

sustained melody emerges in the strings, doubled in octaves, yet moving in contrary motion. This moment, one of the most striking on the CD, heralds the arrival of both the pitched percussion (entirely absent in this movement until now) and of the human voice, scarcely audible through gaps in the orchestration. Following a series of escalating swells, the gradual emergence of the generative harmony for the entire cycle culminates in its statement in the voices, which pulsate and waver as if they could blow apart with the slightest breath.

The one work on the disc that is not part of “*Écritures*” is *St. Francis Preaches to the Birds* (2005), a concerto for violin and chamber orchestra. Nielson’s evocation of St. Francis raises many questions about the nature of communication. Although it is not explicitly representative of St. Francis or his birds, the violin’s role in the ensemble is ambiguous: Does the orchestra respond to the violin, the violin to the orchestra, or is their synchronicity a mere coincidence? At the outset, both violin and orchestra engage with identical musical material, the violin seemingly controlling the pace. This logic soon proves tenuous, however, for as the violin becomes increasingly independent of the orchestra, the orchestra itself begins to unravel. By the end, the alienation is so complete that the violin continues for a minute and a half after the orchestra has ceased playing.

Violinist Jay Freivogel’s performance is nuanced, exciting, and devoid of arrogance or shameless bravado. The ensemble, The Twittering Machine, comprising alumni of Oberlin Conservatory (where Nielson is Professor and Chair of Composition), likewise performs capably throughout, thoughtfully interpreting Nielson’s complex and highly nuanced scores with accuracy and vigor.

Given the dissonance and complexity of *Écritures*, its most remarkable feature is its accessibility. Nielson is not a composer experimenting with a novel musical vernacular, but one who confidently pursues his objectives with a strong awareness of his own logic. Although this logic may at times be unfamiliar, even bizarre, it is multifaceted, reasoned, and exceptionally consistent. Whereas the musical surface may be abstract, ostensibly to the point of estrangement, the outcome for listeners is quite the opposite: It is inclusive, dramatic, and highly expressive.

David Reminick



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Fred Lerdahl. Bridge 9191, 2006.

Music of Fred Lerdahl, Vol. 2. Bridge 9269, 2008.

Fred Lerdahl has garnered most of the significant awards and accolades that may be conferred on a U.S. composer of concert music, except for the Pulitzer Prize, for which he has twice been named a finalist. The two works for which he had been under consideration for that award, *Time after Time* (2000) and *Waves* (1988), are among the pieces that appear on two recent CDs from Bridge Records: *Fred*

Lerdahl and *Music of Fred Lerdahl, Vol. 2*. These discs offer a range of recordings representative of Lerdahl's orchestral and chamber works composed between 1981 and 2005. Included here are six new recordings as well as two rereleases of works that are no longer available from their original labels. Although these recordings do not include any of Lerdahl's vocal music or his three string quartets, they do provide a broad overview of the output of a significant and influential composer whose recorded music had previously been only sporadically available. Bridge Records has not only made U.S. music the central feature of its catalog, but also has consistently done so with superior production standards. Therefore, it is not surprising that each of the current discs presents high-quality audio production and includes a detailed booklet that contains program notes for each work, background on the performers and ensembles, and introductory essays describing Lerdahl's compositional world. Volumes 3 and 4 of this series are currently in the planning stages.

Situating Lerdahl's place in recent American music is not a simple matter. He has productively divided his time between composition and music theory for over twenty-five years, and his work in each of these fields has increasingly informed his output in the other. His initial encounter with Noam Chomsky's influential ideas about generative grammars led to a lengthy and fruitful collaboration with linguist Ray Jackendoff and eventually to a groundbreaking book, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*.¹ In that book and his subsequent individual efforts as a theorist, Lerdahl has continually sought to formulate music's hierarchical structures as a correlate grammar, separate from language, but equally capable of being rendered through rules about well-formed structures and listeners' preferences within those structures. These rules are designed specifically to describe how typical listeners organize their hearing of a musical surface. More ambitiously, his project has progressed from an initial focus on the relatively bounded domain of classical music and its codified structures, toward an ever more generalized depiction of the broader cognitive universals characteristic of listening that transcend both stylistic and cultural boundaries within music.

As a result of this research, Lerdahl has developed a variety of critical attitudes as a composer that make the task of placing his music into any specific category a rather difficult one.² Considering only the works on these two discs, one might reasonably speak of Lerdahl the "modernist" composer, or of Lerdahl the "tonal" composer, despite the usual antithesis between those two terms in recent debate among composers.³ "Tonal," for Lerdahl, refers above all to the primary

¹ Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

² For a succinct account of Lerdahl's concerns as a composer and the manner in which they have descended from his activities as a theorist, see Fred Lerdahl, "Composing Notes," *Current Musicology* 67/68 (1999): 243–51.

³ See, for example, the exchange between Lerdahl and fellow composer James Boros in *Perspectives of New Music* following Boros's unfriendly review of an issue of *Contemporary Music Review* dedicated to "the New Tonality": Lerdahl, "Note from the USA Regional Editor," *Contemporary Music Review* 6/2 (1992): 1; Lerdahl, "Cognitive Constraints on Compositional Systems," *Contemporary Music Review* 6/2 (1992): 97–121; Boros, "A 'New Tonality'?" *Perspectives of New Music* 33/1–2 (1995): 538–53; Lerdahl, "Tonality and Paranoia: A Response to Boros," *Perspectives of New Music* 34/1 (1996): 242–51; and Boros, "A Response to Lerdahl," *Perspectives of New Music* 34/1 (1996): 252–58.

organizational strategies that most listeners use to distinguish between relatively stable events of harmonic or metrical repose and those that produce tension through their relative instability. Through these strategies listeners are able to form a mental representation of a piece of music. Lerdahl's interests as a theorist lie in the ways that this representation is formed through innate cognitive capacities, rather than through acculturation or repeated exposure to a particular work. These "cognitive constraints," as Lerdahl has termed them, provide the basis for his own compositional systems, which are intended, in turn, to develop transparent and intelligible surfaces into which listeners may be able to hear deeply.⁴ This is not to say that all of his music is simply triadic (although certainly some of it is) or that his music is always metrically regular (although that characteristic, too, is a feature of at least those parts of his music where stability is intended). Lerdahl seems to intend a surface where a listener's capacities to process music as information, at least as it is understood through empirical studies that have been performed by cognitive psychologists, is considered of paramount importance. His observations about the relative "opacity" of the musical structures rendered by serial and twelve-tone procedures may be too easily misunderstood as a summary aesthetic judgment, and it is important to bear in mind that he remains aesthetically neutral as a theorist about such matters.⁵ As a composer, however, Lerdahl's systems provide the kind of redundant structures that allow a listener to follow his compositional processes as they become increasingly complex and unstable, and thus develop various expressive tensions to be subsequently resolved.

Lerdahl has given the name "expanding variations" or "spiral form" to the general technique that he has been using since his First String Quartet (1978). Of this technique he writes: "In expanding variations, any given variation is elaborated within the structure of the previous variation, yet how it is elaborated is not predetermined. Once the variation is realized, it in turn sets the framework within which the next variation evolves. The result is an open-ended process within well-defined constraints."⁶ Although Lerdahl's technique might easily be mistaken for something akin to Schoenberg's concept of "developing variations," his process actually generates broad formal regions along very different criteria than Schoenberg's preoccupation with developing the motive.⁷ In fact, the "well-defined constraints" that Lerdahl employs locally within each formal iteration situate his harmonic conception closer to the historical model of Paul Hindemith's *Craft of Musical Composition* than to any Schoenbergian framework.⁸

Time after Time (2000), which leads off the first CD, provides an especially clear example of Lerdahl's "spiral technique." Here a clear, stable idea is presented at the outset and then constantly recycles into ever longer, less stable iterations, before

⁴ Lerdahl, "Cognitive Constraints."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115–18.

⁶ Lerdahl, "Composing Notes," 245.

⁷ For examples of what Schoenberg meant (at least superficially with respect to the motive) when referring to "Developing Variation," see Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1967), 8–19.

⁸ In "Composing Notes," 247, Lerdahl explicitly invokes Hindemith's theory of harmonic fluctuation.

some repose is finally restored in the coda to the second and final movement. The musical surface is inflected by shimmering colors that one does not normally associate with the now standard combination of instruments known as the “*Pierrot-plus-percussion*” ensemble. The second movement presents a metronomic surface that stabilizes the surrounding events, which, in turn, diverge from it in ways that necessarily relate back to that pulse and thereby present themselves as less stable accretions to it. The layered effect of these accumulative points of tension and release are expertly navigated on this recording by the Columbia Sinfonietta, the virtuosic ensemble-in-residence at Columbia University, where Lerdahl teaches. This premiere recording by the Sinfonietta is indeed promising.

Waves (1988) is rereleased here from the earlier Deutsche-Grammophon recording by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. It, too, demonstrates Lerdahl’s spiral technique, although the initially consonant and propulsive surfaces suggest something closer to a baroque character that Lerdahl concedes is intended to evoke minimalism within his “anything but minimalist universe.”⁹ A recurring “horn call” punctuates the form, which yields increasingly complex digressions that are successively called back to the stable platform of the initial ideas. Orpheus is, here as always, spectacular.

The Oboe Quartet (2002), performed on this recording by La Fenice, is yet another example of Lerdahl’s spiral form. One is struck in this instance, though, less by the premise of a recirculating stable idea that grows in scope, than by the presentation of a set of variations with a fragmented refrain, all cast in a typically modernist idiom.

The first CD is filled out by a recording of *Marches* (1992) performed by the ensemble Antares. *Marches* shares a number of significant features with its predecessor *Waltzes* (1981), which also appears here in reissue on *Music of Fred Lerdahl, Vol. 2*. Both works initially were conceived during the early 1980s, although *Marches* was set aside for nearly a decade before completion. *Marches* and *Waltzes* each eschew the processes of growth through expanding reiteration that typify spiral form. Whereas *Waltzes* is cast as a sequence of a dozen distinct pieces, *Marches* proceeds as a single through-composed movement. Each work dwells extensively upon particular genres from the past, but to my ears, in a strictly philosophical manner. Specific allusions to other texts, though they may appear at times, seem to integrate so directly into Lerdahl’s own language that the intertextual connections to earlier composers seem especially abstract and difficult to fathom in terms of their actual meaning. Nonetheless, each work is substantial and expressive and fits convincingly within Lerdahl’s overall output.

The orchestral works *Cross-Currents* (1987) and *Quiet Music* (1994) are performed on the second disc by the Odense Symphony Orchestra under the direction of British conductor Paul Mann. The performances and the audio quality are crystalline, and each work reveals that Lerdahl is an effective and diversified composer for the orchestral medium. *Quiet Music* displays the metronomic musical surface that was apparent in the earlier orchestral work *Waves*, but now in a different context

⁹ Fred Lerdahl, program note to *Waves* (*Fred Lerdahl*, Bridge Records, Bridge 9191, 2006).

where the tempo is more relaxed and the dynamics are consistently attenuated to reflect the work's title. *Cross-Currents* shares with *Quiet Music* a process of overlapping the respective expanding variations so that they interact as simultaneous streams, but the effect in *Cross-Currents* is rather different because the overall character of the music is more varied: extroverted at times, inward at others.

Duo (2005) is the most recent composition to appear on these two discs. Although it uses spiral form in still more new and interesting ways, it is also a work whose surface seems most decidedly modernist, much more so than any of the other works presented here. The first movement presents its surface as an especially aggressive and agitated dialogue between the violin and the piano and is appropriately titled "Disputation." The *Duo* is dedicated to violinist Rolf Schulte, with whom Lerdahl has worked on numerous occasions. Schulte's unmistakable tone, vibrato, and idiosyncratic approach to his instrument is such a phonematic earmark of the uptown modernist recorded repertoire that one is not surprised to find Lerdahl's music adapting itself to Schulte's particular virtues as a performer.

These new discs from Bridge present an exceptionally clear picture of a composer whose work, although highly varied in many superficial respects, is unified by his consistent application of basic theoretical principles of organization as well as by his own ineffable expressive subjectivity. It is Lerdahl's expressivity, arising from his subjective experience as a musician, that imbues his music with its most attractive qualities.

Bruce Quaglia