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ENGEL: Minstrels; Sonata; Danse Bulgare; SCHMIDT-KOWALSKI: Variations; MEYER-METZENTHIN: Sphinx; RUPERT: Nowhere Left to Go; HARRINGTON: Erg; SHEKOV: Suite Mediteran

Daniel Ahlert, mand; Birgit Schwab, g Antes 19195--58 minutes

This is the second collection from the Ahlert-Schwab duo that I have reviewed. The first program (Sept/Oct 2001) was very similar to this one: conservative but attractive works written for the duo. The unusual pairing of mandolin and guitar is remarkably appealing; though both are plucked string instruments, the contrast in timbres is considerable: the mandolin's crisp ping is set off clearly from the more resonant mid-range of the guitar. I especially like Ahlert's wonderful ringing and clear tone (Schwab has less opportunity to emerge into the foreground in these works).

The works are by an international group of composers, hailing from Germany (Thomas Schmidt-Kowalski and Jurgen Meyer-Metzenthin), France (Claude Engel), the United States (Jeffrey Harrington), Canada (Chris Rupert), and Bulgaria (Ivan Shekov). Meyer-Metzenthin's Sphinx makes the strongest initial impression. The work often treats the guitar and mandolin as one extended instrument, the mandolin's high register picking up where the guitar leaves off. It is the most tonally adventurous of the pieces here, few of which venture very far from safe triadic territory. Claude Engel's set of three pieces is among the most conservative in this respect, but their deliberately archaic modality has an appealing directness.

The works from the two North Americans are harder to pin down. Rupert's composition is trance-like and meandering, while Harrington's Erg is a prickly mixture of East and West (written partly in response to the events of September 11th, which the composer witnessed first hand). The works by Schmidt-Kowalski and Shekov are blandly tonal and don't make a very strong initial impression. The sound is excellent and the notes include comments from the composers on their works.