

Twenty years ago—in 1985 to be exact—Earl Kim's Violin Concerto received its first and probably definitive recording by its dedicatee, Itzhak Perlman, who was joined by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Seiji Ozawa. It was coupled with Robert Starer's Violin Concerto on EMI 7 49328. That CD appears to be another casualty of EMI's catalog pruning, but luckily I acquired the disc when it was first released, and I still have it in my collection. Since then, Kim has died, and, as far as I can tell, there hasn't been much interest shown in this concerto or in many of his other works either for that matter, at least insofar as recordings go. Which is really a shame, for the Violin Concerto is a real gem; and judging by the other two equally impressive works on this program, it is no fluke.

Some brief background info: Earl Kim (1920–1998) was a California-born son of immigrant Korean parents. A student at the University of California, Los Angeles, and then Harvard, his principal teachers were Schoenberg, Bloch, and Roger Sessions. Kim's accomplishments as a composer were recognized by numerous commissions, awards, and grants—the Koussevitzky, Naumburg, and Guggenheim Foundations, the University of Chicago, Boston University, the NEA, and several others. He was active as Composer-in-Residence at the Princeton Seminar in Advanced Musical Studies, and at the Marlboro, Dartmouth, Tanglewood, and Aspen Music Festivals. He was also co-founder and past president of Musicians Against Nuclear Arms.

Chronologically, the earliest work on this CD is the *Dialogues* (1959). A nine-minute movement for piano and orchestra, the piece may be heard as a fascinating study in a composer's declaration of independence. Kim's natural impulses were those of a born romantic, and in the *Dialogues*—a title that is as much a description of the conversation between soloist and orchestra as it is a statement of conflicting styles and techniques (as in Vivaldi's "Strife Between Harmony and Invention"), one hears the all-too-present influence of the teacher (Schoenberg) being repressed and overtaken by Kim's own predilections for tonal harmony and lyrical melody.

It is not surprising then that by the time Kim came to compose the Violin Concerto, (1979) his unabashed Romanticism was in full bloom. Divided into two large sections of roughly equal length, designated Parts I and II, the piece is further subdivided into shorter sections comprised of variations and episodes. In listening, however, one is hardly aware of these divisions, for the musical flow is continuous. The EMI recording emphasizes this point by banding the entire concerto as a single track, whereas the new Naxos CD bands it into eight tracks. Otherwise, Perlman and Arzewski come within 19 seconds of each other—22:02 and 22:21 respectively.

Overall, the piece gives the impression of a slowly evolving musical metamorphosis in which the composer himself notes the "shifting harmonies that turn on themselves, creating palindromes that are recollected and transformed throughout the Concerto." Mechanics of construction aside, however, there are extended passages in this music of such mesmerizing beauty that you will be transfixed. The Episode marked *Adagio, ma non troppo, con'affetto* is one of them.

Perlman was at the height of his technical powers in 1985, and I have to say that as truly fine as Cecylia Arzewski is in this new recording, Perlman's is the more assured, probing, and rapt reading, but not by much. And what the Naxos CD has going for it is far better recorded sound, allowing a number of Kim's subtle orchestral effects to emerge more clearly. Since the EMI seems to be nla anyway, the Naxos is a no-brainer. If you don't know this concerto, you must.

When it comes to musico-literary and vocal works, Kim's 1984 *Cornet* is not the composer's usual fare. Best known for a series of works from the mid 1960s through the late 1970s based on texts of Samuel Beckett, Kim chose for *Cornet* a lengthy historical ballad by Rainer Maria Rilke.

The *Cornet* of the title does not refer to the instrument but to the military rank of one Christoph von Legenau who was felled in battle in Hungary. The story details in poetic language the events leading up to Christoph's death: his prideful, arrogant patriotism, his lust for war, his sorrowful leaving of his mother, and his sense of invincibility as he rushes into the fray. The music that accompanies this narrative is appropriately effective, and at points sounds somewhat derivative of Mahler and Richard Strauss, as in the concluding line of stanza IX (track 18), "From darkling wine . . ." In fact, as such works go, *Cornet* reminded me a bit of a somewhat similar narrative-based work by Strauss, his little known and seldom performed *Enoch Arden*.

This is a wonderful addition to Naxos's "American Classics" series. The performances are all excellent and the recording is outstanding. I cannot recommend it too highly. **Jerry Dubins**