

STORYTELLER • Justin Benavidez (tb); Deloise Lima^{1,2,3,4} (pn); Patrick Dunnigan⁴, Richard Clary⁵, David Plack cond; Florida St U Wind Ens^{5,6,7} • BRIDGE 9571 (78:29)

MAHLER ¹*Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. **WHITACRE** ²*Goodnight Moon*. **DEBUSSY** ³*Suite bergamasque: Prélude*. (all arr. Benavidez) **BAADSVIK** ⁴*New Kid*. **CUONG** ⁵*Concerto for Tuba and Wind Ensemble*. **T. GOODMAN** ⁶*Concerto for Tuba and Wind Ensemble*. **VIZZUTTI** ⁷*Cityscape*.

Professor of tuba and euphonium at Florida State University College of Music, Justin Benavidez also plays as Principal Tuba of the Tallahassee Symphony. He is a Denis Wick performing artist: Denis Wick is British trombonist and mouthpiece and mute creator (a tradition now proudly continued by his son, Stephen Wick).

This is a thoughtfully chosen program. Several pieces by Viet Cuong (born 1990) have appeared previously in *Fanfare*: I reviewed *Naica* (inspired by the crystal caves of Chihuahua, Mexico) on a Neuma disc entitled *Tourmaline* in *Fanfare* 46:2; other pieces reviewed in these pages include *Moth* and *Trains of Thought*. Cuong's *Tuba Concerto* begins and ends with Chaconnes, a form that appeals to the composer because the very repetitiveness of the bass allows the listener to hear this as the melody (which obviously suits a piece for tuba). The writing for the orchestra in the first movement is glittering, imaginative and mercurial. At only two minutes, this Chaconne is over before one knows it, but it carries an undeniable forward momentum. The central "Canticle" is inspired by Palestrina, Gabrieli and, unsurprisingly perhaps, Vaughan Williams, who of course wrote a major concerto for this tuba. Benavidez is most expressive here (he does use vibrato, and effectively). His sound is gloriously warm and comforting, his legato perfect. There is a most beautiful moment when the tuba carries the melody while a woodwind choir sings above; as the horns take over the melody, then the trumpets, the music becomes ever more ecstatic. As Cuong himself says, this movement is "the heart of the piece". Cuong mimics the "Shepard Tone," an illusion in which it seems the music continually ascends, offering the rationale that this act of ascent honors the grounding bass note from which it originates (this honoring the register and sound of the tuba). We hear a lot of those ascents in the appealing finale; Benavidez' agility here is most impressive (we hear every note clearly). The cadenza is a masterclass in the expressiveness of low-pitched melody.

Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (given here as "Songs of a Wayfarer") is heard in an arrangement by the soloist. All movement titles are given in English in the booklet ("When my beloved has her wedding day" is the first, for example, as opposed to "Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht"). The arrangement is for tuba and piano, and Benavidez is joined by the excellent Deloise Lima who has a terrific way of capturing Mahler's use of gesture. The tuba positively sings in this first song, and there is a fetching lightness of "This Morning I Went Over the Field" (or "Ging het' Morgen über's Feld"). Perhaps "I have a Red-Hot Knife" ("Ich hab' ein glühend Messer") could have a touch more menace about it (the rounded tone of a tuba is arguably too "nice" for the emotions portrayed by Mahler here). It is the final song that completely vindicates this arrangement. The disc is entitled "Storyteller" and that's exactly what it feels like Benavidez is doing in "The Two Blue Eyes of my Beloved" ("Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz").

The composer Todd Goodman (born 1977) appears to be new to the *Fanfare Archive*. His *Tuba Concerto* was premiered in Linz, Austria and was commissioned by the 2012 Tuba Repertoire Initiative. Scored for tuba and wind ensemble, it begins in a quasi-Minimalist fashion (certainly the harmonies evoke that methodology alongside the repeated phrases). The first movement is marked “Introspective” and features long tuba lines against repeated woodwind phrases: the “introspective” element is obviously a ruminative soliloquy in which the tuba operates in a world of its own. Until, at last, it starts to join in the looping upward scales. The contrasting slow movement is simple in design and expression, and all the stronger for it. Goodman explores the tuba’s very lowest register, passages performed with the utmost sensitivity (not to mention control) by Benavidez. In contrast, the “fast and aggressive” finale (described as an “athletic sprint” by the composer) is properly virtuoso for the soloist, not just in agility but also in terms of what must surely be double-tonguing at that speed. If so, the challenge is to get all notes to sound equally in terms of attack (this Benavidez does).

Swedish composer Anna Baadsvik offers *New Kid* for tuba and piano. Although the title hails from having to name a file in the Sibelius program and to a sort of “birthing process,” the work itself actually considers rivers and their associations: multifaceted, and yet they never stop. The composer tells us she can imagine “hearing echoes of whispering voices from a long time ago” when listening to the river, a concept that meshes nicely with the storytelling basis of the disc’s concept. This is a most appealing piece, and a valuable addition to the tuba and piano repertoire.

Much more familiar is Debussy’s *Suite Bergamasque*, which works surprisingly well for tuba and piano. Benavidez’ fluent passagework helps, as does Deloise Lima’s sensitive playing. There is no doubting that Eric Whitacre’s *Goodnight Moon* is easy on the ear, a piece which already exists in numerous versions; no reason not to have a tuba one, then, and Benavidez is splendidly eloquent. Finally, Allen Vizzutti’s *Cityscape* for solo tuba and wind ensemble. The city (represented in three movements by “Uptown,” “Midtown,” and “Downtown”) is an imaginary one, perhaps one from a superhero comic book. The bustling first movement features angular figures that perhaps represent the prickliness of some cities (the composer states it is a “mixture of joy and angst often experienced in a metropolis”). It is beautifully performed: the Florida State Symphonic Band under David Plack is fully on the ball. I imagine the tuba part requires some stamina, and there are predictably no problems here. A tuba song is Vizzutti’s representation of “Midtown,” while “Downtown” opens with a Bernstein-like riff from the orchestra before the active tuba line launches. Quite right to end the disc on a truly virtuoso note, especially given that Justin Benavidez certainly appears to be a true virtuoso of his instrument (if there was any doubt, listen to the solo cadenza). There is also a version of this piece for tuba and piano. Vizzutti is himself a trumpeter, so his understanding of brass writing is flawless. His *Cascades* for solo euphonium was recorded by William Hess on a Summit disc reviewed in *Fanfare* 45:1.

Recording quality is first-rate, as one has come to expect from the Bridge label. All brass players will enjoy this, for sure, and I truly hope the net goes wider than that. A simply splendid disc.

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Colin Clarke

