
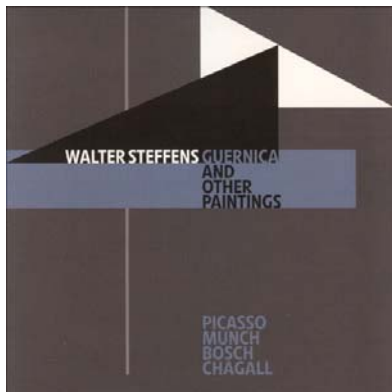


FEATURE REVIEW by [Jeremy Marchant](#)

 STEFFENS Guernica.1 Siguriya.2 Pintura del Mundo.3 Le Cantique des Cantiques4 •
1Janos Kulka, cond; 1Rainer Schmidt (va); 1NW German PO; 2Helmut Franz, cond; 2N
German RCh; 3Klause Weise, cond; 3N German RSO; 4Friedhelm Flamme (org) •
LABOR LAB7084 (77:43)



[Guernica & Other Paintings](#)

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Walter Steffens (b.1934) has written more than 80 works based on (inspired by, conversing with, paraphrasing) paintings. These are among many other works—the desultory Wikipedia article describes him as specializing in opera—and this disc offers a highly diverse selection of these painting-inspired pieces. The booklet notes, understandably, offer a variety of descriptions of Steffens’ response to the pictures, as, in truth, it is impossible to “hear” the pictures in the music. But, then, can one hear the particular Rothko paintings that inspired Morton Feldman to write Rothko Chapel, or Böcklin’s painting in Rachmaninoff’s *The Isle of the Dead*? Of course not; that isn’t the point. What the works on this disc do is provide fascinating commentaries on the pictures.

By far the most substantial of these is *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, based on the five paintings by Marc Chagall collectively titled thus, and laid out as a symphony for organ in five movements plus a prologue which together run for some 40 minutes. Whether the work is a “symphony” or not is a rather tired question. It strikes me as a set of meditations, such as one would hear from Messiaen. Of course the shadow of Messiaen must loom very large over anyone proposing to write organ music today, and it is to Steffens’s credit that he seems to have assimilated this influence (and others: Bach, obviously) and created his own music. As he is responding to Chagall’s pictures, he is obliged to risk comparison as one of the paintings meditates on “I Sleep, But My Heart Is Awake” (one of Messiaen’s *Vingt Regards sur L’Enfant Jésus*). On the other hand, perhaps the fact that “Love is [as] strong as death” is one of the mottoes of Stockhausen’s *Momente* weighed less heavily. As it is, Steffens’ cycle is very satisfyingly structured at both the macro scale—the

juxtaposition of different pieces—as well as the micro scale—the variation within each piece. The prologue (“Hear, O Israel”) encapsulates, in its call-and-response structure, the variation between forceful assertive music and quiet reflective music that characterizes the whole cycle. The first piece, “Awaken O North Wind,” is one large composed crescendo (a palpable awakening), while the second and fourth pieces are essentially meditative pieces (the first of these on “I Sleep...”). The third (“In the Day of His Espousals,” i.e., his wedding day) provides a dramatic foil to the pieces on either side, while the last (“Love Is Strong as Death”) is a tremendous pitting of the relentlessness of love against the finality of death (as I take it). The CD is worth acquiring just for this work. It receives a stunning performance from Friedhelm Flamme, and the recording is excellent.

The well-filled disc, however, offers more—and music in widely different styles. The brief *Siguiriya* is a setting of three Lorca poems, after Munch’s *The Scream*. Running under four minutes in total, this seems longer. Not in the negative sense—although the more conventional 12-tone style makes demands on the a capella chorus that occasionally sound rather like modern-music clichés—rather that there is clearly a lot going on in the Lorca text, which, in the absence of the words, one can only assume was expertly handled in the composition. This work dates from 1968, half a lifetime from *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, which was premiered in 2004.

More in the spirit of the late 60s is *Pintura del Mundo*, after Hieronymous Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, also 1968. This is a two-movement work of some 18 minutes. The first movement outstays its welcome slightly, but that might be put down only to tentativeness among the orchestral players. The stylistic differences with the works discussed above are surprising. Given that the pictures are packed with bizarre detail, it is slightly surprising that Steffens has opted to create mood rather than any sort of literal (do I mean literal?) representation of the images. It sounds as if the composer had heard the contemporary Ligeti works such as *Lontano* and, indeed, those of Scelsi, but I am not sure how frequently these composers’ works had been performed then and I would not want to overlook originality.

The disc opens with *Guernica*, after Picasso. It’s a superb opening—war planes approaching and an air-raid siren all brilliantly realized on full orchestra (and apparently planes printed all over the first page of the full score: see walter-steffens.de). After a climax the solo viola enters, and the work takes on a more conventional manner. At first hearing, this was a disappointment; but on reacquaintance one can hear a procession of stylistic changes that are an interesting response to the subject. The work seems to get committed performances (as usual, I don’t have scores) and, if the viola is a trifle prominent in the mix, I daresay it was necessary.

Steffens clearly composes from the heart, but he has his head screwed on, too. The disc is worth acquiring for *Le Cantique des Cantiques* alone, but deserves to be heard by anyone remotely interested in music of the last half century.

–Jeremy Marchant, *FANFARE*