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A Rave for New Music

 By [Karen E. Moorman](#)

August 1, 2014 - Durham, NC:

[Richard Festinger](#): *Diary of a Journey*. [New York New Music Ensemble](#). [NAXOS American Classics. 8.559399](#). © 2014. 66:13.

If you are looking for beautiful 21st century American music, look no further. This album holds four compositions written by Richard Festinger (b.1948), performed by New York New Music Ensemble. Currently Professor of Theory and Composition at the San Francisco State University, Dr. Festinger is also Artistic Director of the Morrison Artists Chamber Music Series. Well known in the San Francisco Bay area, Festinger has composed solo instrumental works, chamber music, music for large ensembles, choral music, and music for electronics and mixed media.

The CD opens with *Diary of a Journey* (2003), for clarinet, violin, viola, cello, vibraphone, glockenspiel, and piano, an interesting collection of instruments. But Festinger creates mesmerizing textures. Slowly emerging themes, gently woven from snippets of melody, gradually accelerate and collide like swirling eddies of dissonant color. Animated changes in dynamic, tremolos in the strings, and skittering piano figures create tension and drama. After a flurry of motion, the music eventually fades and a return brings us safely home. In his liner notes, [Ben Frandzel](#) writes, "... the metaphorical journey comes full circle, it has brought about a deep transformation." Festinger's musical language is economical and the performance is singular. This is a piece I will return to again and again.

The Coming of Age (2003), a song cycle for soprano and sextet, is set to poetry by [Denis Johnson](#) (b.1949) from *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly; Poems Collected and New* (Harper Collins). Johnson's poetry is intimate, clean, and concise. Set to music, the text morphs into 3-D. Festinger's music fits like a glove. And like an alchemist, soprano [Jo Ellen Miller](#) lifts it off of the page. She sings with the agility of a dancer and with the depth and warmth of a mature singer.

The cinematic quality relies upon the changing textures and the moving parts of all of the instruments. And each of the four sections has a slightly different stylistic tendency. The instrumental roles range from supportive ("Upon Waking") to contrapuntal and textural. "Poem" has a *pointillistic* feel calling for rapid-fire, skittish voices of the strings and winds. The final section, "The Coming of Age" is pensive – the colors are muted with the addition of Miller's golden thread. Subtle dissonance and descending figures create a sense of mourning. [Margaret Kampmeier](#)'s piano performance is exhilarating, and [Sunghae Anna Lim](#), violin, plays like the wind, but the work of the ensemble brings it all together in a seamless flow.

"Laws of Motion" (2004) is dedicated to [Thalia Moore](#), a cellist and a champion of new music. New York New Music Ensemble's [Christopher Finckel](#), cello, was joined by guest violist [Lois Martin](#) on this recording. They are conducted by [Jeffrey Milarsky](#). Like rowdy adolescents, Finckel and pianist [Stephen Gosling](#) attempt to defy the laws of physics colliding into dissonance. Their performance is wonderful.

A Dream Foretold (2001), for piano, cello, clarinet and flute, was written for and dedicated to the New York New Music Ensemble. In two movements, it begins with a sultry cello solo and ends in a caffeinated frenzy. It feels playful and optimistic.

All of the pieces here are worth savoring. Festinger's compositions are select, superbly performed, and expertly recorded. Silence your cell phone, find a quiet spot, and listen.

Note: This composer's music has been played in Greenville – click [here](#); and an earlier CD was reviewed in these pages – click [here](#).

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