



STEIGER *Résonateur. A Menacing Plume. Elusive Peace*¹. *Elliott's Instruments. awhirl*² • James Baker, cond; Talea Ens; ¹Ben Beimer (drum set); Leanne Zacharias (vc); ²Steven Beck (pn) • NEW WOLRD 80747-2 (58:13)

Rand Steiger (b. 1957) has been active on the West Coast (specifically the Los Angeles area) for decades, but his presence has been felt nationally as well (a visiting professor at Harvard isn't a bad gig). Quipping aside, his music is a fascinating intersection of several different strands of contemporary practice, fused in a personal, at times visionary, manner.

Steiger has certain aspects of what is regarded as prototypical West Coast practice embedded in his music: an interest in pure tunings (think of Harry Partch), a background as a rock drummer that informs his rhythmic sense (think Frank Zappa). But while there are passages of repetition and openness that suggest Minimalism, Steiger is very much a "Maximalist" composer. One is hard pressed to think immediately of a composer of his location and generation who has written birthday tribute pieces to Pierre Boulez (*Résonateur*) and Elliott Carter (*Elliott's Instruments*). He has a love of rich and complex textures, and prolific counterpoint. And his signature use of technology is sophisticated and obviously deeply understood—in part because its effects sound so natural and integrated in their interplay with acoustic instruments.

Herewith is first a quick summary of the works at hand, and then a little broader perspective. All pieces date from 2000 onward. The earliest is *Elusive Peace*, a stunning duo for piano and drum set. The interplay between the two is cracklingly precise and athletic. Rhythmic complexity here equals exhilarating energy, not spastic stasis. *Résonateur* (2005) uses a chamber octet of flute, oboe, violin, cello, two keyboards, and two percussion. These in turn are subjected to digital processing: With the keyboards are samplers that project "pure" intervals that aid the acoustic instruments to achieve tuning derived from overtone relations ("just" tunings that give us sounds that to some will seem "between the cracks" of standard equal temperament; a term now much in use for this approach, coming from French composers starting in the 1970s, is "spectral composition"). *awhirl* (2008) is a solo piano work that enlarges the instrument's sound via subtle effects of delay and spatialization: it too is "spectral" in its approach to harmony, but this is achieved more by having the actual harmonic structures of the score mimic overtone relations than alteration via processing. *Elliott's Instruments* (2010) (for standard "Pierrot sextet") is the only piece without processing, and is in some ways the most fascinating of the group. Steiger here takes fragments from all of Carter's chamber pieces written for instruments of the ensemble's instrumentation, and then reshapes them in his own way to create a dream of the elder composer's music, whipping by at warp speed. Ironically, it's the most successful contemporary incarnation I've encountered of the Renaissance "parody Mass" technique (or perhaps more accurately, "paraphrase Mass"). Finally, *A Menacing Plume* (2011) for instrumental nonet with processing, is a response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, though that source is not programmatically evident in the music, except for a "black wall" of electronic noise that overwhelms all else near the end of the piece. It's the largest work on the program, and I find its long, sustained build in its middle extremely effective, especially with a repeated spectral "chattering" of its woodwinds (a little like rattling skeletons to my naïve ear).

I find Steiger's music admirable because he's trying to reconcile the Modernist 20th-century ideal of richness-in-complexity with a model that comes from nature, namely the structure of sound itself. Daniel Tacke in his program essay makes a strong and revealing point that the composer paradoxically uses "artificial" means (i.e. technology) to attain a supra-natural sonic ideal, transcending the limitations of acoustic instruments, which are rooted in a particular historical moment and practice no longer necessarily our own. I think this is very true, and Steiger's sound world seems a bridge between brainy abstract East Coast Modernism and more populist, "essentialist" West Coast Experimentalism. That's of course a dichotomy that dates back over half a century, and it's now quite out of date, and yet it also preserves a shred of truth.

For the record, the Talea Ensemble players in the larger chamber works are Tara Helen O'Connor, flutes; Arthur Sato, oboes; Ran Moore, clarinets; Yuki Numata Resnick, violin; Elizabeth Weisser, viola; Chris Gross, cello; Stephen Gosling and Steven Beck, keyboards/piano; Alex Lipowski and Matthew Gold, percussion. The composer is joined by Olivier Pasquet and Miller Puckette for the digital processing. I'd only encountered a work or two in isolation of the composer until now, even though I'd heard of him for decades. This release gives me a far more clear and comprehensive view of his work and aesthetic, and I am impressed. And thanks to these wonderful performances, what I'm hearing sounds definitive. **Robert Carl**