

RICHARD FESTINGER: DIARY OF A JOURNEY

There is a Shaker expression, “every force evolves a form,” that comes vividly to mind when listening to the music of **Richard Festinger**. The four works gathered here, written from 2001 to 2006, are each quintessential examples of his approach to composition. Festinger develops powerful generative ideas, examines their implications, and finds avenues for their inherent musical architecture and expressive possibilities to be revealed.

The composer’s personal and artistic roots are in Northern California. He grew up in Palo Alto and studied composition at UC Berkeley with Andrew Imbrie, joining an important Bay Area musical lineage. The fine detail and expressive clarity found in his teacher’s music are echoed in Festinger’s own, very different body of work.

Festinger also has roots in jazz. After a sojourn to Boston’s Berklee College of Music, he returned to the Bay Area to work as a jazz guitarist and bandleader before turning to composition full time. His concert works don’t often contain overt reference to jazz, but they share some key characteristics –propulsive motion, harmonic richness, and complex interplay in which each ensemble member adds a distinct and vital contribution.

For three decades, Festinger has played an important role in the Bay Area’s musical community. He founded the San Francisco contemporary music group Earplay in 1984 and has been Professor of Music Composition at San Francisco State University since 1990, while composing prolifically for the area’s circle of contemporary music ensembles and many other musicians.

Festinger’s music has been heard nationally in venues such as Tanglewood and Merkin Concert Hall, and at festivals in North America, Europe, and China. Commissions and awards have come from the Koussevitzky Foundation, American Academy of Arts and Letters, and many others. One important artistic partner has been the New York New Music Ensemble, which, with soprano Jo Ellen Miller and several other guest artists, provided the virtuosic, beautifully shaped performances on this recording.

Diary of a Journey, for clarinet, violin, viola, cello, vibraphone and glockenspiel, and piano, was written for Louis Karchin and the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, which premiered it in 2003. The composer marks the opening “magical,” and there is a sense of portent in the sparse and evocative introductory music. String tremolos and trills and rising and falling clarinet and cello figures emerge and then come to rest, but don’t resolve.

Across a broad sonic canvas, a series of motives appears – dark, heavy chords, broad and unpredictable arpeggios, yearning clarinet lines. The musical space tightens as these gestures start to encounter each other with more frequency, until the piano and metallic percussion form a collective sonority, heightening both tension and momentum with rapid, sharply chiseled passages.

After these dramatic changes in mood and style, the work nears its end, while the journey’s forward motion and stillness, its uncertainty and exhilaration linger. As the quiet opening music

returns and then dies out, there's a sense that as the metaphorical journey comes full circle, it has brought about a deep transformation.

The Coming of Age is a song cycle on four poems by American writer Denis Johnson, for soprano and a sextet of winds, strings, and piano. The artists met in 1984 when Festinger was in residence at the MacDowell Colony, a frequent home for his creative work, and Johnson was the Frost Poet at the annual Frost Place Festival and Conference in Franconia, NH. The work was commissioned by the Mary Flagler Cary Trust and premiered by the Group for Contemporary Music and soprano Amy Burton in the Guggenheim Museum's Works and Process series in May 2003.

The poems' images and feelings are precise and intimate, with the poet contemplating love, and a beloved, through a prism of heightened perceptions. *On Waking* begins with a delicate mix of string harmonics and wind tremolos, then gives way to more fully articulated sounds, prefacing the text's transition from night to morning. As light reaches a lover's face and brings an awareness in waking, it is the piano's more complex music that answers. The opening textures reappear and fade, as if the world of the poem had occurred in a single moment.

A restrained, then increasingly active setting gives a home to the second poem. The vocal line first ascends stepwise and then broadens, capturing the poem's unfolding from the dry land of its title to the lush language of the final stanza. A pair of sudden vocal flourishes marks the poem's ending leap to an ecstatic, life-filled image.

The third movement functions as a kind of scherzo, with the poetic change from a still, quiet tone to one of speed and motion. Festinger responds to the "ninety miles an hour" images with dashing piano lines and powerful rhythms. Widely arching vocal lines heighten the effect while a switch to bass clarinet adds a rougher texture. The score instructs the players to swing, and a bebop-styled piano mixes interjecting chords and virtuosic solo lines before its figures are taken up by the other players with even greater sweep.

In the cycle's title poem, Johnson contemplates a paired destiny, from the present through the remainder of life. The setting is fittingly spare, giving a broad space to the voice. A striking moment occurs as the poet starts to consider togetherness until death, when a duet emerges between a moody alto flute and clarinet, encircling and considering, perhaps questioning each other. One last time, the delicate string and wind textures that opened the cycle return to gently end the piece.

Laws of Motion, for flute, clarinet, viola, cello and piano, again saw much of its genesis take place at MacDowell, and was completed at the Liguria Study Center in Bogliasco, Italy. It is dedicated to cellist Thalia Moore, a leading light in the Bay Area new music scene, and the Empyrean Ensemble.

The cello is at the center of the conversation, and succeeding encounters with the other instruments reveal new aspects of its persona, from wildly kinetic to mournful. An energetic introduction by the other instruments paves the way for the cello to join the viola in a slow, dark duet. A series of more animated passages finds the cello leading a rotating array of players

through a mix of pointillistic textures and surging rhythms. An electric mood gradually takes hold of the full ensemble and brings a stretch of complex counterpoint, before a slower, soulful passage leads the cello to a gently rising line, saying a quiet goodbye.

A Dream Foretold was written for and dedicated to the New York New Music Ensemble, which premiered it at the 2001 Sonic Boom Festival at New York's Knitting Factory.

The music begins with an eloquent solo cello, tracing short paths that rapidly alter course but ultimately reach a sustained topmost note, while the piano condenses the cello's pitches into enigmatic chords. This gesture of ascending to a summit along an unpredictable route appears at many points and in many variations, bringing both unity and surprise. The flute and clarinet soon take on larger roles, leading to a masterful stretch of counterpoint in which the parts seem both competing and interdependent. At several points the players trade a long series of trills, interrupting each other with rising tension, before bursting back into expansive lines that dovetail toward a soft, ambiguous conclusion.

In the second movement, the piano is relieved of its contemplative role, and instead drives the music's perpetual motion. In a deft bit of orchestration, the other instruments grab bits and pieces of the piano lines, adding emphasis to key moments, and then take the lead with their own fuller parts. Despite the intense pace, there's a subtler touch at work, so that the driving rhythms don't demand volume and force. Instead, a carefully shaped series of phrases builds inexorably to a final chord, leaving a continued sense of anticipation even as the work concludes.

Ben Frandzel