



West Side Story Revisited and Revived

I admit I never intended to review what I believed to be a straight orchestral revival of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, released by Orchid Classics on November 6th. I loved the musical and the film starring Natalie Wood, and having sung all the songs throughout my teenage years, I thought I had eventually expunged it from my soul.

And so when I slotted the CD into my player, I did so a little nonchalantly, without paying attention to the sleeve notes.

The *Prologue* knocked me out with its fresh new sound. It even managed to draw my husband from his Bob Dylan den. "Sounds good," he said looking puzzled. "I know it's *West Side Story* but it's different – why?"

With Gwendolyn Masin on solo violin in equal partnership with the Melisma Saxophone Quartet, the end product is ingenious for it is not immediately obvious that you're listening to what amounts to a quintet. By revealing all this to you I feel I have quite spoiled the big surprise, for the CD sleeve with the photograph of New York tenement buildings and the musicians staring out from the title, don't immediately suggest that this is a chamber ensemble playing one of the most famous orchestral scores of all time.

Of course, the saxophones make perfect sense, for what better to produce that authentic car horn, the urban musical landscape that we have come to associate with *West Side Story's Prologue*. In *Somewhere* however, the wah wah, beep bopping saxophones disappear as they produce a more reverberating organ sound. This added to Masin's sweet violin melody, creates a perfect song without words of yearning and hope. *Procession and Nightmare* with its stratospheric high violin combined with contrasting low sax resembling a cello, is stunning. In the highly rhythmic *Mambo* the saxes take on the personality of trumpets.

Throughout the recording, I was struck by the versatility of the saxophone and its tonal range. No doubt the young men and women artists making up the Melisma Saxophone Quartet will be great ambassadors for the instrument.

What this very inspired arrangement by Henk Huizinga does too is capture the soul of Bernstein's original orchestration for the musical, all the while peppering it with something new, for the instruments in this arrangement have to take the part of the vocals. Interestingly, Masin's violin, for example, is pitched higher than the original Bernstein score, to make the melody more distinctive and perhaps more vulnerable and plaintive.

What this recording does do is make you more acutely aware of the structure of Bernstein's score and the effects he was trying to create. The contrasting themes of love and death, war and peace, when they reappear and resurface, come through all the more powerfully when they are not masked or dominated by the vocal line.

Excellent, spirited play by Gwendolyn Masin and Melisma Saxophone Quartet. Highly recommended.

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West Side Story is released by Orchid Classics November 6th 2020.

<https://www.orchidclassics.com/releases/orc100145-west-side-story/>