

Music Review – *Twisted Skyscape* – British Music for Woodwind Orchestra

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The producers of *Twisted Skyscape* are direct about the purpose of their project: it is an advocacy album for both the woodwind orchestra and British composers. The British composers certainly represent themselves well, with a varied program of contemporary music ranging from dance-like to ethereal. And the woodwind orchestra, for the most part, serves as a successful and colorful vehicle for this music.

This album claims to be the first of its kind. This is mostly true, since an orchestra of mixed woodwinds only is a relatively new phenomenon. This woodwind orchestra uses specifically the woodwinds of the wind band (flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and saxophones, often in several sizes). However, while the creators of *Twisted Skyscape* can point to a number of standing woodwind orchestras within their musical circles, and even non-British composers like American [Carter Pann](#) have written for woodwind-only ensembles, groups like this don't really exist as a common cultural phenomenon, at least not in the way that string orchestras, brass bands, and even percussion ensembles do. So in that way, this does indeed mark the coming-out of a new type of ensemble. And yet, the art music world has maintained something like a woodwind orchestra for more than two centuries in the form of *Harmoniemusik*. This ensemble, which peaked in popularity just before 1800, uses pairs of oboes, clarinets, and bassoons from the woodwind family, with French horns rounding out the middle voices. You might also see basset horns and a string bass, as in Mozart's legendary [Gran Partita](#). Ensembles derived from this mostly-woodwind makeup have a rich and fascinating repertoire with contributions from [Mozart](#), [Beethoven](#), [Dvorak](#), [Gounod](#), [Richard Strauss](#), [Willem van Otterloo](#), [Jonathan Dove](#), and [Lior Navok](#), to name but a few. The woodwind orchestra would thus expand its repertoire instantly by admitting French horns into its fold.

The woodwind soloists of the Czech Philharmonic make for a world-class woodwind ensemble. Their playing under Shea Lolin's leadership is mostly flawless and quite musically compelling, with only the occasional lapse in ensemble blend, mostly due to consistently over-present low saxophones. On every track, the potential of the woodwind ensemble as an artistic medium is clear.

Philip Sparke's *Overture for Woodwinds* provides a wonderful introduction to the sound world and color possibilities of this ensemble. Its stately opening showcases the full sound potential of the collected woodwinds. Gary Carpenter's *Pantomime* began its life with *Gran Partita* instrumentation before being re-orchestrated by the composer for this recording. Perhaps because of this, there are times when the piece does not feel native to the genre, particularly in the fourth movement. This dance suite was derived from Carpenter's musical *Aladdin*, and as such it has some dramatic and introspective moments among its

relatively straightforward and melodic dance movements. These are often reminiscent of the wind band dance treatments of [Robert Russell Bennett](#). Adam Gorb's *Battle Symphony* successfully combines a medieval sound foundation with contemporary harmonic and timbral touches, much like [Dello Joio's *Scenes from the Louvre*](#) or [Poulenc's *Suite Francaise*](#) before it. The standout pieces on this album belong to Christopher Hussey, who was also a producer on the project. His two pieces, *Dreamtide* and the titular *Twisted Skyscape*, both extend the mood and color palette of the ensemble in exciting ways, especially on the more lyrical and ethereal end. They use the ensemble so well that the listener never once longs for any other instrument. This is especially remarkable in the case of *Dreamtide*, which was originally a choral piece. What unifies the five very different pieces on the album is their shared accessibility. Each one is immediately appealing and begs a second listen.

Twisted Skyscape the album represents a very promising start (if we accept that it is truly something new) for the woodwind orchestra. But what is the future of the genre, especially outside of Britain? The music presented here may already be able to find a place in school and university wind band programs in the USA, which are often hungry for good literature to work on in sectionals. But it will be just one option among many (including arrangements and existing *Harmoniemusik*), and is unlikely to lead to the establishment of dedicated woodwind orchestras. It will take a great deal more music like this and more full-throated advocacy by people like Shea Lolin and Christopher Hussey in order for the woodwind orchestra to spread as a distinct idea separate from its cousins the wind band, the orchestra, and *Harmonie*. For now, this repertoire can add some welcome variety to any group that would try it. And they should: it would be a thrill to hear this music live.

Twisted Skyscape is available for pre-order from www.twistedskyscape.com. It will be released worldwide on July 17, 2015.