

raW: Chamber Music by James Rolfe. Performers: Continuum Contemporary Music; Carla Huhtanen, soprano. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 16210, 2010. 1 compact disc (64:42). Contents: *raW* (11:08) – *Simon & Garfunkel & the Prophets of Rage* (9:57) – *Drop* (8:25) – *Revenge! Revenge!! Revenge!!!* (10:53) – *Freddy's Dead* (3:10) – *Devilled Swan* (6:47) – *Fêtes de la Faim* (6:27) – *Squeeze* (7:55). \$13.98

The Continuum Contemporary Music chamber ensemble and vocalist Carl Huhtanen present a survey of the chamber music of James Rolfe (b. Ottawa, 1961), who is one of Canada's leading composers of contemporary music. The works, which date from 1991 to 2004, demonstrate a number of Rolfe's staple techniques including a predilection for citation and a privileging of rhythm as a compositional parameter. The CMC Centrediscs production leaves nothing wanting and the disc comes packaged with a glossy English and French booklet containing ample programmatic notes.

The expanding and contracting rhythmic and melodic fragments that open *raW* (2003) allow the Continuum players to demonstrate their exceptional ensemble skills. In the liner notes, Rolfe describes the work as a filtering of J. S. Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto through Bob Marley's "War," Burning Spear's "The Invasion," and Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever"; he refers to each of these filterings as a distinctive movement. The changes in musical language that mark each movement are obvious as the funky, bass line inspired riffs of the opening section give way to a more delicate and articulate call-and-response between individual instruments. The piece finally transitions into a march-like mutation of baroque harmonic progressions that dissolve into the chromaticism of the ending. It is worth noting that of the eight tracks on the disc, three quote J.S. Bach, including *raW*, the contrapuntal miniature, *Freddy's Dead* (2004), and the hymnal march, *Squeeze* (1997).

Simon & Garfunkel & the Prophets of Rage (1993), for soprano, piano, and percussion, provides another example of Rolfe's preference for citation. The work is crafted from the juxtaposition of the Simon & Garfunkel ballad, "America," and the Public Enemy rap, "Prophets of Rage." The lyrical content of the two tunes is interwoven against a sparse and rhythmically disjunct instrumental backing that evokes the fragmentation and splicing of hip hop sampling. The interest of the work lies in Rolfe's juxtaposition of the sweetness of the ballad and the anger of the rap. However, at just under ten minutes, the work feels a bit long in places as Rolfe remains overly faithful to his generative material to the detriment of musical development. The introduction of somewhat gimmicky electronic sounds in the final two minutes of the work does little to help.

Rolfe notes that *Drop* (1999), for piano and violin, is "haunted by ghosts of violin sonatas past," and this is definitely evident. At the beginning of the work, the violin stands out with wide, dramatic melodic lines juxtaposed against a much more rhythmically and harmonically modern piano part. Eventually the violin submits to the machinations of the rougher-edged piano, joining in what becomes an increasingly intense texture of dissonance and close-interval double stops. The piece then gives way to a beautiful heterophonic texture with the violin and piano playing in near unison for a prolonged period. Following this respite the piece returns to some of the earlier material

to bring the form to a close.

Conceptualized by Rolfe as a kind of sequel to *Devilled Swan* (track six), *Revenge! Revenge!! Revenge!!!* (1995), for clarinet, cello, piano, and percussion, is titled after a line in the famous *Tintin* series of comic books. The work takes the simple motif of two chromatic scales moving inwards and crossing from the extremities of the upper and lower range, which is then manipulated through transformations of the rhythm, articulation, and contour of repeating fragments. Rolfe crafts an ebb and flow of tension and release through interjected pauses as well as subtle and effective changes in instrumentation and timbre. The work culminates in repeatedly articulated shots that bring to mind a skipping record overlaid with exercise-like chromatic runs before fading into an ethereal and effective coda. Clarinetist Max Christie's excellent control of his instrument stands out here as he executes particularly effective chromatic slides at soft dynamics.

Working from an 18th-century hymn tune by Timothy Swan, Rolfe scores *Devilled Swan* (1995), the predecessor to *Revenge! Revenge!! Revenge!!!*, for violin, cello, piano, and percussion. He opens the work with an alternating pattern of contemplative chorales and frantic and at times comedic chromatic syncopations, punctuated by shrill whistles and off beat percussion shots. As the seven-minute work unfolds, the styles blend and compress one another in a single drawn-out process until they become almost indistinguishable.

I particularly admired *Fêtes de la Faim* (1991), for soprano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano and percussion. With its text from Arthur Rimbaud's poem of the same name, the work opens with the fragmented text enunciated pointedly over the subtle drone of the clarinet and the sharp, interjecting attacks of the percussion and piano. This builds in intensity until the three-minute mark, when the winds and strings enter with sustained clusters that support slow and deliberate melodic fragments of two or three pitches in the voice. The percussive attacks in the piano grow less frequent until all that remains are haunting and ethereal harmonies in the ensemble supporting the simple and slow melodic variations of the voice. There are moments that recall Claude Vivier's writing in *Lonely Child* and similar works. The work's form follows a single transformative trajectory moving from the opening to the close. Carla Huhtanen's performance is impressive as she demonstrates both rhythmic precision and a controlled tone unspoiled by any unnecessary vibrato.

This disc, a wonderful snapshot of Rolfe's chamber music career, can be recommended to any lover of Canadian new music. Rolfe's predilection for transparent processes and forms, his use of rhythm and groove, and his tendency to cite familiar classical and popular repertoire also makes his music accessible to a wider audience. His chamber music would serve as an excellent introduction to new music for those who might be scared away by the more extreme examples of modernism.

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