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Dialogus: Music for Solo Violin
Hlíf Sigurjónsdóttir, violin
MS1551

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The purest of all expressions of the violin comes when the instrument plays unaccompanied – a feat that is notoriously difficult to bring off successfully, especially with the knowledge that Bach did so at an astonishingly high level with his *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, BWV 1001-1006. The impossibility of matching these works has certainly not stopped innumerable composers from trying, through the years, to produce solo-violin music of substantial interest. That sometimes quixotic quest continues today, and Hlíf Sigurjónsdóttir plays six examples of ways in which contemporary composers have undertaken it on a new MSR Classics CD. Written between 1983 and 2012, these pieces all show an understanding of the violin's technical and expressive capabilities, and all make suitable demands of the soloist without being display pieces for their own sake – indeed, several lean far more to the contemplative side than to that of virtuosity. And it is interesting that the CD is called *Dialogus*, since it would seem to be more monologue than dialogue – except that Sigurjónsdóttir is clearly intending to be in a musical dialogue with the listener. The title may also refer to performer-composer dialogue, since several of these pieces – all of which are world première recordings – were dedicated to her. The music is varied and sometimes clever, with the two longest works here – both of them collections of comparatively short movements – being the most intricate and involving. Merrill Clark's *The Sorceress/Sigurjónsdóttir Sonata* (2010) is as closely tied to the performer as a work can be, fully showcasing her expressive and virtuosic capabilities. It is akin to Bach's solo-violin works as well, concluding with a very extended *Ciaccona* that is nearly as long as the other four movements put together and that quite clearly recalls the magnificent *Chaconne* that caps Bach's *Partita No. 2*. It does Clark no discredit to note that he aims higher here than is perhaps wise, since his design invites inevitable comparisons that are not to his work's benefit. Nevertheless, this movement makes a fitting capstone to an extended solo-violin piece that is impressive in many ways. More accessible and somewhat less dry, *Winter Trees* (1983) by Jónas Tómasson seeks to portray, in its four movements, good, sad and mad trees – the listener gets to figure out just what the adjectives mean – and then, in the finale, simply *quiet...* (with the ellipsis). The remaining four works here are expressive in their own ways and generally lean toward thoughtfulness rather than display for its own sake. They are *From My Home* (2012) by Rúna Ingimundar; *Meditation* (1996) by Karólína Eiríksdóttir, which is particularly deeply felt; *Kurie* (2012) by Hróðmar Ingi Sigurbjörnsson; and *Variations on Victimae Paschali Laudes* (1987) by Alfred Felder. It is inevitable in all-contemporary discs like this one that most listeners will find some elements of greater interest than others; and indeed, the composers do not all have especially distinctive styles, even though all write more than adequately for solo violin and all are treated with equal care and attentiveness in Sigurjónsdóttir's performances. This is a (+++) recording that offers listeners interested in modern solo-violin music a chance to hear some of it that has not been recorded before performed with considerable skill by a soloist who knows how to extract what emotive elements the pieces contain. It is also a disc best heard one piece at a time, to allow listener to absorb what compositional differences there are among the composers and to avoid having the works seem collectively like a pale attempt to match the ones that Bach created 300 years ago."

<http://transcentury.blogspot.com/2015/05/how-strings-communicate.html>

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