



BRESNICK *Going Home-Vysoke, My Jerusalem*¹. *Ishi's Song*². *Josephine the Mouse Singer*³. *Strange Devotion*². *A Message From the Emperor*^{4,5}. *Prayers Remain Forever*.^{2,6}
• ¹Double Entendre; ²Lisa Moore (pn); ³Sarita Kwok (vn); ⁴Michael Compitello (perc & speaker);
⁵Ian Rosenblum (perc & speaker) ; Ashley Bathgate (vc)⁶ • STARKLAND (60:38)

I've reviewed the work of Martin Bresnick (b.1946) several times now, and each one has been a great satisfaction. Bresnick has spent most of his creative life based at Yale (which I once heard him amusedly call "my Esterházy"), where he has reigned as one of the most influential teachers of his craft to at least a couple of generations of leading composers. It's clear (to me at least) that Bresnick's music holds the key to what makes him a great teacher: more than almost any living composer I know of, he is able to take the most basic, plain materials and spin them out into compelling dramatic structures. In this sense he is very "Beethovenian". His great cycle *Opere Della una Musica Povera (Works of a Poor Music)*, referring to the postwar Italian visual art movement *Arte Povera* is a "summa" of this approach. He also had the great fortune to come of age at a time when the boundary between movements called modernism and minimalism were collapsing. As a result, he is able to combine a rich harmonic palette and often disruptive or highly contrasting gestures with compulsive repetition. He's able to blend high dissonance with bread-and-butter triads into a personal mix where all seem part of a natural continuum. Add to this his studies with Ligeti, and the recipe for substantive music is complete.

All the works on the program share these qualities. *Going Home-Vysoke, My Jerusalem* (2010) starts with high sustained, keening tones on open and violin; then the same pitch emerges an octave lower in the remaining strings. Such a simple shift, yet full of power and poignancy. *Ishi's Song* (2012) is a solo piano work based on a recorded fragment of the last of California's Yani-Yani Indians singing in a 1916 recording. Its hypnotic pentatonic riff slowly opens up registrally, discovering beauty in its mourning. Pianist Lisa Moore is also featured in *Strange Devotion* (2010), one of my favorite pieces by the composer. Based on a gnomic etching from Goya's *Caprichos*, it's a dark and unrelenting processional.

Josephine the Mouse Singer (2011) is the first of two Kafka-based works on the program. For solo violin, it begins as a series of expected high shaking tones, rather like squeaks, but develops into a virtuosic sustained *bariolage* (arpeggiations across the four strings). The climax is Bachian without sounding like a cop from that source. *A Message to the Emperor* (2010) is for two mallet percussionists who narrate as they play. Bresnick has done this periodically in his music, and an earlier such piece *My Twentieth Century*, was a little problematic for me in its word-music mix. This piece though is an unqualified success. An essay on a Sisyphean mission given a messenger from a distant king (and equally impossible for the recipient), the setting of the text seems ideal as it develops into furious repetition, insistent, unyielding, and ultimately exasperated.

And finally, *Prayers Remain Forever* is a powerful musical freight-train; both instruments have sections of unrelenting drive, where each refuses to acquiesce to any will than its own. Both dig deeply into their material, and the piece feels like an "emotional excavation", building to a rock-solid conclusion as it brings back the opening material in a new light. It's written for TwoSense, a duo of Moore and Ashley Bathgate, the current cellist for the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Like all the performers on this program, they give a powerhouse rendition. (For the record, Double Entendre is Christa Robinson, oboe; Caleb Burhans, violin; John Pickford Richards, viola; and Brian Snow, cello). Powerful music by one of the great voices of his generation. **Robert Carl**