

RECORDING REVIEWS

Eric Chasalow. *Left to His Own Devices*. New World Records 80601-2, 2003.

In recent years, Eric Chasalow (b. 1955) has become widely known as a composer of electro-acoustic works, specializing in the genre of “instrument plus tape.” His works from the 1980s, especially “Over the Edge” (for flute and tape),¹ brought him recognition within the new music community, and he continues to explore the sonic environs of electronics. Chasalow’s expertise is evident in the CD *Left to His Own Devices*, which documents his music from 1994 to 2001. The CD contains nine works; two of them are purely acoustic, whereas the rest contain a significant electronic component.

The title track, composed in 1996, yields an apt point of reference for Chasalow’s music. Milton Babbitt began a work with the same title to be realized on the formidable RCA synthesizer. The sonic possibilities of this medium characterize many of Babbitt’s electronic works—as well as those of Mario Davidovsky, Chasalow’s mentor at Columbia. Chasalow’s works refer to, and often echo those of, New York composers, and the aesthetics of his electronic music are rooted in the traditions that began with the RCA synthesizer. Chasalow’s purely electronic piece here is actually about Babbitt; fragments of Babbitt’s voice, excerpted from interviews, are mixed with quotations from his music. The vocal transformations are quite far-reaching, as the voice becomes stretched beyond recognition. There are, as well, moments reminiscent of textures evoked by composer Bernard Parmegiani in “Ponomatopees,” where the voice eventually becomes a virtual instrument of otherworldly quality. Here Chasalow often returns to the interview fragments for its literary implications, preferring to work in a more direct medium—that of a sonic wordsmith.

A substantial portion of Chasalow’s output calls for live performers and tape, and the current CD includes four examples. Of these, two are for solo instruments, “In a Manner of Speaking” (2000) and “Out of Joint” (1994), for bass clarinet and trumpet, respectively. Both works make references to jazz, in particular Eric Dolphy’s energetic bass clarinet playing and Miles Davis’s muted trumpet. In both of these works, the synthesized sounds at times blend with their acoustic counterparts, while they otherwise stand in stark relief to the soloist. In “Suspicious Motives” (1999, recorded by the Auros Group for New Music, conducted by Michael Adelson), Chasalow seamlessly blends the electronic component with the live instruments. Occasionally the tape sonorities cut through the acoustic ensemble, with startling results. However, all of these pieces demonstrate Chasalow’s ability to produce full and finely balanced textures that create a new approach to part writing, where the implications of many secondary voices depict an almost ghostly effect. By avoiding sound saturation and distortion, the tape and ensemble never obfuscate one another.

¹ Recorded on Chasalow, *Over the Edge*, New World Records 80440-2.

Many works for fixed media and instruments present the instrument as soloist and the electronic component as accompanist. Yet, in “Dream Songs” (2001, performed by Gil Rose, tenor William Hite, and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project) Chasalow reverses this paradigm. Here the composer introduces primary musical materials in the tape part—while the orchestra serves as commentator. The tape part presents a combination of spoken and sung text (selections from “The Dream Songs” by John Berryman), as well as far-reaching transformations of the voice, often echoed, filtered, elongated, or vastly compressed in time.

Rounding out the electronic works on the CD are two pieces for tape alone: “And It Flew Upside Down” (1994) and “Crossing Boundaries” (2000). The latter is a large three-part work making use of spoken texts as its primary source material. “And It Flew Upside Down” uses fragments of pop music, including voice, percussion and piano sounds, although the end result is so heavily processed that only fleeting images of the original show through, like spectral ghosts unmistakable for anything else in the sonic landscape. As in the other works on this recording, there is an unusual blend between density and clarity.

Two works on this CD do not have an electronic component. “Yes, I Really Did” (1998), an eight-minute-long piano trio, was recorded by an ensemble consisting of Christopher Oldfather (piano), Andrea Schultz (violin), and Michael Finckel (cello). “In the Works” (1993, rev. 1994) is a more substantial multimovement piece, scored for the instrumental *Pierrot*-plus-percussion aggregate common to many new music ensembles, and recorded by the Phantom Arts ensemble (conducted by Andrew Rindfleisch). This work firmly places Chasalow in the New York school of composers, although with a slight postmodern edge. “In the Works” ranges from jazz-tinged passages in its second movement to the more athletic (and accessible) late modernism of the outer movements. The writing here is quite strong and well crafted, and it receives a performance worthy of its power.

All of the performances on the CD are studio recordings, carefully produced by the composer (except “In a Manner of Speaking,” produced by Mario Zannini). The recordings are clean and clear; in the works for instruments and tape, the blend is well produced. The accompanying booklet is, at times, informal, yet it always remains informative. All texts are reproduced, including those that are the result of the electronic processing in “Left to His Own Devices” and “Crossing Boundaries.” Including the text in this manner has the curious effect of creating a heretofore-unrealized poetic structure of the constructed texts culled from interviews and conversations. Yet it provides both an apt printed image of the electronic works and a metaphor for the music as a whole—phrases that are edited, recombined, and imbued with new meaning. Chasalow’s syncretic approach succeeds in the exquisite combination of the seemingly detached worlds of electronic and acoustic sounds to form a more powerful, complex, and rich sonority.

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