


## FEATURE REVIEW by [Barnaby Rayfield](#)

 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)



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Describing himself as a pluralistic composer, Walter Steffens has through his long career embraced most musical developments; atonality and five-part chords work alongside conventional tonality in his musical background. Such blatant eclecticism is unfashionable in the composing world, but it helps explain his interest in writing music to specific works of art, which, according to the booklet, has resulted in around 80 compositions. Somehow, successfully transcribing artwork to music can confound the best composers; Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the obvious reference point, is more a retelling of the artwork's content, rather than the painter's individual style, while Poulenc's *Le Travail du peintre* is a rather slight glimpse at various painters. With this collection, Steffens certainly is fearless, tackling artworks of almost household fame.

Picasso's brutal *Guernica*, painted in 1937 after the bombing of that town, is reimagined here as a dark-hued elegy for viola and orchestra, the choice of instrument mirroring the painting's brown, jagged lines rather well, with the air-raid sirens punctuating the orchestration like some menacing intruder. Programmatic without being prescriptive, it has the feeling of organized chaos, common to Picasso's own work. A choir is then Steffens's chosen method to transcribe Edvard Munch's most famous work, *Skrik*, to sound. It is a brief work, but the colorful, disjointed harmonies match Munch's bold primary shades well, even if it lacks the shock, the focal point, of that startling image.

Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* makes a surprising appearance. A Biblical triptych painted around 1500, it inspires Steffens to his most challenging music here. There is no

attempt to mimic the musical style of the period, but instead he wisely hones in on Bosch's wild perspectives and scale. Fiddly woodwind writing, sliding strings, and menacing, sardonic brass all fuse together into a blazing sound tapestry, although there are moments of introspection and structure, too. The icy, shivery depiction of hell (on the right-hand panel of Bosch's triptych) is vividly realized, taking this tone poem to a frightening, urgent climax.

Continuing the Biblical theme, Chagall's *Le Cantique des cantiques* is revamped here as a symphony for solo organ. Certainly Chagall's mellow pinks and disjointed perspectives can be glimpsed in the exquisite *I Sleep But My Heart Waketh* movement, its elusive melody creeping gently out of the slightly twisted harmonies. There is also much to admire in Friedhelm Flamme's poised played here, as well as in the angrier outer movements. Fragmented tonality sums up Steffens's tribute, and in many ways that aptly describes Chagall's late Biblical style.

But I am still not convinced that Steffens has achieved the "impossible" (the notes' admission, not mine). I enjoyed this well-performed album immensely, but I needed reminding of the music's relevance to the artwork. Sound is fine, although more definition is needed, especially for the organ's various layers. Documentation contains a rather pretentious, unhelpful essay and, much as we have Google, missed a trick by not showing us the artworks in question. Still, for the adventurous, this is a very interesting listen.

–Barnaby Rayfield, *FANFARE*