

STEIGER Coalescence Cycle: Volume I: *Cyclone*¹. *Beacon*². *Mourning Fog*³. *Light on Water*⁴. *Concatenation*⁵ • International Contemporary Ens (¹Joshua Rubin, cl; ^{2,4}Claire Chase, fl/picc; ³Kivie Cahn-Lipman, vc; ⁴Jacob Greenberg, pn; ⁵Rebekah Heller, bn) • TUNDRA 1764 (70:27)

Exploratory would seem to be the *mot juste* here. The music of Rand Steiger seeks to explore the merging of separate sounds into one, while the natural intervals of harmonic series act as Steiger's guide to generating pitch structures. The result is a unique vocabulary that operates on many levels.

The first piece is *Cyclone* (2013) for clarinet and electronics. The soundscape is at once alien, frozen yet hypnotic. Inspired by the actual event of two tornadoes in Brooklyn, the electronics sweep and spin the musical material. The title also makes reference to a roller coaster on Coney Island, the interactions between the fabulous playing of clarinetist Joshua Rubin and the electronics a model of its kind, with Rubin ever sensitive to his musical environment.

Scored for flute/piccolo and electronics, *Beacon* (2015) boasts a fascinating premise. Not only does the title refer to the activities of its dedicatee and performer here, Claire Chase, but also to an imagined beacon that calls to extra-terrestrial life via gestures inspired by Varèse. The alien life is found, a dialog ensues and there is a final place of reflection. While this all sounds very programmatic, the piece has a lyricism that runs through it that perhaps, on an underlying level, speaks of the yearning for mankind to learn that we are not alone in the Universe, or a particular type of deep set loneliness. Claire Chase is totally attuned to Steiger's language.

The solo instrument for *Mourning Fog* (2012) is a cello, here the eloquent Kivie Cahn-Lipman. By far the most reflective of the pieces so far, *Mourning Fog* refers to the mornings (as in time of day) around the coast of San Diego, often cloudy and foggy. As the day progresses this lifts to reveal sunshine and hope. The composer takes this as a metaphor for his personal loss. It is astonishing to find that all of the sounds here are taken from the cello, such are the levels of transformation (all of which conform to the general mood of the piece). At over 17 minutes, this piece is pretty much as long as the first two combined, and this increased sense of space allows the music itself to breathe, to reflect at leisure, and to explore its own pain in its own time. Again inspired by natural phenomena, this time the reflection of light off the Los Peñasquitos Lagoon, *Light on Water* (2012) for flute, piano and electronics is a study in silvery delicacy. Jacob Greenberg's tracteries ideally complement the agility of Chase's flute resulting in an experience as elusive yet as special as the moment light does indeed reflect off water. The combination of Chase and Greenberg is a winning one. Think, perhaps, a modernist Ravel, and you have an "in" for the piece.

How ethereally *Light on Water* ends. Just the perfect stage for the sudden interruption of a low bassoon virtuosically negotiating its nether regions. Composed in 2012, *Concatenation* for bassoon and electronics is a "nested etudes" piece, the idea of which is that there is a set of contrasting materials, any part of which could form the basis for an etude, become the basis of an ongoing "conversation". Here, Steiger presents seven different types of material, each with a different approach to signal processing, and each with a label ("Fog," "bloom," etc). They are presented in order (and therefore there is something of a sectional nature to the piece early on) before engaging in conversations with one another. Rebekah Heller is a stunning bassoonist. She needs to be, as Steiger's demands are constant; and how fascinating to hear her in dialogue with her own sounds.

The electronic soundstage for these works was developed by the composer in association with Miller Puckette and his Pure Data software environment. Steiger's explorations in Digital Signal Processing (the real-time alteration of sounds) is fertile ground

indeed. The result is a brilliant exploration of not only soundspace but also of the expressive nature of tuning. The truly great news here is that this is volume one.

The documentation spoils us. First, there are individual notes on the pieces, plus introduction, by the composer himself. This is followed by an extended, excellent, essay by Lukas Schulze. Perhaps a listening strategy might be to save Schultze's essay until after the music has been heard a couple of times; there is so much to be gleaned that way.

Colin Clarke

Rating: FIVE STARS QUOTE: Exploratory would seem to be the *mot juste* here; a unique vocabulary that operates on many levels.