

# CD Reviews



## F. Gerard Errante, **Delicate Balance**, Aucourant Records, AUREC 1001 Reviewed by Thomas Dempster

**Delicate Balance** is the eighth album on which clarinetist and mixed-media music exponent F. Gerard Errante appears; with recordings dating back to 1991, Errante is easily the leading American clarinetist specializing in electroacoustic performance practice. Created over the better part of a decade, the compositions Errante interprets on *Delicate Balance* cover, perhaps necessarily so, a strikingly wide stylistic berth, with the common thread of *slowness* throughout the album. Errante's aim for the album was to curate a series of tranquil, peaceful pieces, "perhaps being suitable for relaxation and contemplation." Here, the album succeeds, roundly. Errante also desired to provide an album that would be of some substance and demand repeat listening. The album succeeds

here, too, as there is indeed plenty of material to which a listener can appreciate immediately as well as works that slowly grow on the listener.

There is a constant delicate balance between the conventional approaches to slow music, their successful execution, and the elements which comprise - either in stereotypical fashion or in novel approaches - what we envision and comprehend as slow music, especially in the EAM realm.

Regardless some of the conventions in which the electroacoustic components may find themselves, each selection on the album exploits Errante's beauty in some way or another, and it is rather easy to hear which pieces inspired Errante the most and which works he gravitated toward - this is nothing but good, so far as passion and energy in performance is concerned, as it brings forward tics and strengths that might otherwise be subsumed in nominal performances.

One such performance is during *Circles in the Sky* by Jane Brockman, the fourth cut on the disc: after an initial gesture that somehow hauntingly combines the likes of Schuller, Gobeil, and Hovhannes, Errante floats through the melodic material, showing off the clarity and beauty of his timbre, yet some of the writing in the throat register puts Errante in intonation trouble; yet, for a work that has little pitch-based tension, these incidental microtones demonstrate an effort - conscious or not - on Errante's part to bring various forms of beauty into the pitch language of a diatonic piece. Errante pushes the clarino range to an aggressively transparent point toward the piece's end, exploring another form of counterpoint in music that consists largely of shimmering contrapuntal lines. Like many of the works on the album, *Circles in the Sky* is quite haunting, and quite short -- too short, in fact.

The third selection on the album, Robert Scott Thompson's *Passage*, features a wealth of highly attractive textures and is the first time the perceived spatial environment for the clarinet really changes: it is most effective when Errante bursts forth pure high-register tones against a warbly counterpoint, an interesting foil to the predominance of ping-pong gestures. Errante beautifully weaves in and out of the textures with subtle élan, textures which sound as though captured

from a clarinet yet is wholly synthesized (according to the liner notes provided by the composer), and it is the first time on the album where the full lyrical force of the clarinet truly arrives. After a memorable arrival and a work with a very clear clarinet role, the piece moves, in a Normandeau-like fashion, into a world of thunderstorms and nightingales, with the clarinet slowly receding into the imagined night.

MacGregor Boyle's *Midway Inlet* is one of the more striking water-centered selections on the album, focusing on the ritualistic aspect of nature and dealing specifically with the ebb and flow of an inlet separating the mainland from Pawley's Island, South Carolina. At the acme of the piece, Errante lusciously performs the chant *Veni Creator Spiritus* amongst the work's largest spectral densities, conjuring the vast, still waters Boyle wishes for listeners to envision. Errante exquisitely handles a wide gestural idea of moving up and down the range of the instrument, giving us a wide, liquid sound, the opening of a narrow creek into a broad, shimmering sound.

*Cherry Blossom and a Wrapped Thing - After Hokusai* is Judith Shatin's contribution to the album, composed explicitly for Errante and revised for this recording. Shatin creates gossamer, translucent textures that envelope the clarinet without obscuring the almost-Messiaen long lines; Errante not only provides us with these throaty lines, but also, magically, delivers delicate timbrel trills and quarter-tones, mirroring the high-celestial gestures Shatin provides in the electronic part. Somehow, Errante effortlessly delivers a number of graceful flutter tongue passages as well, including a gentleness that at times becomes otherworldly. There is a tenderness and organic warmth to this piece that does not quite exist anywhere else on the album, and the formal shape is deliciously satisfying, making the work's placement on the album in no way incidental.

Joe Harchanko's *Breath* is the least conventionally-wrought slow music on the album, and in many ways the most successful work on the album altogether. This is also easily Errante's finest moment on the album, as his performance seems quite relaxed, fluid, and - somehow - even more effortlessly beautiful than any other moment in the album. The clarinet line makes the fullest use of the instrument's range and is probably the most technically-involved piece (barring extended techniques) on the album; Errante's performance is assured, engaging, and, as ever, lyrically apt. The majority of the beauty resides in the explorations of subtleties: tinkling gestures in the electronic component

seem inextricably linked to the organic, flowing clarinet lines that are set in a compelling and delicately challenging tonal language. Bifurcation between the clarinet and the computer seems less palpable here, despite the clarinet's obvious role as centerpiece. The electronic sounds are rich, varied, and both meld with and offset the clarinet part, and Harchanko easily wins the "best use of a comb filter" award for very subtle uses of the device as signal gestures (incidental or purposeful) marking phrase terminations or sectional divisions.

Robert Mackay's *Equanimity* features the first pronounced and prolonged extended technique passages for the clarinet, opening with foggy, breath-generated whispers yielding to subtone-filled and multiphonic-rich textures, extolling Errante's ability to go beyond the typical clarinet world. As the title suggests, flowing and convincing gestures arise from an equal interplay between clarinet and computer with a particular three-note gesture moving back and forth across the human-machine divide. The pure echoes, crickets, and icy drops sensuously complement the key-clicks, pitch-bends, and breath tones creating - dare I say it - a delicate balance between an intense stasis and swirling textural trajectories.

Similarly, *A Little Night Music* by Douglas Quin exploits the ability of the clarinet to transparently offer up multiphonics to easily match the spectral realm of the electronic component. The spaces in which the electronics and clarinet find themselves are the most convincing on the album. As it is the only piece on the album to feature a prominent accompaniment that is not continually or consistently pitch-based, it is a welcome departure with its constantly shifting textures and reliance upon rhythmic mottoes to propel the work and the listener forward. Errante's performance here confidently demonstrates his lucidity with extended techniques and a vibrant darkness of the chalumeau register that few clarinetists can match.

Peter Terry's *Echoes of the Invisible* and Alex Shapiro's *Water Crossing* belong to many of the same sonic worlds, with slowly-changing textures underscoring a pan-diatonic world with extended, expressive clarinet lines. Both works are successful in their goals of creating constant, meditative pieces that are largely straightforward in their compositional approaches, though requiring little technical or virtuosic effort from Errante. This is, of course, the goal: allow the performer to breathe as well through pieces that are as

contemplative for the performer as they are for the listener.

D. Gause's *rain of the heart, reign of the soul* closes the album, an evocative work in its own right, straddling the line between a deserted-street Midtown soundtrack and denouement scene in a Scorsese film. The most pop-oriented piece on the album, *rain...* serves as a fine way to end the album, a return to slowly-melding envelopes, gentle rhythmic pulsations, and long, effortless melodic lines from *Errante*.

Water and breathing - iconic staples of stillness and calm - are recurrent motifs throughout the titles and programmatic aspects of the works on the album, and *Errante's* tone, largely clear and brilliant throughout, seems perfectly fitting to ideals of reflection and primal rhythms. The clarity of water and concerted rhythms of breathing as well as phrases in nature similarly seem to be echoed in the arrangement of the pieces in the album: there seems to be an arch form, from dawn to high noon to dusk, with waxing and waning levels of intensity as pieces occur. Ironically, some of the works featured here suffer from not breathing enough: atmospheric does not necessarily need to be a compositional cognate to "slow;" creating and maintaining sonic spaces does not preclude moving in and out of new spaces - any meditation or yoga practitioner will happily comment on hearing the changes in the environment around her, something absent from a few of the works that are more cloistered in uniformity of space than desirous of spreading throughout the stereo field. Similarly, as is to be expected - and this is no fault of any composer here but of decades of convention - envelopes and timbres tend to be uniform from one piece to another, which at least begs the question: can we EAM composers create successful slow music without clichés of slow-attack envelopes, perfect-fifth-heavy drones, or reliance on XP10 or DX7 sounds?

Overwhelmingly, yes: this album proves that slow, mixed-media music in the hands of a tremendous performer and exponent of new music, as well as ten stylistically varied composers, can circumvent these conventions and be compelling; of course, pieces can be - and are - created using our typical vocabulary but be challenging as well. In that regard, this album

represents yet another delicate balance between cautious innovation and effective convention.