

**KURTÁG Signs, Games, and Messages. LIGETI Viola Sonata • Kim Kashkashian (va) • ECM 001719602 (55:00)**

So you think a recording of viola solos sounds daunting or even dull? Think again. This is a wonderful dual portrait of two of Hungary's greatest composers, one still with us, one recently deceased, both great friends through their mutual time on this planet. Kim Kashkashian has paired the great works for her instrument from the two Györgys—Kurtág and Ligeti. The former is a set of aphoristic pieces in the trademark style of the composer. They are mysterious, ranging from highly chromatic to more Central European folksy, a music that continues Bartók's legacy without imitating him. Depending on the mute or technique chosen, the viola can sound like a viol, a full-throated peasant keen, or an insect. The pieces are universally concise—no matter what their duration. You keep asking, "what can he come up with next?" and he never disappoints. This is a hallmark of Kurtág, and what makes him great: the capacity to endlessly revisit his obsessions and make each essay seem unique.

The Ligeti is a late-career masterpiece. In six movements, each is a complete and invigorating world. The first is one of the best essays in microtonality by an "established" composer ever written, the fourth an astonishing essay in prolix fast music, and the final chaconne is shattering. It demonstrates an astonishing knowledge of string writing from a composer who never played a string instrument, yet whose imagination could take him anywhere. I remain stunned by its authority and risk-taking.

So having praised the repertoire, can I recommend this release without qualification? Alas the answer is no, even though Kashkashian's playing is immaculate and impassioned. But please realize that I am a "repertoire-driven" reviewer, and so the following is driving this opinion.

On Sony 62309 we have the performance of the Ligeti by its dedicatee, Tabea Zimmermann, and it's a doozy. Somehow there's just more "edge" all around, on every movement. And you also get the two major wind quintet works and an undisputed masterpiece, the Horn Trio. As for the Kurtág, Mode 230 features what seems to be a more complete version of the *Signs, Games, and Messages* (24 pieces in comparison to 19 from Kashkashian; it claims to be the only integral recording of the entire cycle) performed quite brilliantly by Maurizio Barbetti, and including four other solo viola works. I feel these two releases cover the ground more comprehensively and creatively than the ECM. But if you are viola-centric, and want two great solo masterpieces for the instrument, Kashkashian's release will not disappoint. It depends on what sort of repertoire you want to cover in your collection and listening. **Robert Carl**

