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Franklin Cox, *The New Cello, Vol. 1: American Composers*. Centaur Records CRC 2994. 2010.

There is a myth among cellists about a shortage of repertoire, the product of almost constant repetition of a very limited number of works. In fact, however, the repertoire for the unaccompanied cello has increased exponentially during the twentieth century, with many works stretching the boundaries of what had previously been considered acceptable sounds. In this first volume of his planned series of recordings titled *The New Cello*, Franklin Cox offers eight pieces written during the second half of the century by four U.S. composers: Elliot Carter, Ben Johnston, Stuart S. Smith, and Cox himself. Each of these works challenges what Cox calls the “requirement of constant tonal beauty” from the cellist; rather, they extend the sonic landscape to include a wide range of sounds that may be considered strident, harsh, or otherwise ugly. Listening to this recording also requires some patience aurally to grasp the intricacies of the tuning. Johnson’s works use extended just intonation, and Cox’s are microtonal. One of the issues that composers face in writing microtonal works is the intrinsic limitations of Western instruments in producing intervals smaller than the half step. Unfretted string instruments can play fractional tones, but the long fingerboard of a cello accommodates them more easily than the smaller violin or viola, easing experimentation with tuning systems other than equal temperament. For Carter’s and Smith’s pieces, Cox chooses to use what he calls “expressive intonation.” In the liner notes he explains that, “after working extensively with all these tuning approaches, it is difficult for me any longer to accept the premises of equal temperament.” String players traditionally think of “expressive intonation” to mean the altering of passing or auxiliary tones toward the next tone, an idea promoted by Pablo Casals. Cox says he considers his expressive intonation closer to the variety of historical temperaments, but he does not offer further details. His playing certainly demonstrates his skill with intervals outside the equal-tempered scale, and his confidence performing music far out of the mainstream is obviously the product of a long association with these tuning systems.

Several of the pieces on this recording reflect the influence of Johann Sebastian Bach, most notably the two works by Ben Johnston. Bach was not the first to write for the cello alone, but his six suites continue to impact composers more than three centuries later. Johnston was a disciple of Harry Partch and extended his system of just intonation to traditional instruments; he wrote many works for strings. Johnston blends new with old, using the Baroque forms of Bach’s time. *Toccata* brings to mind the first Bach cello suite, although the almost *ponticello* timbre Cox uses seems inappropriate for the style of writing. The second work by Johnston is a duo for two violins, transcribed for two cellos by Cox with both parts performed by him. It is in three movements, using the traditional forms of fugue, aria, and toccata. The unusual tuning is more obvious in this piece than in the *Toccata*, both in the chords that are not equally tempered as the ear expects and in the perfectly-in-tune high harmonics in the Aria.

The two best-known works on the recording are Elliot Carter's *Figment* (1996) and *Figment 2: Remembering Mr. Ives* (2001). These works are the only ones on the album that are commercially available on other recordings. *Figment* was written for cellist Thomas Demenga; he has recorded both works, as have Matt Haimovitz and Rohan de Saram. Cox's performances of both *Figments* are significantly faster than those of his colleagues and at times feel rushed. He tends to draw an edgy sound in these pieces that verges on harshness. Although he discusses in the notes his desire to "convey an undertone of anxiety and unrest," Cox misses opportunities to use beautiful sounds to develop greater tonal variety in general.

In contrast with the other works, Stuart Smith's pieces focus most notably on the vast range of pitches possible on the cello. Cox meets the demands of the constant leaps admirably and produces impressively clear, bell-like sounds on both the natural and artificial harmonics. *Willow* has an appealing sense of wandering through darkness and light in a style reminiscent of a Bach Prelude; in *Said, nearly*, Smith's writing seems more directionless; each of the eight movements sounds much the same, and the liner notes offer little guidance to the listener.

It is in his own works that Cox is at his best. The liner notes explain his use of microtonality and compositional devices in ways that help make the listener's experience more meaningful, and the pacing of these performances is more relaxed than in many of the other works on the disc. Cox describes the cello's sound in *Clairvoyance* as "almost a speaking voice, breathless with hope," and the syllabic articulations and pauses of speech are quite audible. Silence is used effectively in the last section. *Recoil* is the most microtonally complex of the eight works, using 1/12 tones—that is, dividing each half step into six parts. Cox calls it "the most extreme exploration I have yet made of . . . microtonal pitch organization." Despite its complexities, the tuning is not the most noticeable characteristic of this work, because much of the microtonality has a glissando-like quality. Cox identifies seven types of bowings and five bow movements and locations that he uses in *Recoil*, and the various combinations result in a piece that in many ways best demonstrates the potential of the cello to make a vast variety of sound.

Overall, this disc is a worthy addition to the canon of cello music, particularly because most of the pieces have not previously been recorded. Many cellists have considered expressive intonation based on Casals's ideas, but very few have tackled alternative tuning systems, and almost none to the extent that Cox has. There is also value for both performers and listeners in considering a wider range of sounds from the cello. The close miking on the recording allows the listener to hear the subtle timbral differences but also emphasizes the surface noise from Cox's aggressive sound and, in some cases, his breathing. Finally, although the music is not instantly accessible to casual listening, it challenges our ears to hear different possibilities in both intonation and sound quality.

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