

# ECM INFORMATION

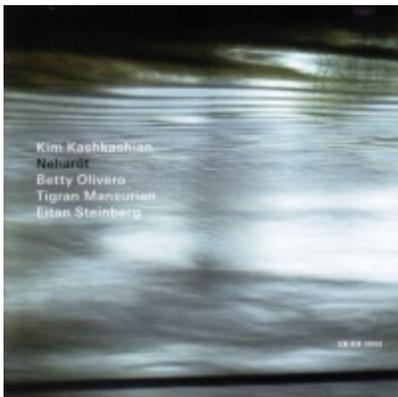
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## Probing the psyche of the oppressed through music

By Charles Noble



I've been living with the new Kim Kashkashian recording entitled *Neharót* for some time now, and find its title track *Neharót Neharót* (by the Israeli composer Betty Olivero, b.1954) to be one of the most affecting new pieces of music that I've encountered in the past decade. I liken its first impact on me to that of Jennifer Higdon's *Blue Cathedral*, now one of the most-performed pieces of contemporary music in America – visceral, deeply touching, and subtly haunting. *Neharot* stays with you for some time, not the least because it succeeds in transporting the listener to a place outside of their normal experience, and, I

dare say, out of their time as well. It's a timeless piece of music. Kashkashian also produces a remarkably vocal sound on her viola – an instrument which is often overlooked in favor of the cello for emulating the range of the human voice, but which I think takes the place in the register of a great mezzo – capable of stratospheric heights, but more at home in the middle-to-upper range and with subtle imperfections in the tone production that make the timbre reach more deeply into the heartstrings. Speaking of voices, the *Neharot* features recorded voices of professional singers (singing songs of Kurdish and North African origin or derivation) which interplay with the solo viola. The added layer that the orchestral figurations which open the work evolve into quotations from Orpheus' lament from Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* relates directly to the subtext of a people who have endured countless hardships and tragedies through years of civil war. The work, for solo viola, accordion, percussion, double string ensemble and tape, is the showpiece and emotional center of the recording, and on its merits alone justifies the purchase of the disc or download.

There are other worthy works on the disc as well. Armenian composer Tigran Mansurian (b. 1939) contributes two works to the album, *Tagh for the Funeral of the Lord* for viola and percussion, and *Three Arias (Sung out the window facing Mount Ararat)* for viola and chamber orchestra. If Olivero's musical palette might be described in visual terms as being more symbolist or abstract, then Mansurian's contributions to the album lay more in the realist school and more traditionally Romantic in thrust. Clearly, Mansurian, like Olivero, reveled in the opportunity to write for such an artist as Kashkashian, and the singing lines that he gives her to play are clearly aimed at her strengths in realizing vocal lines on a stringed instrument (a trait often sought, be less often found).

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The disc is rounded out by a Mansurian arrangement of *Oror* by the Armenian composer Komitas played with quiet elegance on the piano by Mansurian, and Eitan Steinberg's *Rava Deravin* for viola and string quartet, performed by Kim Kashkashian with the Kuss Quartett. Originally written for voice, flute, clarinet, string trio and piano in 2001, it was transcribed by the composer for the present combination in 2003. This last work is striking in the variety of sonorities that the composer is able to wring out the string quartet – an ensemble with no shortage of great works written for it, and virtually every trick in the book has been tried already – and a piece for solo viola and string quartet is a welcome addition to the repertoire, especially with orchestras less and less easy to come by to perform with. In a way, *Rava Deravin* is a cyclical return to the materials of the opening work on the disc, since it pits largely block sonorities in the quartet against fluttering and singing lines in the solo viola.

What a revelation this music is! It reflects the spiritual aspirations and profound losses of several groups of dispossessed or subjugated peoples through that most intimate of musical utterances, the human voice, but at a slightly greater distance with the added layer of the stringed instrument standing in for the vocal line. Prayers become songs, and through their transcription to the instrumental become songs without words, and achieve perhaps even greater significance.