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## Brazil's Léa Freire Maps a Sonic Environment, Haunting the Imagination

Contributed by Bruce Gilman  
Tuesday, 26 June 2007

Containing some startling and original music performed with great authority and with all the harmonic and rhythmic complexities expertly negotiated, Léa Freire's new CD, *Cartas Brasileiras*, comes over richly and seductively to deliver a scintillating dreamscape that commemorates 10 years of the Maritaca record label as well as the 50th birthday of its founder, Léa Freire.

A leading light in Brazilian music, Freire continues to break down musical barriers, moving freely between jazz, popular, and classical music. She is an inventive musician who has distinguished herself as a daring flautist, arranger, and composer. *Cartas Brasileiras* represents her writing at its most impressionistic and inspired.

The first thing that strikes you about this recording is the orchestral warmth radiating throughout. Freire brings to the orchestra's embroidery a mesmerizing combination of luminous beauty and reserved expressiveness, and with this, new hope that Brazil, a country already rich in woodwind and brass traditions, will achieve a uniquely orchestral voice for its stringed instruments.

The disc features eleven of her compositions and some of Brazil's greatest musicians, a stylistically varied team whose names alone are a palpable guarantee. You'd expect this lineup of performers to give us something remarkable, and they do. The powerful, projected emotions and great imaginative range of their playing could only come from players accustomed to being soloists.

What's less expected is how well all of them play together, their excellent, easy ensemble blending, their never over-assertive, always supportive collaboration offering an overall strength. And Freire showcases them with genuine style on tunes that carry listeners along cocooned in rich sound, transporting them into a world of their own imagining.

Says Freire, "This CD maps Brazil, a magical, musical country where even the animals emerge as distinctive instruments, where the music is a mixing of different cultures, and where care has to be taken to mix without messing, so you can still feel the original flavors. There is, after all, a fine line between fusion and confusion. We're sending out this message to listeners, summoning musicians, to come together and create new music."

Poetically balanced, the song titles provide imaginative paraphrases of the musical impressions and the aural dramas they evoke. The opener, "Vento em Madeira" (Wind in Wood), alluding to the weather and its relation to music, whirls through Northeastern Brazilian rhythms - 6/8, ciranda, carimbó, coco, and baião - and features the remarkably gifted Teco Cardoso on flute.

In Portuguese the word for great-grandmother is bisavó. "Bis a Bis" is Freire's cinematic evocation of two old ladies (her great-grandmothers) quarreling. Written for two Eb (piccolo) clarinets, Bb (soprano) clarinet, and two bassoons, it is perkiness personified.

There may be other ways of presenting this complex musical character-study, but Luca Raelle's arrangement for this maxixe concerning a family's roots probably takes us closest to the original conception, lending idiomatic pliancy and bringing out both its virtuosity and depth of characterization.

The first of three waltzes "Caminho das Pedras," combines a choro ensemble with an orchestra for an imaginary trip from Portugal to Germany to Brazil and features Izaias Bueno Almeida on bandolim, André Mehmani on piano, Nailor "Proveta" dueting with Sérgio Burgani on clarinet, and Paulo Bellinati on acoustic guitar. Top soloists in their own right, they combine their individual gifts with the ability to play as a well-integrated team.

Performed with exceptional finesse and care for articulation, "Isabella," a samba canção with a chamber-jazz feel, is buoyant and infectious. Tiago Costa's arrangement, showing prudent attention to the flute lines, is polished and insightful, as is his piano solo. The ensemble phrasing is shaped with unfailing elegance and displays excellent balance and blend.

The Brazilian waltz, "Nove Luas" (Nine Moons), originally composed for piano, but heard here arranged for piano, alto sax, and string orchestra, refers to the time of pregnancy. Freire's arrangement for orchestra, beginning and ending with the flute-like quality of the strings' harmonics, produces an infectious and potent tapestry against which Proveta, whose communication of feeling is acute, solos like a composer, letting the music drive him.

An extraordinary love of tone color and exploration of sonority typify "Vila Ipojuca," a vignette scored for three clarinets and two bassoons. Depicting Freire's neighborhood - full of dogs, stairways, and old Italians - in São Paulo, it bypasses predetermined patterns of bar lengths by combining complex rhythmic meters (3/8 and 3/4) within the 2/4 feel of a choro. The allure of this performance is its utter naturalness.

The most immediately striking work on this disc is the mediative, extremely beautiful "Maré." With soft sustained textures and gentle colors, it is hauntingly memorable. Like a dream from which one draws away the veil, every tiny detail in Freire's multilayered textures, every counter-strand, every fleck of color is always crystal clear. The range of color and the sensuous beauty can only be described as a feast for the ear.

Soloist and guitar virtuoso Paulo Bellinati, in keeping with the overall contemplative atmosphere and character of the piece, the astral affects on ocean tides, stresses the musical rather than the virtuoso elements, responding with eloquence and passion. Though separated here, "Nove Luas," "Maré," and "Caminho das Pedras," in this order, were composed as a waltz suite and share motivic threads.

Typified by lush textures and ardent emotion, "Choro na Chuva" plays with the rhythm of rain (the B section is written in 17/16). Gil Jardim, an arranger who has worked with, among others, Egberto Gismonti, Naná Vasconcelos, and Milton Nascimento and whose individual insights appear endless, constructed a lusciously cushioned, storm over Freire's original piano score. The ensemble's feeling for the music's atmosphere, their determination to wring the last drop of expression from even the most finely suggested passages, is extraordinary.

"Espiral," a maracatu in 3/4, is exquisitely sung and finely played by Monica Salmaso and Léa Freire, a duo made in heaven, each a highly individual, probing, and sincere artist prepared to challenge perceived views of song. Salmaso heightens the mysterious, ecstatic quality, shaping the melody line so that it evolves up in endless curves; Freire, on piano, underlines and reinforces the singer's intense utterance - quite hypnotic. You don't have to listen for long to be swept up by its spirit of renewal and discovery.

Moving from intervalic darkness to light, "Rabisco," another samba canção, was arranged by Proveta, who pares down harmonic essentials to a soft woodwind textural mesh out of which the clean, resinous tone and strong sense of line from Daniel Alcântara's solo on flügelhorn and the florid passages of Tiago Costa's on piano can assert themselves.

"Domingo de Manhã" is a gafieira-like samba arranged by the recently deceased Mozar Terra, who appears here on his last recording. The tune was written as an homage Ayrton Senna, the Brazilian Formula One triple world champion who died after a crash while leading the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix and whose races occurred on Sunday mornings. Freire's grand vision registers within a few bars and heats to the boiling point, exploding in an orgy of alert and explosive brilliance, with a drum solo by Edu Ribeiro.

Cartas Brasileiras abounds with creative playing, empathy, and suppleness of repartee among kindred spirits. Its substance is in ideas, but the extent of the musicianship is overwhelming, the sureness and flawless confidence, the uninhibited warmth and verve, the glorious orchestral tone and richly lyrical phrasing, let alone the extreme harmonic diversity and the variety of the scoring.

Cartas Brasileiras has such a positive focus and is so full of commitment and visceral excitement that it would be hard to imagine more amiable performances. Freire is, of course, the linchpin. A charismatic presence, she embraces all her work with the passion of a devoted horticulturist tending her most precious flowers. Whatever it is, Cartas Brasileiras is an absolute stunner - indispensable and thoroughly recommendable.

Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of Brazzil magazine, an online international publication based in Los Angeles, for more than a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the Georgetown Journal.

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