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FEATURE REVIEW by Barnaby Rayfield

SCHWENDINGER *High Wire Act*.¹ Nonet.² *Rumor*.³ *Sonata for Solo Violin*.⁴ *Two Little Whos*⁵ • ¹BrightMusic; ²Chicago Chamber Musicians; ³Christina Jennings (fl); ³Greg Sauer (vc); ⁴Katie Wolfe (vn); ⁵Duo46 • CENTAUR 3098 (59:04)

I recently interviewed Laura Elise Schwendinger back in 36:4, where I encountered her intricate but ultimately accessible style for the first time. Then promoting her disc of concertos, this welcome second album of her work gathers up a selection of her chamber pieces, all written in the last 10 years, except her Violin Sonata from 1992. Just as I admired her love of orchestral color back then, it is her unusual pairing of instruments that intrigues; flute and cello, violin and guitar. Poise, structure, lyricism. This new disc echoes the fine qualities of her *Three Works for Solo Instruments and Orchestra*.

There's a nice whiff of Ravel about the rhapsodic flute opening to the five-movement *High Wire Act*, before being offset with the scuttling piano and violin writing, with each part being a snapshot of a circus act. This musical

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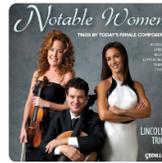
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Laura Schwendinger, Composer



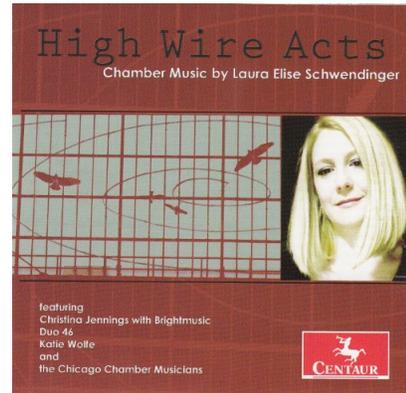
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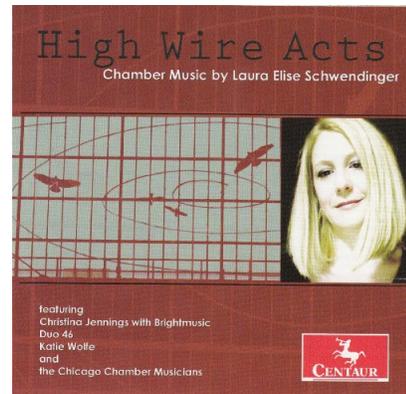
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beautifully structured, from the unbearably still and tense “Tightrope-walker,” to the Glassian rhythmic energy of the “Aerialist.” There’s a similarly French flavor and color to Nonet, although its rhythmic motifs and repeated arching lines of the first movement have more of an academic feel than the programmatic *High Wire Act*. Nonet is a riot of colorful trills, with Schwendinger demonstrating a wonderful ear for clarity of texture and balance. The second movement (suitably tagged *Tenderly*) is an assured and poised work of beauty and color that really ought to be better known. Similarly *Rumor* is a beautifully written “conversation”

between flute and cello that develops from the broken phrases bouncing off each other, into something shriller and more dangerous, like a marital argument in music, I kept thinking.

The Sonata for Solo Violin (the only solo work here) sits rather oddly with the more colorful instrumentation elsewhere. A complex, yet austere work, Schwendinger's violin writing has an almost baroque dryness, amidst the probing slides and dissonance on display. This tense piece has echoes in the wistful and increasingly dark *Two Little Whos*, which rounds off the album satisfyingly, with a touch of ice about the violin's troubled writing, set off against the guitar.

As in her previous disc, Schwendinger loves color and edge in her music, but never at the expense of lyricism and momentum. The playing throughout these disparate sessions is uniformly superb with Christina Jennings's balmy contributions being a special highlight. The notes are good and Centaur's sound is bright, forward, and well balanced, making these lithe, vibrant pieces come to life. **Barnaby Rayfield**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 37:1
(Sept/Oct 2013) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**

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