

# Joshua Smith

## American Record Guide

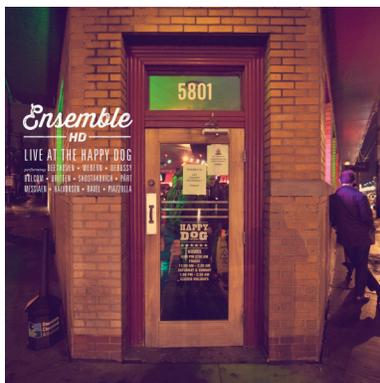
By Mark L. Lehman  
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### Beethoven, Piazzolla, Webern, Bolcom, Britten, Ravel, Debussy, Shostakovich, Messiaen, Halvorsen, Pärt “Astounding”

This is an experimental release of sorts: performances of 11 classical pieces (or movements from them) recorded at Cleveland’s Happy Dog bar before an enthusiastic audience—and released as a two-LP set. Somewhat to my surprise, the whole thing not only works, it does more than that: it recreates an **inspiring concert that engages the listener** more than I would have thought possible.

I was all set to disapprove of using just movements from three of the works, not to speak of what might have seemed a cynical attempt to popularize classical music by lowering its standards, but I found myself rejecting these reactions; they just don’t apply—not with the **freshness and verve brought to the music by a superb assemblage of Cleveland Orchestra musicians** and not with the excitement and sense of occasion that radiates through this recording. I thought I didn’t even like some of the pieces the Ensemble HD has chosen; but **the music is transfigured by hearing it presented before a real audience, in bold, persuasively virtuosic one-time-only takes. Add to that the recording’s you-are-there realism, and the only response is to murmur, as the French say: “Ah, to have been there”—and to marvel at how close Live at the Happy Dog comes to fulfilling that impossible dream.**

There’s certainly no evidence of dumbing down here. All sorts of combinations of the instruments played by the group’s musicians— flute, oboe, violin, viola, cello, and piano—are used, whether to give the works in their original form or in arrangements. The last two movements of Beethoven’s Serenade for flute, violin, and viola start things off with sprightly Mozartean charm, quickly darkened by the 12 minutes of sultry, rhapsodic swaying and overheated emotion in Astor Piazzolla’s *Grand Tango*, here played on viola and piano. **I’ve never responded to Piazzolla’s extended tangos until I heard this one on this recording; it’s music that belongs in the midst of an excited crowd, not on a sedate concert stage or airless studio.**



How strange, though, that Webern’s brief, posthumous Movement for String Trio, three minutes of delicate pizzicatos and disjunct fragments in unhurried, elaborate contrapuntal overlappings, should have such **mesmerizing power** in the middle of (and on!) that same excited crowd? **You can feel (and share) both the players’ and audience’s concentration on every exquisitely-chosen note, every lapidary inflection chiseled from silence. Anton Webern at his most recondite, played with technical perfection and shapely, musicianly expressiveness, in a bar? Astounding.**

William Bolcom’s piano rag, *Graceful Ghost*, is a lovely, nostalgic homage to a bygone era and half-forgotten genre quickly retreating from living memory; it comes right after Webern, reminding us, however catchy its tunes, lilting its rhythms, sweetly tinted its Tiffany-shade harmonies, that ragtime and 12-tone music are turn-of-the-century near-contemporaries—and that both, at their best, balance fine craftsmanship and poetic fantasy. One wrong note and the entire structure crumbles.

That brings us to the end of just the first of four sides, but there’s much more: Britten’s Phantasy (for oboe and string trio), combining a perky little march with long-spanning melodic lines; Ravel’s wild, gypsy-fiddler *Tzigane*; Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* here in a version for just flute and piano; the final two movements of Shostakovich’s bitterly mocking Second Trio; a seraphic cello-and-piano duo from Messiaen’s post-apocalyptic *Quartet for the End of Time*; a stately rendering (by Johan Halvorsen) of a Handel passacaglia for violin and viola; and finally Arvo Pärt’s gentle, otherworldly *Spiegel Im Spiegel* (Mirror in Mirror), in an arrangement for flute, oboe, and piano. No “lite” music for boozers and philistines here; **all real music, presented in the liveliest imaginable setting** (with audience applause and for some pieces, spoken introductions) and in performances vitalized by a thoroughly engaged audience. The way to beauty, as always, is through pleasure.