**Dancing With Friends**

*by Alison Young*

*Elizabeth Hainen and Agnes Clement delight with new albums.*

**Les Amis** *Elizabeth Hainen, harp; Michael Stern, conductor; IRIS Orchestra; Jeffrey Khaner, flute; Roberto Diaz, viola; Avie, 2013.* 4.75 harps

It boggles the mind to think that Claude Debussy was working in an almost mercenary fashion as one harp maker was trying to outdo another. It was Paris of the fin-de-siécle and Pleyel was attempting to outdo Erard in sales of its new chromatic harp. If they could only get the respected master to create a work for this newfangled instrument, they’d have the Conservatoire business sewn up. Well it would seem to me anyone crazy enough to ask a harpist to tune nearly three times as many strings was asking for trouble, and the chromatic harp went the way of the dodo as the pedal harp found its footing, ahem, so to speak. But what we have is this stunning creation, a test piece of contrasting styles—two dances, one sacred and one secular (or in the direct translation, profane). With Elizabeth Hainen at the helm, you would think she was taking dictation directly from Debussy. He never gave only half of himself to a project, but in this case we hear a sense of wonder, of discovering the muted palette of the world of the harp while still having an ability to dance in that muscular lighter-than-air manner of a ballerina. Elizabeth literally breathes when she plays. There is cushion, a kind of Air-Jordan strength that at time feels like she’s not trying very hard.

Elizabeth Hainen is the Principal Harpist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and it shows in her poise and lush style when acting as chamber musician or when all alone. She has embodied that warm sound we associate with Stokowski.

This project was a Kickstarter project, with many colleagues offering their work just for the fun of doing it. Does making a CD this way give it a different energy or imperative? The album’s title *Les Amis* refers to the long friendship of Caplet and Debussy; I would imagine there is a feeling of gratitude surrounding the myriad of friends who gave time, talent, expertise, a helping hand, and their money as well to make this CD happen. Some of those friends include the IRIS orchestra, an ensemble of professionals from all over the country led by Michael Stern. There’s a freshness to the sound, an excitement and chamber music mentality that sometimes only seems to come from the brightest lights when they are at conservatory or music festivals. The wash of sound in the Debussy Dances is rich and full of depth.

My former flute teacher Jeffrey Khaner joins Elizabeth along with violist Roberto Diaz for the Debussy Trio. The vibrancy and nuance that attracted me to Jeffrey as my teacher and mentor are on display. The three musicians do something I rarely hear, which is to accentuate the differences in the qualities of their sounds, the very strangeness of Debussy’s decision to combine these instruments. While searching for a kind of velvety “impressionist” palette would be expected, the wider variation in timbres puts a new shine into this well-known work.

The one work that is new to my ears is the cinematic and terrifying *The Mask of Red Death* by Andre Caplet, based on a short story of the same name by Edgar Allen Poe of the same name. It is interesting to me that this piece is never mentioned when we look at the oeuvre and influences of Bernard Herrmann. There is a chillingly familiar repeated phrase at the opening that takes me to Vertigo or even Psycho in my mind’s eye. The harp, with its sounding board, becomes a living kind of coffin of sounds, wrappings, pulsations, and stressful frenetic melodies. Elizabeth again takes over as soloist, but inserts the sounds within the frame of the orchestra in such a way as to give a larger sense of the whole. A wonderful discovery that will find its way on my Halloween playlist for sure!