

New Classical Tracks: From spirituals to tangos

by Julie Amacher, Minnesota Public Radio

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St. Paul, Minn. — Joel Fan's new disc explores music by North and South American composers, many of whom were influenced by the popular songs and traditions of their own countries.

As a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, pianist Joel Fan is quite comfortable navigating through various musical worlds. His journey continued on his first solo recording, "World Keys," in 2006. Now he's venturing even further with the release of "West of the Sun."

On this new release, Fan maneuvers his way through lesser-known repertoire by nine different composers from North and South America, including the recording premiere of "Nine New Bagatelles," from Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer William Bolcom.

These little miniatures are vivid character pieces that are sometimes playful, and sometimes mournful, as in the case of the final funeral march titled "Pavane for the dead/hope's feathers."

Quiet dissonant chords open this piece. Fan plays this piece with crisp intensity, and allows the final notes to softly flutter -- almost suggesting that more is yet to come.

Amy Beach was a prominent American composer at the turn of the 20th century. She claimed it was a field of fireflies one summer that inspired her to compose.

Joel Fan knows just how to bring out the joy of her discovery, as he gently chases those lightning bugs up and down the keyboard in an encore piece titled "Fireflies." It's the last movement from her suite of smaller works titled "Sketches."

Margaret Bonds was a Chicago native who became the first black American to solo with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra back in 1933. She wrote orchestral and choral music, and she created arrangements of spirituals that were often sung by Leontyne Price.

On this recording we hear Bond's piece, "Troubled Water," based on the spiritual, "Wade in the Water." Fan handles this work like any great jazz improviser, effortlessly weaving his way through melodic variations and key changes.

Brazilian composer Ernesto Nazareth's "Vem Ca, Branquinha" is a flirty little dance tune, filled with syncopated rhythms, with a theme that moves back and forth between the left and right hand. Joel Fan doesn't miss a beat, throwing in mischievous pauses and rhythmic alterations, bringing added sparkle to this animated piece.

The Brazilian word "choro" literally means "I cry," in Portuguese. It became the name of a style of popular music, sung by serenading musicians. Heitor Villa-Lobos wrote an ambitious collection of 13 Choros between 1920 and 1929.

Each Choro was written for a different instrumentation. Number five, titled, "Alma Brasileira," or "The Soul of Brazil," was written for solo piano. The Choro opens with a sensuous love song. Joel Fan lingers through this beautiful section, and his transition into the breezy dance section is seamless.

This musical voyage to the Western side of the globe is delightfully diverse. From spirituals to tangos, from bagatelles to sonatas, music lovers will find each port of call an intriguing destination, especially in the hands of pianist Joel Fan.