


**VOICES FROM THE OTHER SIDE** • Gabrielle Haigh<sup>1</sup> (sop); Steven Smith, cond; Erie Coast Cellists (ens) • NAVONA 6662 (68:23 )

**GRIEBLING-HAIGH** *Voices from the Other Side*<sup>1</sup>. **Cantilena. PÄRT** *Fratres. L'Abbé Agathon*<sup>1</sup>. **VILLA-LOBOS** *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*<sup>1</sup>.

The previous release I reviewed by soprano Gabrielle Haigh was really exciting, a perfectly programmed arc of discovery (*Il Circolo Respighi*, a feature review in *Fanfare* 46:3). Here she joins a cello octet, the Erie Coast Cellists, for a program of otherworldliness. The present disc takes its title from Margi Griebeling-Haigh's settings of Edna St. Vincent Millay. The Erie Coast Cellists comprises Khari Joyner, David Ellis, Gabriel Ramos, Robert Nicholson, Julie Myers King, Jeffrey Singler, Ralph Curry, and Richard Weiss.

It is good that this is a release by Navona with full physical booklet (in a plastic CD case as opposed to minimal card with expanded notes online). Such an enterprise deserves proper presentation.

All three poems that make up *Voices from the Other Side* by Margi Griebeling (sometimes given as Griebeling-Haigh) address otherworldly matters. "Some things are dark" is the first phase of the first song, and its title, sung over worrying motifs in cellos. The piece swells to the second stanza ("For I am Nightmare where I fly"), ushering in a ghostly dance on cello. The rhythmic doubling of voice by pizzicato cello is most effective here, and decidedly unsettling. The central "Prayer to Persephone" is appropriately dark, given that Goddess' links to the Underworld. The cellos become for the most part one coagulating mass, with a high solo cello emerging as a second "vocal" line. Gabrielle Haigh sings with great intensity. The final song, "The Curse," is rhythmically animated, and keenly articulated here by the cellists. The recording is slightly dry, which in this context is a good thing as it allows the listener to disentangle all those low-lying lines.

Written in 1999, *Voices from the Other Side* has only been heard sporadically since its 2000 premiere, according to the composer (who should after all know). I hope it will be heard much more: the writing for cello ensemble is masterly, the setting of the verse perfect.

Gabrielle Haigh, from the booklet notes, has the composer's full approbation

From obscure to much better-known: Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*. It appears in a multiplicity of forms as it has no fixed instrumentation: the somewhat lamenting sound a cello ensemble gives to its descending melodic lines seems entirely appropriate. An open-string drone on one cello seems to give the work a timeless quality, as if the drone exists before and after the performance, and we hear only one part of a much larger canvas. The return to Griebeling for *Cantilena* means we hear her piece colored by Pärt's fundamentally atemporal space. The lines seem freer, and searching. Written in 1998, *Cantilena* was premiered the following year at the Cleveland Institute of Music. The booklet notes refer to the opening as "somewhat boozy"; I prefer untethered (a pizzicato cello later seems to add more rhythmic stability, but the parts above continue with relentless liberty). There is an unpredictability to the work's trajectory that is most appealing, and that sense of exploration is superbly conveyed here by the Erie Coast Cellists. Formal shape is given by a return of the opening (albeit in different scoring). The piece draws the listener in, and very much invites repeated listening.

Regarding the ECM recording of Pärt's *L'Abbé Agathon*, reviewed in *Fanfare* 36:3, my colleague Robert Carl likens the cello ensemble to a consort of viols in this piece. Commissioned and premiered by Barbara Hendricks and L'Octuor de violoncelles de Beauvais in 2004, the piece is both magical and mystical. Haigh's voice and the Erie Coast

Ensemble bring in a real sense of electricity and intensity. Haigh's diction results in crystal clear text, too. The analogy of the viol consort is clearer in the ECM recording (Tõnu Kaijuste conducting members of the Estonian Chamber Orchestra), but both takes are valid.

Finally, Villa-Lobos. His *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5 is pretty much expected on a disc for this combination of forces, and of course opposition grows exponentially (with the unforgettable Victoria de los Angeles dominating the field). But Haigh and the Erie Coast cellists offer a performance that allows for more textural clarity than most, and benefits from it. Haigh also has a fine legato (which she obviously needs for a vocalise such as that of the first movement). Haigh's declamation is also impassioned. A clear win. The second movement could perhaps benefit from a touch more rhythmic urgency, so that that tensile energy underlies the more lyrical passages more.

A unique set of composers, fine interpreters and a good recording make this a most enjoyable listen. **Colin Clarke**

Five stars: A unique set of composers, fine interpreters and a good recording make this a most enjoyable listen