

↓**VAAGE** *Bumerang*¹. *Rabalder*². *Svev*³. •, ¹Mara Haugen (vn); ¹Ingrid Rugesætter (va); ¹Ragnhild Sannes (vc); ³Valen Pn Trio (²Einar Røttingen pn; ¹Ricardo Odriozola, vn; John Ehde, vc) • LAWO 1199 (61:33) reviewed from a *Spotify* stream at 160 kbps.

Three pieces: three states; but states that, perhaps inevitably, overlap. Such is the basis for the program on this disc of chamber works by Danish composer Knut Vaage. (born 1961). Here is a composer who has a distinctive, uncompromising voice who should be better known: I say that as there is only one piece previously reviewed on the *Fanfare Archive* (*Mylder*, or “Multitude,” recorded on an Aurora disc reviewed in *Fanfare* 41:2). There only appear to be a couple of other full discs available of Vaage’s music: *Gardens of Hokkaido* and *Transit*, both on the Norway Music label.



The three pieces here can each be attributed to Body, Spirit and Mind; but, of course, elements of one can be found in the others. The idea of music that keeps turning around back on itself (but not necessarily ending where it began) maps perfectly onto Vaage’s piece *Bumerang* (Boomerang), a piece that revels in its own sense of physicality. Written in 2011 and scored for traditional string quartet, the piece contrasts periods of hyper-activity with plateaux of calm, while the time-honored medium of the string quartet offered Vaage a canvas for experimentation in which he could play the very nature of the instruments themselves. Hence a plethora of explorations of the instruments’ “special properties,” as the composer himself puts it. In this piece academic complexities meet very physical sounds; grindings and slow glissandos that seem like recontextualized Xenakis, but which are every inch as raw; chords are thrown at us like shards of glass, juxtaposed right next to passages that seem to want to dance. The booklet note by Ricardo Odriozola, a violinist on the disc, posits a scenario in which group of rowdy youngsters attempt that which is beyond them, the quieter moments representing exhaustion. The control required by the players is extreme, and it is often at the quieter dynamics that the challenges lie.

The piano piece *Rabalder* (2018/19) is heard in a spotless performance by Einar Røttingen, Professor of Piano Performance at the Grieg Academy, University of Bergen. The range of sounds here is astonishing. Harmonics are generated, glissandos generated on the instrument’s strings, while extremes of dynamics are common (the work title *Rabalder* means “Uproar”). But the piece is not just about noise; it also examines the after-shocks, and the ripples that occur in the cacophony’s aftermath. Vaage’s processes are ambitious, to say the least. Ideas of embracing the overwhelming sound of a waterfall and finding the still point are reflected in the use of a quiet chord that keeps recurring, its message that no matter how unstoppable the pounding rhythms, there is a quiet within that will prevail. At times the piano takes on the nature of a prepared piano in the manner of John Cage. At the end, an e-bow is used to sustain one member of that recurring chord. Røttingen is clearly saturated in this language; he conveys a sense of rightness that only those who are, can. Another aspect is the recording quality, which is as far as I can tell, perfect: we need to hear the primal edge of the piano, and that we do; similarly, we need to experience the beauty. And when that e-bow works its magic towards the end, it is truly revelatory. The trajectory of the piece moves from chaos to silence; but, of course, the journey is the point.

The longest piece on the disc (some 27 minutes), *Svev* (Levitare: 2017/18) for piano trio takes as its basis another fine conceit. The idea of levitation is to transcend gravity (it can also refer to being suspended in the air, or gliding). This, the idea of levels of gravity, and escaping the pull thereof, may be applied to a denser or finer musical surface. And so it is here., where earthy passages vie with ones that “float”. The idea of experimenting with new sounds is not accidental: composer and performers are all members of the “(Un-)settling sites and styles: performers in search of new expressive means” project that was held at the Grieg Academy from 2017 until 2020. In *Svev*., so-called “point music” (we hear them like flecks of paint on a canvas) vies with extended sound explorations. There is a storm of knockings at one point, but perhaps it is the beauty of the pointillist passages around 20 minutes in that really resonate on. This is a long way from Webernian angularity; the music seems to want to dance, even to break out into an admittedly hyper-disjunct song. When, instead, stillness asserts itself, it does so with melting beauty.

This is ultimately refreshing music. A surprising adjective, perhaps, but it works on various levels. Refreshing to have music that challenges; refreshing to have music that plays with our expectations, that takes abstract concepts and translates them effectively into music, that talks of journeys from darkness to light, of journeys from the earthbound to the airborne. **Colin Clarke, Fanfare Magazine, August 2020**

Five stars: This is ultimately refreshing music: challenging music that takes us on life-enhancing journeys