

Gapplegate music review

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Phil Kline & His Zippo Songs

OK, Phil Kline's song cycle *Zippo Songs* (Cantaloupe Music) has been available for some time now. If I am mentioning it today it is because it transcends the trendy and flavor-of-the-week sorts of come-and-go "product" that we find ourselves bombarded with every day.



Phil Kline created in this group of songs a kind of musical equivalent to Goya's *Disasters of War* paintings. It is based on the inscriptions soldiers in the Vietnam War scratched on their Zippo lighters. It's sometimes about a kind of gallows humor in the face of horror; then again the inscriptions sometimes communicate a despair that certainly is not at all ironic. They are invariably touching, moving, heart breaking.

The music is what of course puts this all over in a way that transforms it into art. We have a chamber ensemble of Todd Reynolds on violin, the composer on guitars and Dave Cossin on percussion. Theo Bleckmann takes on the vocal part, and he does so without using a trained, operatic sort of sound. This only serves to bring home the contemporaneity of the whole thing. There are electronic manipulations and double tracking passages that thicken the sound but of course that has been a consistent part of Phil Kline's sound and trademark.

I try not to read other reviews before I do one but I accidentally stumbled on a review of *Zippo Songs* by somebody; I don't recall who. It commented on the work's "brutality." Well certainly the music itself is not at all that in any systematic way. It is sad, reflective and a bit angry at times. But the music is so distinctive it does much more than parallel the lyrical content. It recreates the "looking at a distance" we necessarily experience looking back on a tragic event from a later time. That's in part the magic of this music. It's a tribute to the men and women who fought in that war and the absolute insanity of having to fight in it.

More than that, though, this is music that bears the Phil Kline stamp. It refuses to accept what the "modern classical" genre would dictate as to how the music sounds. It also refuses to accept what the "post-" mode would expect Mr. Kline to produce. There are moments of metal music, especially from the guitars, there are moments of a lyrical tenderness, there are influences of every sort of music Phil Kline has ever heard, I would think. And that's how it should be with a contemporary composer of his caliber.

We sometimes forget that a Haydn, a Mozart, a Beethoven enriched their compositional palettes by the music in which they were immersed as human beings in place and time. Hence interludes of "Turkish" music, references to the dance music of the era, and so on.

The difference between them and Phil Kline is that he is alive right now. And like the other composers I mention, this is not a matter of appropriation as it is of transformation. It isn't music about other music.

Zippo Songs I believe is one of the masterpieces of our current era; Phil Kline is one of our most important composers. But don't take my word for it. Listen.

Posted by Gapplegate at 5:02 AM