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GUITAR AMERICA 250 • Aaron Larget-Caplan (gtr¹, nar²); Trevor Neal³, Charles Coe⁴, Jeffrey Lependorf⁴ (nar); Irina Muresanu⁵ (vn) • NAVONA 6830 (53:00) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

JOHN STAFFORD SMITH ¹*The Star-Spangled Banner*. **J. ROSEMOND JOHNSON** ¹*Lift Every Voice and Sing*. **WARD** ¹*America the Beautiful*. **STEFFE** ¹*Battle Hymn of the Republic*. **ROOT** ¹*The Battle Cry of Freedom*. **COHAN** ¹*Over There*. **BERLIN** ¹*God Bless America*. **COHAN** ¹*Over There*. **PAUL SIMON** ¹*America*. **LIPTAK** ¹*Freight* (after Elizabeth Cotton). **WIESE** ¹*Midnight Train*. **CAGE** ¹*Apartment House 1776: Harmonies: 20; O Give Thanks—James Lyon; 26; Judea—William Billings*. **HOVHANNES** (arr. Larget-Caplan) ¹*Mystic Flute*, op. 22. **VAN HALEN** ¹*316*. **FLORENCE PRICE** (arr. Larget-Caplan/Muresanu) ^{1,2}*Adoration*. **BERNSTEIN** (arr. Morel) ¹*West Side Story: America*. **BRACKETT** (arr. Hand) ¹*Simple Gifts*. **HARPER** ³*Songs for the People*. **WHITMAN** ⁴*Proud Music of the Storm* (excerpt). **CAGE** ^{4,5}*Mureau* (excerpt). **MADISON** ²*Bill of Rights, Amended*

Revolutionaries and Rockstars: does this sum up present day America? It's the subtitle of this release, anyway. And a very clever release it is, too. Aaron Larget-Caplan's tribute to his home country (he was raised in Denver) includes icons as contrasted as Bernstein and Cage, illuminated by a sequence of readings.

Bernstein's "America" from *West Side Story* is heard here in a lively version foregrounding the rhythmic characteristics of a Hispanic Huatango (from Puerto Rico, which makes perfect sense in terms of the story). *Star-Spangled Banner* is heard (originally a British drinking song, *To Anacreon in Heaven*, 1773). The opening is a curious cross of the jaunty and the nostalgic; the experience is refreshingly intimate with some fetching glissandos built in. There is a quotation from *Taps* (1862, Butterfield), deliberately invoking Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock in 1969.

Hymnody has to be part of this, and so it is: Rosemond Johnson's *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, concentrated, beautiful, each harmonic turn relished, timbrally vibrant and contrastive.

There are interspersed poems and spoken prose, the first *Songs for the People*, resonantly read by Trevor Neal. The author, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was one of the first African American women to be published in the U.S. An appreciation of the value of music in life, it cuts deep—and leads straight into *America the Beautiful*, with terraced registers: an airborne opening is "grounded" by a more traditional rendition of this fine song.

Two battle cries follow, *Battle Hymn of the Republic* (with guitar percussion for the marching, and with a real musical shape, textures accruing as time passes) and George F. Root's 1862 *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, an incredibly inventive arrangement.

George M. Cohan's *Over There* is new to me, I believe. It begins with a guitar "bugle call," and a march is launched. The technical difficulty of this must be something else, and Larget-Caplan's rhythm is rock steady. Impressive.

Anyway, time to bless *America* (Irving Berlin). Larget-Caplan is right in his booklet notes when he says that this is "a prayer more than a pledge" that carries gratitude as well as a "quiet defiance." In reading it this way, Larget-Caplan brings yet more layers to the familiar.

The reading of Whitman's "Proud Music of the Storm" (from *Leaves of Grass*) by Charles Coe has a real sense of urgency. The text is imbued with references to music, celebrating both its earthly and divine aspects.

Paul Simon makes an appearance in *America*, in the American ideal of the road trip. A waltz, this is light, reflecting one of those moments where all is right with the world, and Larget-Caplan's performance entirely conjures that state. But how good is it to have Florence Price as part of the equation, an arrangement for violin and guitar of *Adoration* performed by the formidably talented Irina Muresanu (head to her website and the "Media" section for a cracking Dvořák Violin Concerto, among others). Muresanu's stopping is exceptional, her cantabile just right for this salon piece. Both Randall Goosby and Daniel Hope offer fine versions of the original (*Fanfare* 47:2 and 45:6 respectively).

Frederic Hand's arrangement of "Simple Gifts" results in a piece not quite as simple as the title implies, until the familiar melody appears as a monody. Hand, as Larget-Caplan implies in his notes, uses the guitar's resonance to fine effect. Highly enjoyable, both as an example of the arranger's craft, and as an example of Larget-Caplan's excellence.

It is fascinating to see *Freight* here, as there are examples of Elizabeth Cotten playing (and singing) this in cotton-picking style (two fingers and thumb). *Freight Train* was her signature song, amazingly written when she was 12. David Liptak offers his own take, dating from 2012, in which the music "mists over" and seems to strive for harmonic clarity. In a rather nice touch, Liptak's piece was premiered in Syracuse, in 2013: the place Cotten had spent her twilight years).

Another train: Ian Wiese's *Midnight Train*, the repetitive rhythms positively sleep-inducing ("but do keep an eye on your personal belongings," jokes the composer. A charming, imaginative piece.

It is so good to see John Cage here. Two pieces from *Apartment House 1776* of 1986, which comprises 44 "Harmonies," of which we have Nos. 26 and 20, separated by a reading of some Cage, an excerpt from *Mureau*. The "Harmonies" subtract music from American hymns and anthems by William Billings and James Lyon. Larget-Caplan has actually arranged nine of the "Harmonies" for solo guitar (using Irvine Arditti's string quartet arrangements as a template).

Added resonance gives a new warmth to Cage, “Judea” in the first instance (Billings), “O give thanks” (Lyon) in the second. It is the sense of delighted deconstruction fueled by a lightning strike of curiosity that makes this (both piece and interpretation) so special. The sense of simplicity and complete individuation is huge. I could literally listen to Larget-Caplan play Cage all day (he has recorded a whole disc of Cage).

In between is Jeffrey Lependorf’s fabulous reading of some of *Mureau* (itself from Cage’s *M: Writings* ’67–’72). It is not unlike listening to Joyce (and it strikes me the listening techniques are analogous).

Alan Hovhaness is another composer making a welcome appearance (we still hear too little of his music, and there’s a lot of it). Here, *Mystic Flute*, originally a solo piano piece. The “mystic” bit is clearly the Near East, with the lightest of sprinklings of the Far East (although Hovhannes grew up next to the Mystic River in Arlington, Massachusetts, so that’s part of the equation, too).

The title of Eddie Van Halen’s *316* is actually a reference to 3/16 in the American system of dates: March 16, the birthdate of the composer’s son. It is beautiful, a perfect preface to a reading of *Bill of Rights, Amended* (the amendment is by Larget-Caplan, intending a “poetic interpretation”). Repetitions inevitably invoke the spoken Cage track. Words are omitted, too, so that their absence is all the more obvious, to “emphasize the evolving relevance and fragility of these principles.” The repetitions and omissions of course are used for emphasis, thus pointing to the present.

A fantastic disc. Larget-Caplan is a master arranger as well as master guitarist. I thoroughly enjoyed his disc *Spanish Candy* (*Fanfare* 47:2) and his expert Bach disc, *God’s Time* (46:3). Add this one to the list of fine releases. Navona rarely drops the ball when it comes to recording, and this is no exception. Recommended. **Colin Clarke**