

whole and performed individually as welcome additions to any concert program. Having conducted many of O'Connor's works, Alsop clearly has a feel for his style. The orchestra's performance is strong, and the recording quality complements the full scoring and open quality of the music.

The other work on this disc, Concerto No. 6 "Old Brass," was written while O'Connor was visiting a plantation in South Carolina built by Frank Lloyd Wright. He comments in his notes on the impact of the surrounding architecture and nature on each movement. O'Connor employs traditional tonal harmonies, repetitive melodies, and consistent motoric rhythms throughout the concerto. The sound is rich, and the music is accessible. O'Connor's performance is, as always, superb, and the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Joel Smirnoff provides a spirited accompaniment.

As in the *Americana Symphony*, the first two movements of the "Old Brass" concerto tend to focus on a single melodic motive. The short theme of the first movement is memorable, but at the same time it fails to hold the listener's attention for its entire eleven-minute duration. The second movement begins with a lovely new melody, followed a minute later by the theme from the first movement. Again, although the sound of the orchestra and soloist is wonderful, this movement, at just over ten minutes, feels like too much of a good thing. The final movement features the full virtuosic capabilities of O'Connor. Following five minutes of fugal material, he improvises a lengthy cadenza. Rapid-fire sextuplets, complex string crossings, crisp staccato, and lightning-fast scales flow from his instrument with ease. Even in the most challenging passages, his tone remains elegant, supple, and evocative. Compositionally, he again chooses to draw his melodic ideas for the cadenza from the first movement. An improvisation on the fugue theme would have offered greater variety.

This disc offers a welcome introduction to the music of O'Connor. With the *Americana Symphony*, he has created a modern symphonic work reminiscent of many of the orchestral works of Aaron Copland while adding personal touches of his own. For his fans, as well as interested musicians unfamiliar with him, Concerto No. 6 provides plenty of exposure to O'Connor's unique virtuosic playing.

Andy Carlson



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Lewis Nielson. *Écritures*. The Twittering Machine, Timothy Weiss, conductor. Centaur Records, CRC 2941, 2008.

The role of tone color as a compositional tool has evolved greatly over the last century. Once an element capable of shaping and enhancing a form, it is now, for many composers, an element from which form can derive. Whereas this progressive perspective has traditionally been more prevalent in Europe than in North

America (among such figures as Helmut Lachenmann and Salvatore Sciarrino), U.S. composers have increasingly embraced it; eminent among them is Lewis Nielson. Although Nielson's music is fertile in the domains of pitch, rhythm, and harmony, the contributions of timbre, articulation, orchestration, and instrumental technique are elevated beyond adornments on an already complete and functional object. They constitute the object and are as fundamental to its integrity as the more conventionally regarded conduits of musical content.

Nielson's new CD, *Écritures*, is a substantial three-movement cycle for chamber orchestra that uses as its genesis a single, symmetrical four-note chord. The composer speaks to his compositional concerns in the album notes, where he details the structure of his works as well as their poetic and literary influences (Paul Celan's poem "Anabasis," Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, Dante's *Inferno*, and others). For the casual listener, some of the musical terminology Nielson invokes may prove confusing; however, those versed in this vocabulary will find the more technical side of Nielson's discussion revealing about his processes: "highly abstract" transformations of sound across multiple levels of musical structure.

"Anabasis" (2004), the first and longest piece on the CD, begins with a violent introduction characterized by vicious, metallic clanging whose only moments of repose are filled with lingering dissonances. Only with the eventual entrance of the maracas does the texture finally soften, the glockenspiels and crotales yielding to the gentler tones of the vibraphone, the maracas evolving through a brushed tom into the cymbals. The winds then begin the first of five mensuration canons (canons that begin together but proceed at different rates) that are themselves separated by other discrete "refrain mensuration canons." Although the canons remain audible, the piece succeeds with or without recognition of their presence, due largely to the continual shifts in orchestration and the near constant activity of the instruments that do not actively participate in the canons. As the piece's rigorous architecture plays out, we arrive at the final canon: a grim modal chorale à la Ockeghem. Borne by the strings, it moves seamlessly to the winds, its incongruity made stranger by the feeling that somehow its arrival was inevitable and its ultimate destruction by the string section unavoidable.

"Of Flesh and Stone" (2005), the second and most recent of the "Écritures," is at once violent and cartoonish—like a horror film scored by Carl Stalling. Rapid glissandi cascade into and through each other; flutes and clarinets scream and wail; percussive jabs disrupt the surface, initiating drastic changes. Nothing is without consequence here: Every gesture, every sound evinces a reaction in some other realm, and yet somehow, remarkably, the disparate elements cohere.

The frailty and patience of the final movement, "Go (. . . go . . . go)" (2002) provides a welcome reprieve from the preceding two movements. Originating from the resonance of a cymbal scrape, delicate harmonics emerge in the viola, gradually blossoming from a single pitch into richer, more active harmonies along with (and as a result of) the rest of the ensemble. Although the action does, at times, flare up beyond the flashpoint, restraint is the status quo here: The sustained notes, trills, and glissandi that permeate the movement are chiefly carriers of potential energy. Given the extent to which Nielson maintains his distinctive musical environment, it is surprising when, in the wake of an enormous dynamic outburst, a tranquil

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*