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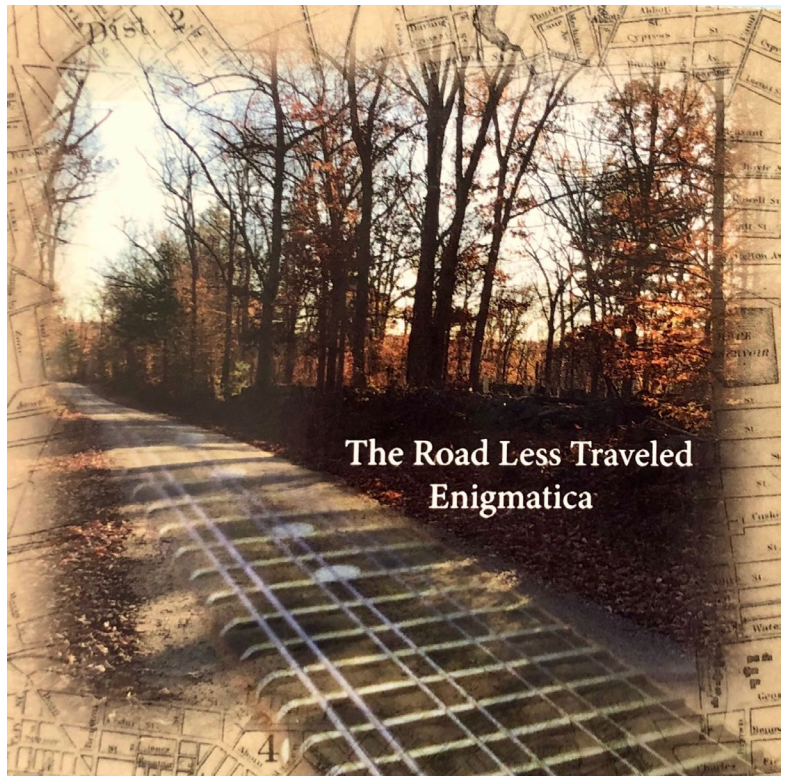


Review of Enigmatica's "Road Less Traveled"

By Mark Linkins

Prominent American mandolinist and mandolin pedagogue Marilyn Mair founded Enigmatica in 2000. Mair describes the ensemble as "part chamber group and part plucked string double quartet." Several months ago, Enigmatica released its fifth CD, *The Road Less Traveled*.

In the twenty tracks that comprise *The Road Less Traveled*, Enigmatica explores a wonderfully diverse musical terrain: from Baroque (both German and Italian varieties) to Benjamin Britten, from Brazilian choro to the Beatles, and from Astor Piazzolla to contemporary Americana (Rhiannon Giddens, Eden Macadam-Somer, and others). While a handful of the works are original compositions for plectrum ensemble, the majority of pieces are arrangements of works written for other musical configurations (string orchestra, roda de choro, etc.). The compositions of three Enigmatica members – Marilyn Mair, Robert N. Martel, and Catherine Hawkes – are included in this collection, along with a number of arrangements by Mair and Martel.



While the works presented in this collection – and by Enigmatica generally – are diverse, two generalizations can be made: (1) the repertoire is largely of North American and South American origin, with a few exceptions, and (2) the repertoire does not include works from the "Golden Era" of the mandolin (late 19th and early 20th Century). These are two of the reasons why I find Enigmatica so refreshing. While I love the music of Calace, Munier, and their contemporaries, I don't think that 21st Century mandolin ensemble performance should be constrained by the musical sensibilities of La Belle Epoque.

I like everything about the *The Road Less Traveled*. The recording quality is excellent, and the tone production and balance across the ensemble is superb. The ensemble's expressive and interpretive skills are on full display. All of the performances on this CD are very strong. While I don't have the space here to offer comment on all 20 tracks, I have selected five tracks that, to my ear, reflect Enigmatica at its finest.

"The Long Road Home," composed by Enigmatica guitarist Robert N. Martel, is a gorgeous, contemplative ballad. For this listener, it is reminiscent of the compositions of the late Peter Ostroushko. Martel judiciously uses tremolo only with the inner voices. Throughout the piece, the melody is performed without tremolo. This contrast between tremolo and non-tremolo voices helps to distinguish and differentiate the melody and accompaniment. This is a simple, but very effective, technique. Martel also makes effective use of harmonics. The ensemble performs this piece with precision, subtlety, and nuance.

(continued on page 13)

(continued from page 12)

Eden Macadam-Somer is a violinist/fiddler, composer, and improviser whose work transcends musical genres. She has been described by the New York Times as possessing “astonishing virtuosity and raw expression.” “Homeward Bound” is Macadam-Somer’s tour de force for plectrum ensemble. It’s an exuberant mash-up of musical influences, including bluegrass, old-time, Baroque counterpoint, and even a touch of “midwestern” (think Pat Metheny Group). The piece is brilliantly conceived. It presents technical challenges for each section of the orchestra, but Enigmatica is certainly up to these challenges. The ensemble performs with confidence; all of the lines cut through with crystalline clarity. Their performance conveys the spirit of joyous celebration which the composer clearly intended.

20th Century British composer Peter Maxwell Davies composed “Farewell to Stromness” to protest proposed uranium mining in the Orkney Islands, where Davies lived at the time. Stromness is a seaside village in Orkney. Composed by Davies for solo piano, the sparse, but perfectly crafted melody evokes the ancient feel of an O’Carolan ballad. Marilyn Mair’s masterful arrangement is perfectly suited to Enigmatica. Rendering the melody and block chord accompaniment on plucked strings – rather than piano – adds a certain tonal sweetness and warmth. Under Mair’s musical guidance, the ensemble members are very much in synch, whether executing the slightest of rubatos or a subtle musical turn of phrase. Davies’ deceptively simple composition is a work of profound depth and beauty. Mair’s arrangement and Enigmatica’s performance certainly do it justice.

Composer, violinist, and cellist Evaristo Dall’Abaco served as a musical appointee in the courts of various 18th Century European monarchs. As a composer, he was greatly influenced by Vivaldi and Corelli, both of whom were his contemporaries. Dall’Abaco’s Concerto a Quattro da Chiesa, Op. 2, No. 6, like so many of Vivaldi’s concertos for string orchestra, “translates” beautifully when performed by plectrum ensemble. Across the first and third movements – Allegro assai and Allegro e spiritoso – the performances are appropriately energetic and buoyant. The playing is crisp and clean, and the dynamics are flawlessly executed. The concerto’s second movement – Adagio – is characteristically very short, but sublimely beautiful. The piece contains some gorgeous dissonances between the 1st and 2nd violins/mandolins. Navigating close dissonances on the mandolin can be tricky business. A harsh attack and harsh tremolo stroke can create a very unpleasant dissonance, while a gentler approach will yield a more pleasing sound. In this instance, the latter is called for, and the dissonances are beautifully rendered.

The penultimate track on “The Road Less Traveled” is the Intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana, by Pietro Mascagni, arranged by Enigmatica’s Robert N. Martel. I have heard other mandolin orchestra performances of various arrangements of this piece. Enigmatica’s performance of Martel’s arrangement is my favorite, by far. Most mandolin ensemble arrangements of the Intermezzo follow the Neapolitan practice of using tremolo on all notes longer than a 16th note throughout the entirety of the piece. Martel uses a broader expressive palette in his arrangement, designating certain sections to be played without tremolo. His decision to use – or not use – tremolo is not arbitrary. It has everything to do with serving the purpose of the music. Enigmatica’s performance of the Intermezzo is exquisitely beautiful. The tremolo has a beautiful shimmering quality, without any rough edges. Everything about the ensemble’s performance – phrasing, dynamics, balance, etc. – exudes confidence and a clear understanding of the composer’s (and arranger’s) intentions.

To purchase a CD or Digital Album of The Road Less Traveled, go to <https://marilynmair.bandcamp.com/album/the-road-less-traveled>.