

Classical CDs

By BRADLEY BAMBARGER
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Two new recordings present chamber music at its most intimate, as solo instruments stand in for the human voice. A third release offers a glimpse into an alternate sonic universe.

"Asturiana"

Kim Kashkashian, viola; Robert Levin, piano
(ECM)

Longtime musical partners, violist Kim Kashkashian and pianist Robert Levin have made wonderful recordings over more than two decades in tandem, helping further the viola's claim as an eloquent solo instrument. This is their best disc yet -- a collection of Spanish and Argentine songs in their own ingenious transcriptions, with Kashkashian taking the singing role.

Even shorn of their words, it's hard to imagine these songs having more lyrical color, rhythmic spice or sensual intimacy. They are by Manuel de Falla (including the darkly luminous title track), Enrique Granados, Xavier Montsalvatge, Alberto Ginastera (the doleful, mysterious "Triste"), Carlos Guastavino and Carlos Lopez Buchardo. Kashkashian phrases as if she were a great vocalist, evoking as much with a whisper as she does with a passionate outburst; her intonation is impeccable, her tone 360 degrees of expressiveness. And Levin's playing has never been more dramatic, as he shadows Kashkashian like a lifelong dance partner.

One of the year's most irresistible releases, this should be as attractive to neophytes as it is to aficionados. Along with ideal sound, the disc has ECM's objet d'art touch, with the booklet including the words to the songs, personal notes by the performers, a contextual essay and evocative photos.

"The Voice of the Clarinet"

Cristo Barrios, clarinet; Clinton Cormany, piano
(Divine Art)

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Spanish clarinetist Cristo Barrios and American pianist Clinton Cormany have created their own anthology of songs without words, including some of the most justly famous of classical melodies -- Schubert's "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel," Duparc's "Invitation to a Voyage," Debussy's "Beau Soir." The clarinetist also has a

glinting tone that mirrors the silver-on-black of his instrument. It's too bad that recording is far too close, catching the noise of the clarinet's mechanism and, worse, a harsh sibilance.

That defective sonic tic makes dynamic tunes a trial, even if one can turn down the volume to enjoy floating renditions of Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Nightingale Sings to the Rose" and quietly beautiful melodies by Brahms, Faur?, Ravel and Poulenc. It's instructive, though, to compare the Barrios/Cormany interpretation of De Falla's "Asturiana" with that of Kashkashian/Levin. Though lovely in its way, the Barrios is more coolly generalized, the emotion not as intensely realized.

"Revelation"

Michael Harrison, piano
(Canteloupe)

Inspired by the kindred-spirit works of minimalists Terry Riley and LaMonte Young, Michael Harrison created his own piano tuning for his 72-minute piece "Revelation," a monumental work both archaic and avant-garde. It's based on "just intonation," a method more in sync with the fluidities of Oriental music and Gregorian chant than the equal temperament devised to accommodate key modulations on a modern piano.

For its mathematical precision and bell-like resonances, Harrison likes to call this sort of tuning "pure." To unaccustomed ears, "Revelation" seems anything but pure; it sounds tart with "wrong" notes -- the aural equivalent of sucking on a lemon. Yet, once one has adjusted, the pulsing, gamelan-like waves Harrison conjures from his customized "harmonic piano" have a hypnotic effect, even as those pungent in-between notes keep the ear alert. "Revelation" is what a mad scientist might hear as a lullaby. Some will run from it; others won't be able to get enough.

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PHOTO CAPTION: 1. The partnership of pianist Robert Levin and violist Kim Kashkashian has yielded its best recording yet.
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