



### Richard Festinger: Chamber Works

Richard Festinger: Chamber Works. New Millennium Ensemble. Bridge Records 9245, ©2008. 67'40". \$14.99.

Move over Haydn! Richard Festinger, composer and distinguished Professor of Music Composition at San Francisco State University, presents a recording of five chamber works spanning more than twenty years and featuring the Naumburg award-winning New Millennium\* Ensemble. From Douglas H. Holly's distinctive cover design to the works of art within, this recording inspires one to listen with a drawing pencil, a set of pastels, or a paint box in hand.

Festinger, whose mother was an accomplished pianist, grew up in a musically rich and stimulating home environment. Studying scores of great composers, listening to a wide variety of music, and attending concerts as a child, it was probably inevitable that he would turn to music as a career. This former student of Andrew Imbrie and graduate from the University of California at Berkeley approaches composition with the intellectual curiosity of an academic, the heart of a romantic, and the depth of one totally immersed in the art. About developing his style, he writes, "My creative life has been a fantastic and inspiring journey through the most remarkable of musical landscapes...."

The titles reflect Festinger's deep eclectic musical background. They suggest novel compositional practices and even specific 20th-century works, such as John Cage's *First Construction in Metal* (1939), for example. And while his *Variations for Piano*, the musical equivalent of "Smith," shares more of a kinship to the works of Second Viennese School composer Anton Webern than Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven, the work is neatly structured and rich in counterpoint and rhythmic intricacy. And informed by his study of jazz (he also holds a degree in jazz arrangement and composition from Berklee College of Music in Boston), his harmonic palette is rich, and the melodic material, often involving specific intervallic choices, ranges from the austere (descending tritones) to lyric elegance. The New Millennium Ensemble's powerful performance brings the music to life.

Communicating and persuading us to participate with open ears can be as daring as sailing through the Roaring 40s. Founding ensemble member Margaret Kampmeier's singular performance of *Variations for Piano* (1988), for example, gives testimony to the commitment and long working relationship between the NME and the composer. Festinger's composition culls the intricacy of Liszt's *Les Préludes* and the spaciousness of Webern's piano works, demanding much of the performer, and Kampmeier delivers. Festinger writes with equal facility for winds and strings.

*Peripeteia* (1999) for clarinet, violin, and cello, bursts into life from a sustained pitch (d") and seamlessly weaving in and out of the foreground; the clarinet, played by Alan Kay, creates the sensation of a bird flying through a vast array of clouds. *Triptych* (1979), adeptly played by flutist Tara Helen O'Connor, is just as compelling. There are no jet whistles, key clicks, and the like, but just perfectly executed, well-crafted music. Turning wide leaps into counterpoint and executing widely-spaced trills with the precision of a mockingbird using athletic breath control, O'Connor's performance is convincing.

The centerpiece *Construction en metal et bois* (2001) for piano and percussion pushes the boundaries of chamber music, winning my greatest admiration. Here Festinger gives us his best and the demanding challenges are met with equal passion. Margaret Kampmeier and John Ferrari, like two fighter pilots, perform at lightning speed and with the intensity of a

tarantella. Imagining the choreography of a live performance, I understand its immediate reception. *Construction en metal et bois* was commissioned by Thierry Miroglio and Ancuza Aprodu, premiered at University of Maryland in 2001, and featured at the 2002 Festival Antidogma Musica in Italy. NME's recording was made in 2006, and they performed it in 2007 at James Madison University. With repeat performances by outstanding players, this composition passes the first litmus test toward canonization.

*After Blue* (1998) for flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and percussion, evokes the opening pitch of *Peripeteia*, but this time it acts provisionally as the gravitational center, gradually orbiting outward and creating constellations of sound; the impression is of wanderlust, exploring the universe of possibilities. And though I sense an improvisational character to the piece, the composer says, "It's more a reference to the darkly poignant mood of the middle movement," holding the piece together. The third movement, *Allegro capriccioso*, is an exuberant closing.

Does it take an educated ear to appreciate this CD? Perhaps, but Festinger's music, like a Mark Rothko painting, is beautiful, even on the surface. And discovering what's beneath makes it rewarding — it is reason enough to heed Milton Babbitt's advice to record modern music. This is a CD to savor.

In recent electronic mail correspondence, Richard Festinger generously shared his thoughts on composition. In closing he says:

*... I see art as a mirror, a window into the human mind and spirit, and great art as a reflection of what, as human beings, we aspire to, what astonishing and deeply affecting creations a single individual can bring into being simply with the power of his or her own imagination. (6/11/08)*

[Karen Moorman](#)

\*Spelled thus on the CD's cover - but it's given the 1-n treatment at Bridge's site....

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