

Review of Anne Wolf, "A Gleam in Winter: Japanese Music for Mandolin," CD recording, Trekel Records, [www.trekel.de](http://www.trekel.de)

By Robert A. Margo

The steady supply of world-class performers on mandolin emanating from Germany shows no signs of abating. One of the most recent, and also one of the best, is Anne Wolf. Born in 1987, Wolf took her first lessons on the mandolin with Annette Schneider, followed by formal study with Marga Wilden-Husgen and Caterina Lichtenberg. A prize winner in numerous international competitions and a recitalist throughout Europe, Japan, and the United States, Wolf's "A Gleam in Winter" is her first solo recording.

Many of the recordings of solo mandolin that I have reviewed for the CMSA newsletter take a bird's eye view of the repertoire – some Bach (or other baroque), maybe an early (or late) nineteenth century piece, several contemporary works, plus a Calace prelude (or two). To her credit Wolf's vision is more focused than this and, as a result, her CD is more rewarding (at least to this reviewer).

The focus is Japan, where a vast amount of mandolin activity takes place. Much of this activity is obscure to the West although access has expanded with Youtube and other portals (such as, until very recently, the Nakano archive). Japanese fascination with the mandolin began around the turn of the twentieth century and received an enormous fillip with the visit by Raffaele Calace in the 1920s. Calace's impact was profound and many of the early works for mandolin by Japanese composers sound slavishly Italian. But gradually a more distinctive Japanese style emerged, which incorporated elements of traditional Japanese music along with contemporary European influences. "A Gleam in Winter" includes representative examples of these different styles and, as such, is an effective window on this particular corner of the mandolin world.

The oldest music on this recording, in the evolutionary sense, is Jiri Nakano's "Fantasia No. 2". This particular piece is well-known to Western mandolin audiences, having been recorded previously, including the all-Nakano CD by Gertrud Weyhofen as well as the recent debut CD by Alvina Voznesenskaya. Wolf's version is somewhere in the middle, exhibiting the careful attention to detail and sound characteristic of Weyhofen with some of the flair (if not the unabashed exuberance) of Voznesenskaya.

An all-Japanese mandolin CD these days cannot be without its Kuwahara or Kobayashi, and Wolf's is no exception. By the time he wrote "A Gleam in Winter" Yasuo Kuwahara had been diagnosed with the cancer to which he eventually succumbed. Compared with his other solo works, "A Gleam" is more reflective, as befits the subject matter. It receives a beautiful, controlled performance from Wolf. Compared with his other solo works, Yoshinao Kobayashi's

“Suite” is also more reflective and subdued, but as such requires more intense musicality for an effective performance – which Wolf has in abundance and which is well represented in the gorgeous, precise rendering on this disc.

The remaining three works round out Wolf’s tour of Japanese solo mandolin culture and are very much a reflection of indigenous influences. A major figure in the world of Japanese mandolin, Takashi Kubota’s “Variations for solo mandolin on a theme of Narayama” is programmatic in nature, telling a grim musical story about famine in the wake of a failed harvest. Drawing on the resources of the mandolin to imitate traditional Japanese instruments, the three movements of Seiji Nawata’s “Kyoto” are musical portraits of different parts of the city. Contemporary Japanese music borrows freely from the pop music of the West, and these borrowings are amply evident in Daigo Marumoto’s lovely and idiomatic, “Reminiscence of the starlight,” which is dedicated to Wolf.

There is little, if anything, not to like about this recording. Technically, Wolf is the equal of any of outstanding players that make up the modern German school of classical mandolin, including the very best. Musically, she is the equal as well – especially impressive to me is the exceptional wide range of dynamics that she employs as well as the strong overall sense of architecture in her interpretations. Recorded sound, as one has come to expect with Trekel, is also first-class. The CD can be readily obtained from Trekel (as above). For further information on Wolf and her musical activities, see her website <http://www.mannedoline.de/anne/>.