

ARNAOUDOV The Way of the Birds • Tanya Kazandjieva-Chauche (sop); Ens • LABOR LAB7068 (42:33 📖)



[Way of the Birds](#)

[Audio CD](#)

[Labor Records](#)



Gheorghi Arnaoudov is a Bulgarian composer, born in 1955. Although the CD booklet and promotional material are quick to mention his “roots in Minimalism,” I think that is a distraction. There’s nothing Minimalist about the complex, emotional six-minute flute solo that opens this disc, underpinned by a violin drone. For European listeners it will evoke a rich diversity of sources, related to place, genre, and time: folk, religious, ancient, and modern.

In the four works on this disc, Arnaoudov makes good use of his inheritance and culture to create a sequence of compelling “sound-poems.” The Way of the Birds, as presented here, consists of three pieces plus a “footnote,” all representing “fragments of Arnaoudov’s cycle of tone poems for soprano and various chamber ensembles based on medieval Bulgarian love texts from the 17th and 18th centuries.” The Way of the Birds I, for soprano, flute, and violin is primarily a flute raga, as the CD notes describe it—thereby adding another dimension of cultural reference—into which the soprano belatedly enters, discreetly taking over the solo role while the flute accompanies with a cantus firmus. It’s richly evocative and, I feel, works best at an emotional level; I’m not sure how yielding to structural analysis it might be.

The Way of the Birds II increases the instrumental texture by first adding drums and what I assume is an electronically modified recording of the soprano against which the live singer duets with not entirely happy pitch accuracy. In due course other instruments in a chamber ensemble join in. Again the sense of cultural collisions is present, though not in a destructive way; rather the ear is intrigued all the time. This is the point to bring in the strange sound world of this disc. I’m sure it’s deliberate—and it’s certainly effective—but it isn’t natural. It manages to be both lurid and dreamlike at the same time. As the CD progresses this becomes more and more the case. In II the drums are close-miked far more

than are the other instruments, there's added echo to some of the percussion, and there are places where the engineers have clearly assisted—in a diminuendo, for example. The *Way of the Birds III*, for soprano, clarinet, violin, cello, and percussion, is somewhat shorter and it's clear that I–III are in the form of an arc, with II being the most complex heart of the sequence, as III returns to the mood of the first piece.

The *Footnote*, subtitled *...und Isolde/ns Winkfall lassen...*, was written in 1991 before the other works, which are from 1995–96. It is the most interesting piece compositionally, and the most luridly presented. The voice performance, described as *Sprechstimme*, would make even Laurie Anderson blush: massively amplified whispering against a diverse chamber group, all set in a sound world where the individual instruments seem to be electronically enhanced. (This is not a complaint, merely a description.) Arnaoudov describes it as “an imaginary interlude to the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*” based on the poem *A Prayer* by James Joyce. The soloist's heavily accented English—complete with mispronunciations (e.g., “breaths” for “breathes”)—only adds to the general air of disassociation. The ending, in which this apparently disembodied voice is set against an electric guitar, has one on the edge of the seat.

I have added the little book symbol to the heading of this review to indicate texts are provided, but the Bulgarian folk poems only appear in the original language, in Cyrillic script: perverse for an American record label, I would have thought. That aside, Labor Records is to be congratulated for resurrecting these recordings from the 1990s. The performances are intense, aided by the sound world that the composer, who also acts as the producer of the recording, has created. I can imagine some listeners finding the whole disc indulgent and irritating. But I confess I was swept along by the composer's vision, aural imagination, and sure-footedness.

–Jeremy Marchant, *FANFARE*