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The Composer Judith Shatin Believes That the Past is the Present

The New Album of the Composer Judith Shatin Proves That It is Possible to Write Romantic Music and to Stay Contemporary

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There is something stable, solid, in the music of American composers. In contrast to the thousand-year European tradition, they are mere babies; but that makes no difference: even a little over 100 years are enough, it would seem, to build a corpus that has character and is convincing. Not that there is a distinct essence of American musicality that one can define, quantify and classify stylistically. Nevertheless, it has something – a certain indefinable confidence. The works of the composer Judith Shatin always radiate such confidence, as it does in her new CD, to be officially released at the end of April, and is therefore now only distributed as a promo on the Net.

The album *Time to Burn* is about light and fire, and not necessarily about their positive aspects – especially not in the work after which the CD is named (from 2006) for oboe (Aaron Hill) and percussionists (I-Jen Fang and Mike Schutz). This is a work Shatin composed, she says, in response to the holocausts that continue to plague the world, and widespread acts of violence that remind us of dark times such as the burning of witches and the Inquisition. It so happens that this work is one of the less interesting on the CD: it is nervous, bright and sharp, and although it may capture well the mood of catastrophe that its name suggests, it does not elicit a desire to listen to it.

Another work that has a certain strangeness is *Elijah's Chariot*, [based on the story of Elijah] who as is well known, rose to the Heavens in fire and smoke. Here Shatin draws upon a pseudo-folkishness, which takes her to the edge of the precipice of orientalism. The music begins with an expressive cello, as it were 'Jewish,' followed by the emergence of human voices with a mideastern effect, and after after which comes a theme in the same spirit, a kind of galloping Hora that is cut short by a bleating shofar electronically transformed, which in turn breaks into a quiet section – and as if that were not enough, the melody *Eliahu HaNavi* emerges after that. This search for the different and the 'other,' arouses a sense of forgiveness, one that only someone who has a 'first-person perspective'

– such as Israelis – can feel towards those with good intentions who observe the culture from outside.

But these works do not diminish the value of the wonderful music on this CD, and above all the opening work, *Glyph* (from 1984), which means a kind of carving. This work consists of beautiful, sweeping, imaginative music in four movements titled Luminous, Flickering, Ecstatic and Incandescent. The delicate piano performance of Margaret Kampmeier; James Dunham, with his viola, which is all song and virtuosity without showing off, and the French (sic) Cassatt Quartet, which can proudly stand beside to the famed Kronos Quartet that commissioned *Elijah's Chariot* and premiered it. This tonal, romantic music shows how little style is the measure of good music, and how one can write romantic music and be at the same time contemporary. True, this is not likely, but it is nevertheless possible – and rare as it may be, here the possible comes into being.

Grito del Corazón (The Cry of the Heart) from 2001, for 2 clarinets and electronics, inspired by the Black Paintings of Francisco de Goya; *Sic Transit*, premiered in 2011, for percussionist and six robotic arms – whose repetitive rhythm moves from fulfillment of expectation to surprises, and explores our relation to time; and *Hosech Al P'ney HaTehom* for electronics, from 1990 – they too are beautiful works that reveal Shatin's originality and her ability to say in sound something uniquely personal. *Hosech Al P'ney HaTehom* shows this: electronic music in which the noise of chaos moves and breaks as its sounds collide; and then a lightening flash triggers a wild storm, eruptions of lava, from which emerges a sound of definite pitch – and then stability.

Judith Shatin, born in 1949, studied at Juilliard and Princeton, among other schools. She is a professor at the University of Virginia and founder and head of the Center for Computer Music there. According to her, the social aspects of music, the sounds of the world, as well as literature and visual art, find their place in her work. In an interview on the American Music site, she explains that she is looking for new sounds – “I live my life with my musical antennas up,” as she says, but that all her works have a direct and deep connection with music of the past: “sometimes I have the feeling that the p