

## RECORDING REVIEWS

Richard Festinger. *Chamber Works*. Bridge Records 9245.

Composer Richard Festinger (b. 1948) has been a well-respected figure on the American contemporary music scene for three decades, especially in the “uptown” circles of New York City and in his native San Francisco Bay area. In Northern California Festinger performed early on as a jazz musician before he studied composition (with Andrew Imbrie at UC Berkeley), founded the noted contemporary music ensemble Earplay, and became Professor of Music Composition at San Francisco State University. Commercially available recordings of his vibrant, skillfully wrought compositions have been less numerous than one would wish, however, and the release of this CD devoted entirely to his chamber music for one to six players is a welcome addition to the discography of recent music by U.S. composers. The overall quality of the disc is high, with scintillating performances delivered by the New Millennium Ensemble, whose close collaboration with the composer dates back to 1994.

The selections on the disc make up a collection of pieces written over a period of twenty-two years, from the three-movement essay for unaccompanied flute *Triptych* (1979), of which an earlier recording is available on CRS Vinyl LP 8738, through the Variations for Piano (1988), the *Pierrot*-plus-percussion sextet *After Blue* (1998), and *Peripeteia* (1999) for clarinet, violin, and cello, to the dynamic duo for piano and percussion *Construction en metal [sic] et bois* (2001). As the composer himself remarks in his eloquent liner notes, the retrospective quality of this program provides an unusual opportunity to gain insight into his longer-term creative development. The notes contain extensive information on the history and dramatic trajectory of each piece. I use the term “dramatic trajectory” advisedly, for it becomes evident to the reader of Festinger’s narratives—in case the music itself had not already made it crystal clear—that he imagines the contrapuntal textures, phrasing, and larger-scale formal evolution of his music in the quasi-dramatic terms of instrumental roles and behaviors, of shifting moods and colors. “The instruments are combined and recombined in myriad ways,” he writes, “sometimes featuring one instrument as a protagonist, other times tossing melodic fragments back and forth . . . in a rapid and spirited interplay” or “The music moves continually through scenarios suggesting divergence and re-convergence, sudden turns of events, and unexpected reversals.” Elsewhere, Festinger describes his music as “bright and extroverted,” “darkly dramatic and atmospheric,” or “in a poignant and contemplative mood.” One small caveat: In keeping with the program’s retrospective aspect, Festinger arranges his commentaries in chronological order, which does not correspond to the sequence in which they appear on the disc.

The program begins with *Peripeteia*, a work premiered by New Millennium. This trio is arguably one of the most successful pieces on the disc and in many ways seems a paradigmatic example of Festinger’s musical personality. True to its title, its unfolding is characterized by sudden changes in mood and circumstances. The gestural language here is strongly reminiscent of Elliott Carter’s kaleidoscopically

interchanging textures. Festinger's music is less rhythmically complex than Carter's. It is, however, perhaps even edgier, always on the verge of eruption. His musical rhetoric is not new, but it is cogent and persuasive. Forceful attacks trigger "resonances" in other instruments, sustained notes that build tension through various means—static tones pushing eventually into a crescendo, trills, tremolos—before bursting into rapid or accelerating figures. Festinger adroitly balances the horizontal and vertical dimensions of his sometimes almost hyperactive, but always transparent, counterpoint. The clarity of his polyphony is a remarkable attribute of his work that is particularly in evidence here, resulting in a compelling interplay between individual instrumental identities and the ensemble's collective sonority.

A faint aura of jazz wafts through the sonorities in the homophonic passages that recur throughout the Variations for Piano. This feature of the work notwithstanding, the composition evinces Festinger's Berkeley lineage as a student of Imbrie, himself a student of Roger Sessions, and is an uncompromising, extended foray into piano writing that harks back to the tradition-inspired modernism of Schoenberg. It demands—and merits—intensive listening. The "theme" itself is sufficiently long and variegated in character that it is not readily apparent when the variations formally begin. Although there are a number of obvious sectional demarcations as the piece progresses, the composer groups the five variations in a manner he compares to a sonata structure, creating larger formal areas that are in turn expository, developmental, and recapitulatory. This architectonic conception makes for an unexpectedly rich form; one experiences the variations less as discrete sections than as focal points that emerge within the shifting continuum of the piece. The contrapuntal passages in the Variations offer some of the most intricate rhythmic textures heard on this disc (or perhaps it only seems so because the piano's comparative homogeneity of timbre puts into stark focus the precise rhythmic interplay of the lines). Margaret Kampmeier articulates the polyrhythmic voices with admirable clarity and suppleness, and engagingly shapes the work as a whole. The recorded piano sound is clear but could be more vivid.

The pace at which the ideas unfold in *Triptych* is more leisurely than in Festinger's later music. Each of the three movements has its predominant character, and in them the composer explores many of the individual ideas and textures that later resurface in the denser, more elaborately woven musical fabrics of his mature works. The score is lyrical and finely crafted, its poetry often captivating. He composed the piece while still a graduate student, and, at times, one senses the composer still searching for his voice. The florid scalar and sequential gestures in the first and second movements, for example, and even to some extent the trills and tremolos, seem a bit banal next to the sensuous lines and sinewy compound melodic writing with which they interact. The piece offers many memorable moments, however. I especially like the juxtaposition of individual flutter-tongued notes and shards of earlier gestural material that closes the agitated second movement. The work benefits greatly from the dynamism, crisp articulation, and carefully modulated tone of Tara Helen O'Connor's flute playing.

*Construction en metal et bois* is perhaps the most sonically intrepid of the pieces in this collection. It is also one of the most exciting. Festinger here repeatedly juxtaposes the fused sonority of vibraphone and piano with the timbral disjunctures of piano and multipercussion (including various metallophones and drums). He

plays here with an interesting palette not only of coloristic combinations but also of conjunct and disjunct relationships among different musical materials and textures. Unison passages between vibraphone and piano, intricate contrapuntal dialogues, and parallel streams of block piano chords and pulsing passagework on drums and metal instruments interrogate one another in a kind of dialectical exploration of similarity and dissimilarity. Throughout his works, a driving, motoric rhythm appears to be one of Festinger's preferred materials, and it is amply on display here, helping to infuse sections of the piece with a raw energy not unlike that of some rock music, or of Xenakis. This piece is engrossing, marred only slightly by the reprise at the end of its grandest cadential gesture, a powerful descent to the low bass of the piano confirmed by bass drum and tam-tam swells. This event is powerfully striking the first time around because of its unexpectedly early arrival less than a quarter of the way through the piece, but its return as the work's closing gesture reduces it to something of a rhetorical flourish. The well-balanced recording does full justice to Margaret Kampmeier's and percussionist John Ferrari's riveting performances.

It would be difficult to overestimate the contribution that the over-300 works commissioned by the Paul Fromm Music Foundation have made to the health and aesthetic breadth of new concert music in the United States in the nearly sixty years of the foundation's activity. *After Blue*, for flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and percussion, composed in 1998 for the New Millennium Ensemble, is one of them. The largest ensemble work on the disc, the combined seventeen-minute duration of its three movements makes it also the longest. Situated on the program after *Construction* and bearing many stylistic similarities to it, including the approach to percussion writing, the first movement seems, curiously, almost like a continuation and timbral expansion of that piece, even though *After Blue*'s earlier date of composition gives lie to that impression. The motoric, propulsive running notes that operate so effectively in the piano and percussion context appear here, at virtually the same tempo, in a dominant role. They are played in a prismatically changing variety of solo presentations and instrumental combinations. Energetic and brilliant though this material may be, its ubiquity in this movement and, to a somewhat lesser degree, in the third movement pushes it to the brink of becoming a stylistic mannerism. On the other hand, in a context as texturally unstable as the second movement ("Adagio fantastico"), when the same motoric material bubbles up and over from beneath a tenuously calm surface, it functions quite effectively as a formidable countercurrent. This "slow" movement is both the heart of the piece and, for this listener, a centerpiece of the whole program. True, the virtuosic counterpoint at which the composer excels is not prominent, but united here are the tense, repeatedly rupturing textures, the unexpected twists and turns (peripeteia!), and the sensitive attention to coloristic detail that are all hallmarks of Richard Festinger's strongest work. With regard to this last attribute, the closing two minutes reveal an added bonus. In this slow, fragile passage unlike any other on the disc, the composer takes his concern for sonority yet a step further, smoothly blending the instruments in overtone-like relationships that conjure a kind of acoustic additive synthesis. (Of special note is the beautiful use of the bowed vibraphone to fuse the timbres.) The result is magical, one of those special moments in contemporary composition where the sound itself supersedes syntax and the music transcends any semantic aspirations we may have for it.

In sum, this CD presents an enjoyable program of intellectually and viscerally compelling music that spans much of the career of a living American composer who deserves to be better known. The playing by members of the New Millennium Ensemble is exemplary, the recorded sound is, for the most part, warm and clear, and the disc is well produced overall.

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