

CD Review

CD 1954

APPASSIONATA

MACCOMBIE: *Tango Amoroso*. BENNETT: *Strange Dreams; Food for Fish*.
BELLINATI: *Baião de Gude; Maracatu da Pipa*. SAVAGE: *Storm in a Teacup*.
VERDERY: *Start Now; Let Go; Now You See It, Now You Don't, Now You Do*.
RYAN: *Cabaret*.

Appassionata

BGS 111 CD

Comprising Rebecca Baulch, Amanda Cook and Hayley Savage, this London-based guitar trio will forever be associated with the splendid *Charlie's Angels* silhouette that adorns both the inner and outer packaging of this 2005 recording. With the exception of *Baião de Gude* which, in its various guises, dates back to before 1989, all the compositions and arrangements are of recent provenance and are, at the time of writing, unique to *Appassionata*. But if you suspect this means a disagreeable 59 minutes of that ephemeral brand of new music that gets briefly presented to an unreceptive public before being quietly dropped, then worry not, for the programme on offer is one of the most unthreatening agendas you're likely to find this side of the mainstream repertoire. On the other hand, there's no lack of substance, especially in the extended single-movement offering from Hayley Savage, where the textural possibilities offered by three guitars are explored with impressive depth and detail. Likewise the two works by Ned Bennett, both of which offer a gentle yet searching soundscape after a relatively lightweight appetiser in Bruce MacCombie's *Tango Amoroso*. The real hit, however, has to be Paulo Bellinati's *Maracatu da Pipa*, commissioned for *Appassionata* in 2004. Running its course in a compact eight minutes, this gentle and hypnotic slice of acoustic Latin imagery even succeeded in calming my nerves during a titanic struggle against the useless telephone system at Manchester's otherwise exemplary *Royal Exchange Theatre*. Incidentally, the composer's notes reveal that the *Pipa* in the title refers to a child's kite, which inevitably made me feel a bit of a twit after searching in vain for musical depictions of the similarly-named Chinese lute derivative.

Performance is of the highest order, with all three parts clearly discernible in even the densest passages. Most impressive of all is the richness of tone, which was also a feature when I saw this ensemble perform live in September 2004. The canvas is further widened with a guest appearance by Nik Ammar, who plays the dholak (a South Asian double-headed drum, it would seem) in Benjamin Verdery's *Start Now*. This, like all three Verdery selections, is an arrangement by Amanda Cook drawn from the composer's own settings for guitar orchestra.

A persuasive and accessible programme superbly presented.

Paul Fowles