

Judith Shatin: Time to Burn

WTJU Classical Comments, 5/12/14, Ralph Graves

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By Ralph Graves

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James Dunham, viola

The Cassatt String Quartet

Margaret Kampmeier, piano

Aaron Hill, oboe

I-Jen Fang, Mike Schutz, percussion

F. Gerard Errante, D. Gause, clarinet

Innova Records

"Time to Burn" provides an extensive overview of this innovative composer's output. Head collectively, the works brings to light several themes which Shatin revisits and reinterprets in differing ways; her Judaic heritage; using sound (not just musical notes) to create art; and the interface between technology and humanity.

One of the highlights is "Glyph," for viola, string quartet and piano. The music has a very open sound, giving the solo viola plenty of room to maneuver in. The work's elegiac opening gives way to more animated and thickly textured movements. The solo viola remains always at the forefront, sometimes interacting with the ensemble, other times floating serenely above the busyness, and occasionally commenting on the action.

The title track "Time to Burn" is an engaging work for oboe and two percussionists. Extended techniques make the oboe sound almost like an electronic instrument in places. The interplay between the three instruments, and the imaginative way in which they're used gives the music a sense of energy and even urgency.

To me, "Sic Transit" was the least successful work on the album. The piece is for percussionist and computer-assisted drum machine, which the soloist interacts with. I suspect "Sic Transit" works well as a theater piece, where the audience can see the performer react to the drum machine. Without visual cues, I found the music somewhat aimless.

"Elijah's Chariot" was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet, and was written for string quartet and electronics from processed shofar sounds. The shofar is a traditional Jewish instrument made from a horn and used in religious services. Shatin uses the shofar to represent the heavenly chariot that comes for Elijah. The composition is a heady blend of acoustic and electronic, spiritual and secular, emotional and intellectual.