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MCTEE *Circuits*¹. *Symphony No. 1, Ballet for Orchestra*². *Einstein's Dream*¹. *Double Play*³ • Leonard Slatkin (cond); Detroit SO • NAXOS 8.559765 (66:43) Live: Detroit ¹2/9–11/2012; ²5/17–19/2012; ³6/1–4/2010

My first contact with Cindy McTee's music was a recording of the wind ensemble transcription of *Circuits* by the Cincinnati College-Conservatory Wind Symphony. In fact, all previous experience with McTee's music has been in the wind ensemble medium, including three movements of the Symphony No. 1 under the title *Ballet for Band*. There is a wind ensemble recording of *Double Play*, as well, which I had not heard until now. It says a lot about the difficulties of getting new music recorded by orchestras that McTee's larger ensemble music, almost always written for the orchestra first, has been much more available to collectors in wind band arrangements. Of course, it didn't hurt that she was, from 1984 to 2011, on the music faculty of the University of North Texas at Denton, the current academic home of band music-recording phenomenon Eugene Migliaro Corporon. He must have found her technically challenging, elegantly crafted, imaginative, often playful and always vibrant music irresistible.

She claims, incidentally, to have acquired the compositional playfulness from Krzysztof Penderecki during the year she studied with him at the Cracow Academy of Music. That is as surprising a piece of information as I can remember picking up from an artist biography.

In any case, it seems fitting, given the large amount of play her orchestral music has gotten, that the first CD of these works is being conducted by Leonard Slatkin. This is not because he has been her husband since 2011, but because Slatkin, a noted proponent of quality American music with audience appeal, has been an advocate of McTee's music for so much longer. In fact, he was instrumental in arranging the commission of her Symphony No. 1 for the National Symphony Orchestra in 2002. That work is the central composition in this Detroit Symphony program, and is in several ways emblematic of the McTee style. It is, to begin with, music motivated by dance and movement, driven by an emphasis on rhythms, often motoric, with unexpected disruptions and syncopations to keep it impetuous. Not surprisingly, it keeps the percussion section very busy. It is music of high contrasts: in those rhythms, and in sonorities, and in its use of tonality. And lastly, each of the four named movements—*On with the Dance*, *Till a Silence Fell*, *Light Fantastic*, and *Where Time Plays the Fiddle*—is inspired by characteristics of one or more well-known works by other composers: the opening motif of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, a melody from Penderecki's *Polish Requiem*, Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Ravel's *La Valse*, and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Those who know the *Ballet for Band* will note the elegiac second movement not included in the band version: an *adagio* derived from an earlier *Agnus Dei* for organ, with which she eulogizes the victim of 9/11. All this, with some occasional jazz references to boot, McTee transforms into a unified, highly original, exceptionally moving 30-minute work.

Double Play (2009/10), the most recent work on this release, is another Slatkin commission, this for the Detroit Symphony. Indeed, this recording is from the premiere performances. *Unquestioned Answer*, the first movement, is a witty rethinking of Ives's *Unanswered Question*, using the same device of an initially serene backdrop interrupted by a contrasting repeated theme. Instead of trumpet, the theme is played by various groups of instruments, and unlike Ives's unvaried theme, McTee's—derived from Ives's—is transformed at

each repetition. The last variation, for wood blocks and cowbells, lead into the second movement, *Tempus Fugit*, which truly seems to *flee* at light speed, after the moments of indecision while the ticking clocks get synchronized. Reminding one commentator of big-band jazz of the Hermann/Kenton variety and inspired by a theme by Slatkin, it is hugely entertaining.

So is her most popular work, *Circuits*, written in 1990: a high-energy romp in which the title describes a stimulus not so much electronic as fractal. It is McTee's closest brush with minimalism on this CD, but there is nothing hypnotic or reflective here. That comes in *Einstein's Dream* (2004), which incorporates electronics and brooding introspection in a remarkable collage of wildly contrasting styles. If this can be taken as a conjecture of what it might have been like to be inside the great physicist's head, then one finds order in the Baroque ensemble, deep intellectual questing in the Romantic violin—based again on Ive's trumpet theme in *The Unanswered Question*—and the most marvelous, and sometimes fantastic images floating among them. The intent is quite serious, of course, as each of the seven continuous sections reflects on some aspect of Einstein's thoughts and works, art and science. It is the work to which I returned most often, reveling in its depth and uncommon beauties.

So, this CD is a thoroughly enjoyable experience. The work of orchestra and conductor in these performances is exemplary, something that I have not always felt when hearing recent recordings from this source. The engineering is superb. I can think of no better way to come to know the work of this fascinating composer. Highly recommended. **Ronald E. Grames**