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Review

by Uncle Dave Lewis

Well it seems at last that composer Benjamin Lees has finally come into his own, and none too soon as the year 2009 witnessed his 85th birthday. For the longest time -- decades even -- all one could hear on recordings of Lees after the most diligent searching were two concertos, a couple of piano pieces, his first string quartet, second symphony, second violin sonata and another, short orchestral work. This was during a time when a lot of contemporary American music was being recorded, and when the veil came down over this tiny, highly specialized area of the record industry circa 1980, Lees more or less totally disappeared from view. This was a pity, as Lees has always gone his own way as a musician, never followed trends and his music is solid, unsentimental and clearly contemporary without resorting to systems or bypassing his own aesthetic choices -- for any reason. With the new century, a flurry of new Lees recordings have followed, and now Naxos -- which last dropped in on Lees in 1998 through a recording of his Symphony No. 4, "Memorial Candles" -- rejoins the fray with an excellent offering of three of Lees' string quartets, performed ably and with dedication by the Cypress String Quartet.

As of this disc's release, Lees has composed six string quartets, the last two for Cypress String Quartet directly. The String Quartet No. 5 (2002) was included on a list prepared by Chamber Music America of the "101 Great American Ensemble Works" and easily lives up to such hype, just by virtue of the driving intensity of its last movement alone. The String Quartet No. 6 (2005) seems poised at its start to take off from the platform that made its predecessor so appealing, and yet by the second movement it's already going in another direction, preferring a more still and mysterious mood for the second movement, a flittery texture and a growing sense of involvement in the third movement and a quirky, ominous waltz like conclusion capped off by a barrage of activity. In a way this quartet hearkens back to the classical (though not neo-classical) approach of Lees' String Quartet No. 1 (1952), receiving its second recording here in only about fifty or so years, the last one being made by the Juilliard String Quartet for the long defunct classical division of Epic Records.

Among record labels that handle contemporary music, there is often a kind of "wait your turn so everyone gets to speak" kind of rotation, the result being that no one gets to say very much -- in such an atmosphere, it is easy to see why some great talents like Lees never seem to rise to the top. We can be grateful that Lees' distinct voice has been freed from neglect, and this new entry is a strong one, given his great skill in chamber music composition generally and the Cypress String Quartet's commitment to making this music sound the best that it can specifically.