

Smaro Gregoriadou

A Healing Fire (DELOS - DE 3582)

Thomas Tamvakos, music writer, critic, researcher, founder & director of “Greek Composers’ Archive”

The year of the pandemic, with dozens of victims and a consequent partial or general confinement, is fading away with at least some good news in the field of classical music, and a rich discography of exceptional recordings. *A Healing Fire*, by the renowned guitar soloist and composer Smaro Gregoriadou, released this past October by DELOS (DE 3582) is among the leading ones. It is her fifth album (the fourth for DELOS) and -as expected from the collection’s unmatched overall quality- it immediately met a triumphal reception from listeners and critics alike.

A Healing Fire is a perfect continuation after the soloist’s previously released masterpieces by DELOS, which have been also highly praised: *Reinventing Guitar I* (DE 3398), *Reinventing Guitar II* (DE 3419), and *El Aleph* (DE 3490). It contains compositions of four non-Greek composers (there are no Gregoriadou's works in this album,) performed in a truly outstanding way, and demonstrating the soloist’s unique interpretive approach that fascinates, especially those who happen to be already familiar with this particular music from discography and internet posts worldwide.

The interpretation, reaching here the ideal of a highest perfection, is based on *Kertsopoulos Aesthetics*, a scientific platform of inventions in guitar and string construction, signed by the imaginative Greek guitarist, composer, inventor, and guitar builder George Kertsopoulos. It aims to an exploration of the guitar's acoustic potential in the entire range of its repertory; and it proposes a revival of historical guitar types of 17th and 18th centuries, by means of a realistic re-composition of their form, sound and technical features. Basic innovations include the enhancement of the sound's volume and sustain, as well as the reintroduction of numerous historical tuning ranges with the use of new string materials. For Smaro Gregoriadou (herself an excellent guitar student of Kertsopoulos,) *Kertsopoulos Aesthetics* must have obviously been an endless challenge of dialectic juxtaposition with the standard guitar sonority -mainly established by Segovia’s school. She has been able to refine tremendously her playing, and we can definitely confirm such an obvious growth throughout her brilliant discography up to now!

The four compositions of the present album, Bach's **Violin Sonata Nr 2 BWV 1003** in Smaro Gregoriadou’s exquisite arrangement, **Nocturnal after John Dowland Op. 70** by Benjamin Britten, **Serenade** by Sofia Gubaidulina, and the **Suite pour guitare Op. 41** by Jacques Hétu, have been recorded with two Kertsopoulos instruments of unconventional construction and acoustics. Interventions include pedal mechanisms, new string materials and non-standard tunings in high registers. We hear a lucid and clear sound throughout, an interpretation full of dramatic depth, totally free from the excessive emotionalism and romantic exuberance often characterizing classical guitar performances of today. The soloist exhibits a faultless knowledge of the secrets of baroque music and Bach, as well as a skill to fully comprehend the particular features and style of the three composers of the 20th c., Britten, Gubaidulina, Hétu. Those virtues, combined with an acrobatic agility and a fine temperament, provide an overwhelmingly attractive effect. Gregoriadou's long expressed vision to ‘reinvent’ the popular plucked instrument, exploring sonic possibilities that are way far detached from Segovia’s influence, is being fully accomplished here. If, for example, we compare her reading of the well-known Hétu composition with various other decent performances (Andrei Burdetti’s, Joshua Shi’s, Alexander Milovanov’s,) we experience a huge divergence in aesthetics, with Gregoriadou’s version taking clearly the lead. More key information about the instruments, the compositions and the soloist can be found in the CD’s elegant and informative 14-page booklet.

I find it impossible to detect the slightest weakness in the overall production (performance, recording, mastering) and I wish wholeheartedly that the collaboration of DELOS with an artist like Smaro Gregoriadou will remain active for many productions to come. For the time being we can enjoy multiple auditions of *A Healing Fire* (by the way, an inventive and substantial title, pointing directly to the very function of the experience of listening!) Greatly recommended to all music fans that haven’t had yet the opportunity to acquire it!

Thomas Tamvakos, December 16, 2020