

Marc Vallon, Madison, Wisconsin

From the Opposite Shore

The Boulder Bassoon Quartet

(Michael Christoph, Kent Hurd, Brian Jack, Ethan Turner)

Online: boulderbassoons.com

Released 2014

Also available for download on iTunes

This disc contains performances of the following works:

Thomas Kent Hurd—*That so Suite*

Rica Narimoto—*The Sound of New York*

Paul Hanson—*Bassoon Quartet Number One*

Thomas Kent Hurd—*Blueish*

Total running time: 43:55

The Colorado-based Boulder Bassoon Quartet was founded in 2006 by students and ex-students of **Yoshi Ishikawa** at the University of Colorado. Most of the current members are graduates from that institution and work in ensembles such as the Boulder Chamber Orchestra, the Boulder Symphony Orchestra, or the Colorado Ballet Orchestra. As do other committed wind chamber music groups, they expand their repertoire by commissioning new works of well-established composers as well as crafting their own compositions and arrangements. A good illustration of these artistic and entrepreneurial efforts is the group's debut album, released in 2014, which features recording premieres of works written for them. The funds needed to fully bring the project to life were put together through a Kickstarter campaign and the result is an exciting CD that features well-crafted new music played by the Boulder Bassoon Quartet with the utmost cohesion, vitality and rhythmic energy.

Ken Hurd, one of the members, has contributed two pieces to the playlist. A former student of **Jeffrey Lyman** and of **Jack Rausch**, he is also a pianist and a composer. His catalog of compositions includes several pieces involving his instrument, all published by TrevCo. His first piece featured on the album, *That so Suite*, immediately sets the mood of the whole CD. Listeners will hear, in the first movement, four well-balanced solid bassoon sounds playing alternate jazz improvisation style solos above some subtly intricate rhythmic patterns. After a second bluesy nonchalant ballad-type movement, the piece ends with a fast moving energetic finale played with poise and conviction by Christoph, Hurd, Jack, and Turner. The group's playing is very engaging, displaying perfect ensemble, clear articulation, and a remarkably rich dynamic range, something typically lacking in this type of ensemble. Hurd's inventive music skillfully exploits the possibilities of the instrument, often combining a bouncy bass line with high register tunes in a very effective manner. It also makes a clever use other effects like glissandi, bent tones, and flutter-tonguing. Hurd's second contribution is a gorgeous chorale-type piece, *Blueish*, in which the Boulder Bassoon Quartet successfully achieves an organ-like sound. This slow-moving piece, played almost entirely without vibrato, features some gorgeous tone colors and attractive chord progressions. It is beautifully played and will be, for many listeners, one of the most rewarding pieces on the CD.

Japanese composer Rica Narimoto has written several works for wind instruments, among them a solo bassoon piece, *Trace III*, and a woodwind quintet, *Catalogue II*. The work featured on this CD, *The Sound of New York*, was also written for this ensemble and is her first bassoon quartet. The music, arguably the album's least "jazzy," is inspired by the

composer's stay in NYC and is somewhat descriptive without ever being simplistically so. The ambulance sirens and car horns are evoked through glissandi, half step chords, and a fortissimo top F. The fourth movement, "On the Streets" starts with a walking bass that leads into a swingy tune. Contrastingly, the last movement, "From the Opposite Shore," is a reflective piece in which the composer displays an appealing harmonic sense. The piece is rather somber, perhaps an expression of the composer's sadness of being back to her home shore, leaving behind her exciting life in NYC.

After the music of a Japanese composer who sojourned in the US, the CD's playlist goes on with a piece by an American musician who lived in Japan, **Paul Hanson**. Bassoonists are familiar with the work of this extraordinary musician who has devoted most of his career to jazz, improvisation, and the creation of his own musical language. Inspired by his four-year stay in Japan working with the Cirque du Soleil, Paul Hanson devoted this *Bassoon Quartet Number One* to his own experiences with places and the people of Japan. It is interesting to note that this is Hanson's first commission as a composer and that he is planning to dedicate more time to writing music, namely a bassoon concerto.

Everyone familiar with the inventiveness of Paul Hanson's music will recognize the patterns in this new composition: rhythmic ostinatos serve as the foundation to improvisatory-style solo lines that are inspired by a mix of jazz, oriental music and classical patterns. Particularly successful is the third movement, "Rayuka," which features a fascinating polyrhythmic ostinato, played with perfection by the Boulder bassoonists. The fourth movement's title, 充人, deliberately appears in Kanji characters, not translated, inviting the reader to experience the puzzled feeling of every foreigner in Japan when having to deal with the written language.

This CD is exemplary in many ways. It is not only a musical and technical product of professional caliber (although the recording sound is slightly on the dry side), but it also perfectly embodies what a group of dedicated young musicians can proactively do to create their own professional outlets instead of passively waiting for the few and far between job offers. Their dedication and professionalism can be appreciated in the quality of their playing as well as in the energy they have gathered to put this album together. Their efforts have and will pay off. *The Sound of New York* was specially selected for the Julliard Festival "Focus 2015: Japanese Music Since 1945." Another performance will take place on August 19 at the Japan 2015 IDRS conference.

The physical CD comes with a \$20 price tag, which might discourage some undergraduate students who are not ready to spend that much on a CD, even if they sometimes invest that much in their weekly Starbucks budget. Nevertheless, every music library should own it. The Boulder bassoonists bring a new dimension to the bassoon quartet repertoire and their CD will, without any doubt, inspire and motivate ambitious bassoonists as well as curious composers.