

COOL TUNES FOR THE BIG BASSOON • Susan Nigro (cbn); Mark Lindeblad¹ (pn) • CRYSTAL 980 (59:30)

JARED ARAGÓN¹ *Little Suite for Big Bassoon*.¹ **Contrabassoon Sonata**, “Nebulae”. **VOSK** *The Giant Stirred*.¹ **Contra Blue**. **PALIDER**¹ *L’Italiano Molto Breve*. **JOEL BJORLING** Suite in a. **KURRASCH**¹ *Chicago Cakewalk*

Susan Nigro is more than a terrific contrabassoonist. She is a superb musician who happens to play the contrabassoon. Because of her serious musicianship married to a virtually flawless technique, Nigro has made a bigger solo career with that instrument than anyone might have thought possible. This new release is her ninth CD—along with *Cool Tunes for the Contrabassoon*, previous releases include *Little Tunes*, *New Tunes* and *Original Tunes*. While technical flair might be the first element that grabs your attention, it is the musicianship that ultimately remains in the memory from her playing.

All of the composers represented on this disc are Americans. Jared Isaac Aragón was born in New Mexico in 1990 and is also an organist. At 25 minutes, his two pieces take up a significant part of the program and deservedly so. *Little Suite for Big Bassoon* explores a wide range of the instrument’s capabilities. The music displays a sense of fun, but also a beautiful lyricism that might surprise you. The second movement (Berceuse) and the fourth (Aria) are exquisite interludes between the jauntier movements. Aragón wrote the *Little Suite* for his senior recital in 2012 as a composition student, and Nigro agreed to come to New Mexico to play it. His love for the instrument continued, and two years later Aragón wrote the “Nebulae” Sonata for Contrabassoon and Piano. The title reflected Aragón’s newly discovered fascination with astronomy and cosmology; the individual movements are named after specific formations like the Butterfly Nebula. I just listened to it as music without the associations that Aragón describes in his notes, and I found the music evocative in the variety of moods it conjures up.

Jay Vosk’s *The Giant Stirred* is described by the composer as a “mini tone poem,” and it succeeds as that. One senses the giant waking up and lumbering around looking for adventure. Scored for unaccompanied contrabassoon, *The Giant Stirred* gives Nigro a chance to display her dramatic and comedic skills, which she does vividly. In Vosk’s other work here, *Contra Blue*, the mood is very different.

Vosk says he “wanted to write a piece more fitting for a jazz or dance club rather than the concert hall,” and Nigro’s suave, bluesy playing fits the music perfectly. Joel Bjorling’s *Suite in A Minor*, which is also for unaccompanied contrabassoon, was inspired by the founding of the Modern Spiritualism Movement in Hydesville, New York in 1848. The program notes explain some of the specific sounds replicated in the score, but even without this knowledge the music is appealing and attractive. The lively third movement should inspire some toe-tapping on your part, as it did mine.

Alan Palider is a Chicago native who wrote *L’Italiano Molto Breve* in 2011 specifically for Nigro and pianist Mark Lindeblad. The work is based on the Italian national anthem, which is heard in a variety of forms throughout. The music is perky and great fun. It is worth noting that the piano part is more than accompaniment—it is of equal importance to the contrabassoon. This is another piece that has humor as a central element.

Another Chicago composer, Ann Marie Kurrasch, has written arrangements of popular songs for Nigro’s Chicago Bassoon Quartet. Nigro specifically asked Kurrasch for a ragtime piece for the contrabassoon, and *Chicago Cakewalk* is patterned after Scott Joplin. It makes a wonderfully enjoyable conclusion to a terrific collection.

Lindeblad is a fully engaged partner at the piano, playing a truly collaborative role rather than simply accompanying. His personality adds to the vivid nature of the whole program. Excellent recorded sound and helpful program notes round out a release that serves impressively to showcase a pre-eminent wind player and her artistry. Strongly recommended. **Henry Fogel**

This article originally appeared in Issue 45:6 (July/Aug 2022) of *Fanfare Magazine*.