

Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada



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COMPOSER CHAMELEON

Michael Colina's latest recording reveals the jazz and pop composer also to be a master craftsman in classical composition, says Jed Distler

In the realm of fusion, smooth jazz, pop and world music, Michael Colina has long stood out as a highly regarded and influential producer, arranger and composer. Over the past four decades he has amassed a diverse catalogue of collaborations with James Taylor, George Benson, Michael Brecker, Linda Ronstadt, Bob James, Michael Franks, Marcus Miller, and Herbie Hancock, among other luminaries. Two productions with saxophonist David Sanborn, *Hideaway* (1979) and *Voyeur* (1981), won Colina a pair of Grammy awards for Best Contemporary Jazz Album, while his music for the film *Finnegan Begin Again* (co-composed with Sanborn) won an Ace Award for best film score in 1985. Detailed discussion of his resumé would easily fill an entire *Gramophone* issue, but you get the picture.

Colina's admirers may well have been caught off guard by his decision to shift his career towards classical composition a decade ago, exchanging tried and true 32-bar song forms and catchy commercially oriented melodic hooks for the structural and expressive challenges that all classical composers invariably face when grappling with large-scale forms. When I ask Colina about this over a leisurely homemade Brazilian lunch at my New York apartment on a recent rainy September afternoon, he redirects my question to explain how record producing paralleled his concert composing. 'Structure is the key word. When I produced albums, I aimed for a narrative, a through line from one song to the next. Today no one listens to albums except old folks like me, but back in the '60s and '70s an album was considered a whole work unto itself. Plus we had more responsibilities. It was also a time when producers like Atlantic Records' Jerry Wexler or CTT's Creed Taylor controlled many aspects of repertoire, orchestration, arrangement and budget. You also created a studio atmosphere in which the artist could flourish, and my job was mainly about the artist, to bring out the best in him or her, which was as much a spiritual as a musical task. But the jazz tunes I was writing have a different kind of gravity than what one would need for a symphony or a concerto; larger pieces require a different kind of depth, character and time scale.'



Michael Colina:
beyond jazz

PHOTOGRAPHY: HOLLY GORDON

In reality, Colina has not so much 'crossed over' as he has reconnected with his early roots and thorough grounding in so-called 'serious' composition, much like one picking up threads of a promising relationship that has lain dormant for years and starting anew. More important, the three orchestral works that make up his most recent release on the Fleur de Son label, 'Three Cabinets of Wonder' – a violin concerto, a guitar concerto and a 12-movement orchestral suite – reveal Colina to be a compelling, vibrant creator and master craftsman, who both embraces and transcends his eclectic pedigree.

Recalling his formative years in Charlotte, North Carolina, Colina credits Bach, Beethoven and Chopin as strong childhood influences. As a teenager he was exposed to early 20th-century masters such as Mahler, Sibelius, Stravinsky and Shostakovich, while also absorbing Dave Brubeck's energetic, complex jazz piano style and the tight-knit intricacies characterising America's best rhythm and blues ensembles. Colina pursued undergraduate studies at the North Carolina School of the Arts, where he worked with composition teachers Vittorio Giannini, Robert Ward, and Louis Mennini (the lesser-known brother of composer Peter Mennin). He later studied with Thomas Pasatieri and Roman Vlad in Sienna, Italy. When he arrived in New York in 1970, the need to earn a living led Colina into the city's busy freelancing scene. One of his first jobs was to engineer the first official album of theremin



virtuoso Clara Rockmore, produced by synthesiser innovator Robert Moog, that was eventually released in 1977 on the Delos label. In 1971 another Charlotte native, choreographer Twyla Tharp, asked Colina to arrange a group of British marching band compositions for her dance company.

Colina readily admits that the collaborative process still holds a place in at least the early stages of his classical composing process. One infers this purely from the fluid flexibility that violinist Anastasia Khitruk and guitarist Michael Andriaccio display in the solo parts of Colina's respective concertos for their instruments. 'Everything in the Violin Concerto is completely written out now,' Colina emphasises. 'But when I first was composing it, Anastasia and I talked a lot, and she made suggestions that led to more effective execution of certain passages and expressive gestures. However, I tried to notate it in a manner that suggested improvisation, like having her play around certain beats, rather than on the beat.'

If anything, a collaborative sensibility permeates the guitar concerto *Goyescana* (whose themes reflect Enrique Granados's landmark solo piano-cycle *Goyescas*) to stronger effect, as if Colina specifically had asked for a soloist who possessed both an innate pop sensibility and a well-schooled classical technique. 'The truth is that there are languages that classical, jazz and pop guitarists universally understand because of the nature of the instrument. I wanted my guitar part to be that way, with that kind of phrasing. I'm not a guitarist, but I can

'Returning to serious music was like beginning again, as we all did in 2001'

play enough to know what technical and expressive things guitarists like to do that fit easily under the fingers, and my attitude is that you don't mess with Mother Nature! In the cadenzas on the recording, Michael did many improvisatory things, like the way he slaps notes, for example. I gave him permission to do these kinds of gestures as much as possible. After all that's what classical soloists used to do in concertos. He made it his own.'

As we sip strong Brazilian coffee after lunch, I decide it would be appropriate for Colina to share some of his own 'kitchen secrets', so to speak. For example, in *Los Caprichos*, the set of 12 short orchestral movements largely inspired by the 80 aquatint prints comprising Spanish artist Francisco José de Goya's collection of the same name, how did Colina achieve those spooky, sliding sonorities?

'I remembered hearing similar sounds in Lutosławski's Piano Concerto, and thought "What the hell is that?" and it turned out to be an ocarina [a flute-like instrument from Central America].' And the intense, thick chord right before the work's conclusion? 'That's inspired by the big, dissonant chord at the climax of the opening *Adagio* of Mahler's Tenth Symphony.' Colina goes on to explain how his technique of dividing the violin section between smaller groups of musicians who play sustained notes and overlap their entrances, drew inspiration from the cascading effect associated with light music conductor/arranger Mantovani's signature sound. 'After all, we – meaning composers – have a vocabulary of stuff that we've heard before, whether we're conscious of it or not. But it's like being an actor in that I might try imitating styles but I really can't because it comes out through whatever my filters are.'

Colina cites 9/11 and the economic downturn in its aftermath among the factors that caused him to rethink his musical life. 'As CDs became less prevalent, downloads began to dominate, and



Michael Colina: dusting off his serious voice

PHOTOGRAPHY: HOLLY GORDON

COLINA ON DISC

Michael Colina *Rituals*

Michael Colina *kbds* **Mark Egan** *bgtr*

Michael Brecker, **Kirk Whalum** *ten sax*

Omar Hakim, **Sly Dunbar** *drum* **Randy**

Brecker *tpt* **Don Alias** *perc* **Sharon**

Bryant, **Vaneese Thomas**, **Porter**

Carroll Jr, **Vivian Cherry**, **Sherilyn**

Huffman, **Angela Clemmons**, **Fonzi**

Thornton *vocs*

Private Music © 2062-2-P

Colina's synthesiser mastery showcased in elegantly textured pop arrangements.

New Arts Trio at Chautauqua: 30th Anniversary Recital

Rebecca Penneys *pf* **Jacques**

Israelievitch *vn* **Arie Lipsky** *vc*

Fleur de Son © 58000

Includes Michael Colina's work *Idoru*, for piano trio. Premiered in 2008, it fuses classical forms and Latin rhythms with tightly knit, invigorating results.

Three Cabinets of Wonder: Music of Michael Colina

Anastasia Khitruk *vn*

Michael Andriaccio *gtr* **London**

Symphony Orchestra / Ira Levin

Fleur de Son © 57999

The premiere recording of Colina's violin concerto *Three Cabinets of Wonder*; *Goyescana*, his concerto for guitar; and the 12 orchestral movements, *Los Caprichos*. The disc 'reveals Colina to be a compelling, vibrant creator and master craftsman'.

COLINA IN CONCERT

November 29

Cadogan Hall, London

Richard Bernas conducts London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and soloist Anastasia Khitruk in the violin concerto *Three Cabinets of Wonder*, Colina's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* for string orchestra, and Henryk Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*.

record companies began to want to pay me less, I decided that if I wasn't going to make money from commercial music, I should at least do something I always wanted to do.'

Colina also credits his close friend and colleague, conductor Ira Levin, as a crucial influence on his classical rebirth by way of encouragement, feedback and orchestral commissions. 'Returning to serious music was like beginning again, as we all did in 2001. At 52, I picked up a part of my voice that I had stopped using and dusted it off, and now I can write the music that I've been wanting to write my whole life.' ©

► For Gramophone's review of 'Three Cabinets of Wonder', visit gramophone.co.uk/review/colina-three-cabinets-of-wonder