoenberg's *Farben* thrown in for good measure. The result is improvisational-sounding and a little scattered, though that is the way dreams tend to be.

Di Vivere (1981) is a quiet and rather blocky study in colors written for the Da Capo Chamber Players (flute, violin, clarinet, cello, and piano).

Attractive and sensual, it is typical of the more laid-back academic chamber music of its time.

The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice (2005), title from an Andrea Camdleri mystery novel, is a short piece for viola and piano written in memory of violist Jacob Glick. It opens with a quote from Schumann's *Piano Quartet*, with Schumann changing back and forth into Biscardi in the form of more quotes from his own music.

Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman) (1989), for bass and piano, written for bassist Robert Black, doesn't sound much like Feldman, though it "comments" on his *Extensions 3* of 1952. Basically tonal and touching, like so much of this program, it is a sort of homage to the man he met in his student days and who had a lasting effect, but not an obviously musical one (at least on the basis of these works).

This is a worthwhile collection, though it could be said that the bewildering number of influences on display and their continual drifting in and out might bother some. It is very much part of the condition of our time, as it has been for so many others, and Mr. Biscardi handles it better than most. Performances are uniformly excellent.

Allen Gimbel, *American Record Guide* (November/December 2011)

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This is American composer Chester Biscardi's debut on Naxos. Several of his works have appeared previously on other labels, including Bridge, Albany, Intim and most notably New World Records, who have featured at least one of Biscardi's works on six separate albums, including a re-issue of CRI's 1996 CD with one of the bluntest titles in the art music domain - 'Gay American Composers' (CRI 721/NWCR721), complete with bare-chested male torso and unbuttoned jeans by way of cover 'art'.

Naxos, thankfully, continues to leave composers' sexual orientation out of things, and presses on with their immense, and generally brilliant, 'American Classics' series. It would be very peculiar if every disc lived up to that title, but a surprising number do contain at least one 'classic', often more: already this year, CDs of works by Haskell Small, David Gompper ([review](#)), Lawrence Dillon ([review](#)), Sebastian Currier ([review](#)), Roberto Sierra ([review](#)) and David Post ([review](#)), all living composers, have borne out Naxos's judgement and confirmed

that this is without doubt one of the most rewarding series by any label ever. This disc of piano and chamber works by Biscardi, though distinctly lacking in length, can safely be added to that list.

The CD – rather brassily – opens and closes with the same piano piece, *In Time's Unfolding*, taken from a poem by American author Galway Kinnell, 'When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone'. The work was commissioned by the US Music Library Association, and their stipulation that the music should "look forward and reflect backward at the same time" is presumably justification for the repetition. Incorporating snippets or ideas from Schumann, Gershwin, Copland, Carter, Jarrett and himself, Biscardi describes it as "at once poignant and painful, lonely, exuberant, heroic, and – in a concentrated way – epic." It is certainly very American, mellifluous and, though not in any way earth-shattering, a pleasant way to pass six minutes (twice).

Though it would be difficult for all but the non-specialist listener to tell, *Tartini*, for violin and piano, makes use of a twelve-tone row constructed from Giuseppe Tartini's so-called "*Devil's Trill*" *Sonata*, as well as melodic fragments and techniques from the same. What Tartini would make of the result is anyone's guess, but Biscardi himself describes it as "the first significant work that I wrote as an adult." Like much of Biscardi's music, *Tartini* is often restrained, contrasted here with bursts of violinistic virtuosity. Though it flirts moodily with atonality, overall the effect is agreeably euphonious, though perhaps too brief to be compelling.

Mestiere and *Di Vivere* are companion works of a sort, in that their titles are taken from two halves of the collected journals of twentieth century Italian writer Cesare Pavese (1908-50), *Il Mestiere di Vivere* ('The Business of Living'). Biscardi says that they may be performed together, *Di Vivere* either as a quintet for clarinet in A and piano, with flute, violin and cello, as here, or as a duo for the clarinet and piano alone. *Mestiere* is a short, ponderous, atonal piece, and serves as a prelude to the more immediately attractive *Di Vivere*, which was commissioned by and premiered in 1982 by the Da Capo Players themselves – flautist Patricia Spencer and cellist André Emilianoff are, amazingly, still in this splendid ensemble's line-up.

From one quintet to another, this one simmering with pathos: Biscardi's *Piano Quintet* is a loving, touching remembrance by the composer of his father, whom he lost when he was twelve. In a sense, it is more of a duo for violin and piano with accompaniment than a true quintet, the other three strings providing textural support rather

than participating with any genuine equality, but this imaginative, sombre, introspective work is Biscardi's American Classic.

Music-lovers in whom the mere mention of Morton Feldman induces a feeling of drowsiness need not fear *Companion Piece*. Though inspired by a visit Biscardi paid to Feldman's apartment, and borrowing one or two ideas from the latter's music, Biscardi himself admits, very politely, that "Feldman's sounds are 'drier', more minimal than mine." *Companion Piece* is a tonal, gently hypnotic, almost meditative work for piano and contrabass – a tranquil duet, although Biscardi also allows for the contrabass part to be omitted.

Finally, the only nondescript thing about *The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice* is the title itself, which is taken from a line in an obscure mystery novel. Like *Companion Piece*, it is a lyrical, slightly melancholic and rather lovely short, written in memory of Jacob Glick, the violist father of American soprano Judith Bettina.

In every piece, Biscardi's music is given a cordial, glowing performance by experienced and up-and-coming soloist alike, with violinist Curtis Macomber and pianist Blair McMillen meriting a special mention.

Sound quality is excellent. The CD booklet is too, with – for Naxos – unusually detailed notes on the music, supplied by Biscardi, and biographies of all soloists regardless of the size of their contribution to the programme. There are little photographs too of many; curiously, Biscardi, 63 this year, is pictured looking as he must have done around 30 years ago. The only untidy business about the CD is the confusing listing of musicians under the track titles, where numerals are used in random order to attach performers to works, and perusing eyes are forced to dart back and forth between lists to see not only who is playing what, but even the forces specified for any given work.

The CD is much shorter than it really ought to be, especially taking into account the wholesale repetition of *In Time's Unfolding* at the end of the programme. A couple of longer works by Biscardi would have given listeners a fuller picture of his talent, but on the basis of these chamber works, there is plenty to admire, and every reason to hope for more to come.

Byzantion, MusicWeb International Classical Reviews
(September 11, 2011)