

Highlander's Lament - A New CD from Elliot Riley

Written by Robert Haley

Monday, 01 August 2011 16:46 - Last Updated Wednesday, 28 September 2011 12:26



ALERT: ClassicSax.com EXCLUSIVE!

In decades past, musicians/saxophonists have bemoaned the absence of truly artistic saxophone recordings that take their place alongside the recordings of other world-class, classical instrumentalists. Thankfully, saxophonists from all "schools" of playing are changing this dynamic! The mostly unfiltered democracy of the internet is giving people around the world a chance to hear, compare, contrast, and appreciate these different artistic approaches to saxophone playing. The saxophone tradition that began in Berlin in the 1930s is producing some of the most intelligent, exciting and expressive classical playing in concert halls and on recordings. **Highlander's Lament**, the debut solo recording by saxophonist Elliot Riley and pianist Scott Mitchell, stands as a brilliant testament to this tradition.

The Riley-Mitchell duo has combined both old and new to produce a disc of remarkable clarity, musical sensitivity and variety. Opening with a live concert recording of the much-loved **Sonata** by Paul Creston, the duo moves with grace and ease through the lush and romantic sounding movements. Typically, one would expect some small issues to arise in live performance and the listener would forgive a mis-step or two, but this particular performance surpasses most any highly-edited studio recording that I have heard of the Creston. But, why should we be surprised at the assuredness of Mr. Riley's live performances? He has been performing some of the most demanding saxophone literature in the world's finest concert halls with the famous Rascher Saxophone Quartet for over ten years.

Highlander's Lament - A New CD from Elliot Riley

Written by Robert Haley

Monday, 01 August 2011 16:46 - Last Updated Wednesday, 28 September 2011 12:26

Rascher stated that the performance of chamber music was always his favorite musical activity. He has passed that legacy along to us through some fine works written for a variety of instrumental combinations. Since its publication a few years ago, Carl Anton Wirth's **Jephthah** (1958) for soprano saxophone, alto saxophone and piano, has become familiar to saxophonists and audiences, and has been recorded at least three times. Drawing on friendships, Riley has invited Christine Rall, soprano saxophonist of the RSQ, to be a musical partner in this convincing performance. Briefly, the work presents the Biblical story of Jephthah, who, when faced with a seemingly insurmountable military difficulty, bargains with God for a victory. Jephthah's part of the bargain was to offer up as a sacrifice the first person to greet him upon his return from victory. Can you guess who ran out to greet him? His daughter. The work portrays the lamenting of Jephthah with the alto and the exuberant innocence and then the solemn resignation of the daughter with the soprano saxophone.

Pythikos Nomos by Brian Elias was composed for John-Edward Kelly in 1988. Mr. Kelly also held the alto chair in the RSQ. The work is an evocative and difficult tour de force, utilizing surviving musical pieces from ancient Greece. Many contemporary techniques are utilized freely and integrated into the musical fabric beautifully. I feel that some contemporary saxophone music sounds like a composer utilized a check list of effects and devices to qualify the work as a valid saxophone piece, consideration of the listening audience aside. Brian Elias challenges the listener but doesn't assault him. Riley's and Mitchell's performance is of the highest order and their complete mastery of the technical and musical demands leaves the listener very satisfied and should leave the saxophonist with his eyes wide open in wonderment as to what is possible with the instrument that he puts to his lips everyday.

Would Beethoven have used the saxophone if it was available? If he heard a beautiful tone like Mr. Riley produces, I'm sure he would have. One of the very interesting outcomes of Adolphe Sax's original design of the saxophone and mouthpiece, is the unique tone quality that the combination produces. Language fails us when speaking of tone color, but velvety, warm, penetrating, vocal-like are a few adjectives that come to mind when hearing Mr. Riley's saxophone tone. The unlikely combination of violin, cello, saxophone and piano in a Beethoven work would raise a few eyebrows among the musical elite, but these musicians make it work! Elliot and Scott are joined by a young cellist Tomasz Daroch (18 years old at the time of the recording) and violinist Agata Riley, Elliot's talented wife. These attractive settings of Scottish, Welsh and Irish folk tunes originally used the human voice, but the performers had the clear thinking to substitute the alto saxophone! Listen to the blending of the different tone colors and how the saxophone integrates perfectly. Adolphe Sax would be delighted. Again, this presentation is from a live concert performance.

Congratulations should be extended to the people who have helped Elliot along the way, including his very musical parents and saxophone mentors, including Patrick Meighan of Florida

Highlander's Lament - A New CD from Elliot Riley

Written by Robert Haley

Monday, 01 August 2011 16:46 - Last Updated Wednesday, 28 September 2011 12:26

State University and Harry White. I even taught Elliot for a while when he was in high school, so I am very pleased to review his fine recording and to [make it available through our website.](#)