



Reviews of **The Mexican Connection**

CACD77021: HD Duo



The idea behind this release is a project sponsored by the Council on Australian Latin American relations which allowed the HD Duo to “undertake a Mexican-Australian exchange program involving composers and concerts in both countries”, in the words of the accompanying promotional material that arrived with the disc. The repertoire is new music for saxophone and piano that stems directly from the project—both well established and young composing talent is involved.

One of the pleasing things programmatically is the variety to be heard throughout this 72-minute disc. Gabriela Ortiz’s *Mambo Ninón* is an evocative tribute to the diva Ninón Sevilla, a heroine of Mexican films, in which impressionistic elements burgeon into rich rhythmically vital paragraphs of unbridled brio and lyricism. A slow mid-section panel leads on to a sparkling up-tempo close full of excitement and gleaming vitality. Most of the pieces are what I’d call medium-sized at around 11 or so minutes; enough time to stretch out but not long enough to risk torpor. Though he was born in New Zealand Paul Sarcich spent many years in Australia. His wittily titled *All at Sevens and Eights* starts gruffly but opens out warmly and sympathetically, for the piano as well as the saxophone—a democratic meeting of instruments here before some rolling vibrancy is injected.

Lilia Vázquez Kuntze’s three-movement *Sendero Naciente* embodies attractively withdrawn writing as well as much that is elegantly fluid. Her finale is gently uplifting; a touching piece, this, and rather beautiful. Liquidity is the name of the game for Ukraine-born, Australian-resident Catherine Likhuta, whose *The Secrets of Water* anatomises florid wave motions, overtone blowing, ruminative quiescence and then sinewy and squally writing over an angry-sounding piano. There’s one especially stormy petrel sax cry. It all goes to show our ultimate ambivalence about the elemental power of the sea.

Enrico Chapela, born in Mexico City, employs multiphonics for the alto sax in *Spectrax* where there’s a zesty circular-sounding groove at work. Pianist David Howie has arranged Arturo Márquez’s *Danzón*—a veritable Mexican second National Anthem—and the results are alluring indeed and very exciting in this vivid performance. Miriama Young denounces “climate change deniers” —they seem second only to Holocaust deniers these days in the liberal lexicon of abuse—in her *This Earthly Round*. Given it’s a round, it goes on a bit and—in the composer’s word—“corrodes” as it progresses but it doesn’t impress. The three very brief pieces that end the programme are engaging, not least the student work by Mauricio Castaño that was workshopped to be included in this programme.

They end a finely played programme, with excellent notes, and good recording values.

Jonathan Woolf, *Musicweb-International*

This disc emerged from an Australian Government-funded scheme under which this duo toured Australia and Mexico giving concerts that included new works written by composers from both countries. The same duo has a track record in this field having also released via Cala a similar Australian portrait in 2013 (CACD77013).

Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz's *Mambo Ninón* was inspired by Ninón Sevilla, born in Cuba but who made quite an impact as an alluring film-star in Mexico. Sevilla died in 2015 at the age of 93. This rhapsodic piece flies along, becomes becalmed and then takes to the wing again. It's not especially sultry. A New Zealander making his way in London, Paul Sarcich designed the booklet and is Publishing and Technical Manager with Cala. His *All at Sevens and Eights* uses the woody tones of the tenor sax. It's a driving piece yet with indulged inclinations to muse mournfully.

Lilia Vázquez Kuntze's *Sendero Naciente* is in three movements: Freely and with great expression; Slowly but flowing; Rhythmic and playful. It's the only multiple movement piece here and one can imagine it working well as a "pocket" concerto. The triptych runs to about ten minutes. Kuntze was a student of Xenakis and Donatoni in Germany. This is a rhapsodic piece, tonal with good substantive ideas deployed thoughtfully across the dreamy first two movements. The finale is attractive without being wildly energetic. Kuntze's succinct yet emotion-disclosing invention has you wanting to go back to replay the piece.

Catherine Likhuta's *The Secrets of Water* is confrontational—no obvious charmer this, and certainly not one that goes with the more axiomatic liquid delights of water. The note tells us that the music is intended to capture water's more murderous aspects including disasters, floods, tsunamis, drownings, killers of the deep, crashes and shipwrecks. It's that kind of piece with a selection of modern techniques to ruffle feathers. For Enrico Chapela's *Spectrax* the composer received recordings of Duke's multiphonics on the sax. Chapela went ahead and analysed these and began to improvise around them prior to the premiere in Mexico City in 2015. It's a piece dusted with avant-garde effects but done with humour: try the galumphing fantasy at 2:30.

Arturo Marquez's *Danzón No.6—Puerto Calvario* leads us submissively away from such experiments with this slip-sliding, wailing and poetic seducer of a dance fantasy. It should go down well with admirers of Piazzolla's tangos. Miriama Young's *This Earthly Round* is delightful and original with a sort of slow, piercing, urgent mournfulness about it. It's one of the highest points of this disc, fully exploring its engaging material. Then follow three very short student pieces arising from the Duo's tour to Mexico City. Jimena Maldonado's *Tremor* trembles and rises upwards, inhabiting the sombre reaches of Nyman's *Where the Bee Dances*. This is followed by Alan Ahued Naime's catchily titled and kitted out *Brain Freeze (Sphenopalatine Ganglioneuralgia)* which is insistent, raw and hectic. Mauricio Castaño's *Angkor* makes for a brusquely imaginative farewell.

Nicely documented and presenting a strong audio image, this is well worth dipping into. Be aware that this presents a very wide variety of styles from limpid to what even today sounds experimental. Future contenders in competitions should certainly get this as it will introduce stimulating works that shake off the usual suspects.

Rob Barnett, *Musicweb-International*

It must drive classical musicians from Mexico crazy that their country is best known for Mariachi music. But this CD is certainly not Mariachi music. It's pretty well as far from Mariachi Music as one could imagine.

If you were not paying attention you may have been unaware that classical and in particular new, avant-garde music has been flourishing in Mexico during the 20th century and Mexico is considered one of the leaders in experimental ideas and methods in ultra modern music

This CD comes out of a project sponsored by the Council on Australian Latin American Relations involving a grant from the Australian Government which enabled the HD Duo, Michael Duke and David Howie, to undertake a Mexican-Australian exchange program involving composers and concerts in Australia and Mexico. I'm not usually a great fan of new classical music but this CD is great! Both established and emerging composers from Australia and Mexico have written fascinating extended works for piano and saxophone and the playing by Duke and Howie is exquisite. When it's this good even a pop, rock, world music enthusiast like me can be taken on sonic journeys that truly enthrall.

So in listening to this marvellous CD I learned that Gabriella Ortiz is one of the foremost composers in Mexico today, that Paul Sarcich from New Zealand now living in London via Australia is a really great composer for piano and saxophone, that women composers like Lillia Vazquez Kuntze are at the forefront of new music in Mexico, that emerging composers in Mexico like Enrico Chapela are a force to be reckoned with and that emerging composers in Australia like Miriama Young and Catherine Likhuta are writing powerful, emotional works that somehow are a response to climate change deniers.

Some of the music is contemplative and serene while other sections are wild and furious. Howie and Duke play these often strange and sometimes bizarre works so masterfully that even the most jagged passages are beautiful and engaging.

Recorded in the Verbrugghen Hall at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 2016 by David Kim-Boyle, the sound is stunning.

If you're into this kind of new music and even if, like me you're usually not, I urge you to have a listen to this CD. It will change your perspective of Mexican music forever.

Peter Winkler, *Loudmouth*