



Alias' debut disc, featuring Gabriela Lena Frank, was well worth the wait

A Frank Assessment

by JOHN PITCHER March 3, 2011

Alias Chamber Ensemble

Performing 8 p.m. Friday, March 5, at Blair School of Music's Turner Hall

The Alias Chamber Ensemble is arguably the most venturesome classical music group in Nashville. Since its founding in 2002, this outstanding virtuoso ensemble has presented nearly a dozen world-premiere performances. Its wide-ranging programs, moreover, feature everything from little-known Renaissance-era pieces to contemporary works that seemingly owe more to rap than to Rachmaninoff.

Just about the only place Alias hasn't ventured with its music is the recording studio. At least, that was the case until last month, when Alias released its first album, a CD on the Naxos label devoted to the music of Gabriela Lena Frank.

A California-based composer and pianist, Frank, 38, finds inspiration for her music in her multicultural background. Her mother is a Peruvian of Chinese descent and her father is an American of Lithuanian-Jewish heritage. Not surprisingly, Frank drew on Peru's rich musical culture to compose three of the four works on Alias' new CD. The fourth piece pays homage to Cervantes' 17th century Spanish novel *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*.

Without question, the most ambitious piece on the disc is *Hilos*, a work for clarinet, violin, cello and piano composed specifically for Alias last year. The title means "Threads" and alludes to the kaleidoscopic beauty of Peruvian textiles. Frank has even referred to it as a kind of Peruvian *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Like Mussorgsky's *Pictures*, *Hilos* is an episodic work, consisting of eight short movements with descriptive titles such as "Charanguista Viejo" (Old Charango Player) and "Danza de los Diablos" (Devil Dance). The music is remarkable for its shimmering, transparent textures. It's also full of vivid sonic images, such as the violin scratch tones in "Charanguista" that suggest an old man singing.

A gifted pianist, Frank joined Alias violinist Zeneba Bowers, clarinetist Lee Levine and cellist Matt Walker to give *Hilos* a riveting rendition. Frank performs the work's bold tremolos and quicksilver glissandi with power and sparkle. Bowers, Levine and Walker respond with playing that is both passionate and spontaneous.

Frank's *Danza de los Saqsampillos* for two marimbas (2006) is surely the most charming work on the CD. The piece is actually an arrangement of music from an earlier work, the *Sonata Andina* (2000) for solo piano. The title refers to the dance of a rambunctious jungle dweller.

Alias percussionists Christopher Norton and Todd Kemp bring this glistening music to life. They are equal to the work's challenges, expertly navigating a minefield of changing meters while maintaining a tight ensemble. And they interpret the score's Andean and tropical motifs exactly right, playing with a sense of pure joy.

Frank's one-movement *Adagio para Amantani* for cello and piano (2007) is basically a sonic postcard. Frank wrote it after visiting the island of Amantani, located in the middle of Lake Titicaca between Peru and Bolivia. The island is beautiful yet barren, and it inspired Frank to write the CD's most intense music. Indeed, she drenches the Adagio's repeated piano notes with lots of sustaining pedal, suggesting a kind of cold, languid landscape. The cello's long-breathed melodies capture the island's aching loneliness. Frank and Walker perform the piece with heartrending emotion.

Quijotadas for string quartet (2007) features some of Frank's most imaginative instrumentation. The work's five movements depict scenes from Cervantes' novel.

In the second movement, "Seguidilla para la Mancha," the players – Bowers, Walker, violinist Alison Gooding and violist Chris Farrell – pluck and strum their instruments, mimicking the sound of a Spanish guitar. The vertiginous string notes in the third movement, "Moto Perpetuo: La Locura de Quijote," readily call to mind Don Quixote's descent into madness.

As of last week, the entire first run of the album was sold out, and Naxos ordered a second run. It also broke into the Top 100 on Billboard's classical chart, at No. 93.

Alias will present its winter concert at 8 p.m. this Saturday, March 5, at the Blair School of Music's Turner Hall. Frank's music will not be on this program. The concert, however, will include a rare complete performance of American composer Samuel Barber's String Quartet, Op. 11, in a program featuring music that spans from the 17th century (sonatas for violin and continuo by both Dario Castello and Giovanni Paolo Cima) to the 21st (Judd Greenstein's *///* for two violins, marimba and drum set). The Greenstein piece will feature drummer Chester Thompson, known for his seminal work with Frank Zappa, Weather Report and Genesis.