



SAN FRANCISCO
CONTEMPORARY
MUSIC PLAYERS

“In the Laboratory”

Jan 20, 2017

Program Notes by Robert Kirzinger

SFCMP in Concert

Richard Festinger, *Careless Love* (2016) *SFCMP commission featuring Daniel Cilli, Baritone.

Baritone, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello, piano

Michael Pisaro, *ricefall* (2010) (17’)

16 performers

Kate Soper, *Door* (2007) (10’)

Soprano, flute, tenor sax, accordion, electric guitar

György Ligeti, *Chamber Concerto* (1969) (19’)

Flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, tenor trombone, harpsichord/Hammond organ, piano/celeste, violin, viola, cello, double bass

This concert brings a modern classic in Ligeti’s Chamber Concerto as well as a world premiere work for ensemble and voice from San Francisco mainstay Richard Festinger. These are balanced by Michael Pisaro’s percussive-pure *ricefall* and Kate Soper’s voice-and-ensemble *Door* in a widely varied program suggesting any number of surprising mirrorings, contrasts, and conversations among these pieces and composers.

Richard Festinger’s *Careless Love*, an SFCMP commission, is his first piece for solo male voice. Having decided on a vocal work, the composer felt the baritone voice was the best fit for setting these A.E. Stalling texts, and his somewhat unusual ensemble—clarinet/bass clarinet, horn, piano, and string trio—follows the voice into that generally lower register. The collection of timbres is just different enough from the standard “Pierrot” group (featuring flute but no horn) to suggest intriguingly different possibilities.

Festinger (b.1948) was born in Newton, Massachusetts, but grew up in the Bay Area, where he has been based for most of his career. He attended the Berklee College of Music as a jazz guitarist and began his career in that realm. He earned a bachelor’s degree from San Francisco State University and went on to study composition at the University of California, Berkeley, where he worked with Andrew Imbric. His music often exhibits the gestural punch and physical virtuosity of jazz (that energy probably both a cause and an effect of his compositional personality), but he also has a fascination for traditional techniques of counterpoint. Both sides of the conversation meld in *Careless Love*.

Since 1990, Festinger has served on the faculty of San Francisco State University, where he also directs the Morrison Artists Series. He was a co-founder of the Earplay new music group in the mid-1980s. He has received commissions from the Fromm, Jerome, and Barlow foundations, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and many others; in 2014 he received a Koussevitzky Foundation commission for his substantial String Quartet No. 3, composed for the Afiara Quartet. Other recent works include *The Moon Is Hiding*, an E.E. Cummings setting for soprano and cello to be premiered next month by Noe Valley Chamber Music, and *Cummings Settings*, commissioned by Lucy Shelton and the Resonant Bodies Festival. His music is featured in three portrait recordings, on the CRI, Bridge, and Naxos labels. Upcoming projects include a piece for the Dutch reed quintet Calefax and a work for the San Francisco-based ClimateMusic Project. Festinger has written one previous piece for SFCMP: *Smokin’ with Cocuswood* for oboe, string quartet, and piano, premiered in 1993.

Richard Festinger was drawn toward these poems of Alicia Stallings (b.1968) for their wit and humanity as well as for their use of formalist techniques, as he details below. The piece is in three movements, with the first two (“Fibs” and “Olives”) of the four poems set together. The charming title *Careless Love* is the composer’s, suggested by Stallings’s “Accident” as well as the old familiar blues song (though there’s no musical allusion to the song here). The baritone setting is natural in its prosody, while the ensemble writing, frequently highlighting individual instruments in soloistic fashion. Note, too, that the ensemble as a whole establishes a substantial presence above and beyond the immediate context of the poetry setting.

Of his *Careless Love*, the composer writes:

A year or so ago, for a period of a few weeks, I read an enormous amount of poetry, looking for texts I might want to set to music, reading which gradually coalesced around themes having to do with the darker side of love, from the melancholy to the disastrous. As one might imagine, there are a great many poems on such themes—themes we all know from personal experience, a subject matter as universally human as any that exists. As I sifted through poems, I had to eliminate many that I would have loved to set, by poets as diverse as Robert Herrick, W.B. Yeats and Jill Essbaum. But when I first read A.E. Stallings’ “Another Lullaby for Insomniacs” and “Accident Waiting to Happen” I knew immediately that I had to set them, so the cycle *Careless Love* came to focus on her poetry, so remarkable for its intelligence, humor, irony and elegance.

The music flows from the poems: from their emotional climate and from the prosody of the language. In the first movement, the “Fib” is a neo-formalism in which the number of syllables in each successive line of poetry is taken from successive terms in the Fibonacci series, an arithmetic expression of the Golden Mean; so the music needed to be structured along similar lines, in its phrase lengths and proportions. “Another Lullaby for Insomniacs” is a Pantoum, a poetic form where the 2nd and 4th lines of each stanza become the 1st and 2nd lines of the next, finally turning back on itself at the end. To duplicate this structure musically would have been too much—the repetitions in the text suffice—so another musical form is superimposed, a binary form that also articulates the poem’s stanzaic structure with interjections focused on the different colors of the instrumental ensemble. The setting of “Accident Waiting to Happen” takes its musical inspiration from the 5th line of the poem—“I’m bright and unstable”—and simply strives to capture the breathless and ever-tightening tumultuous rush of the poem. —RF

A member of the Wandelweiser Composers Ensemble and an inheritor of interests and traditions of John Cage and Christian Wolff, **Michael Pisaro** (b.1961) is the founder and curator of the Gravity Wave recordings and media label. Since 2000 he has been on the faculty of the California Institute of the Arts, where he teaches composition and experimental performance practice. From 1986 until he joined the CalArts faculty he taught at Northwestern University. Like Richard Festinger, as a young man Pisaro also played guitar, though mostly classical and rock, and he had a strong knowledge of the classical tradition. While still a student, he encountered an outdoor performance by John Cage at Lincoln Center, which led to his investigations into new musical philosophies. He began composing more with long silences and was encouraged by his discovery of Kunsu Shim’s work. It was Kunsu Shim who introduced Pisaro’s music to Antoine Beuger, one of the original members of the loose Wandelweiser collective, which formed in 1992. Pisaro was invited to join the collective following year.

Wandelweiser’s radical stance aims to reposition compositional rhetoric via music that insists on the ascendancy of silence, taking Cage’s *4’33”* as a touchstone. Wandelweiser music is often slow and contemplative, causing the listener to focus intently on what are often tiny, subtle, or short-lived sounds, although ultimately there is great range of affect from work to work even within these constraints. Also characteristic of this approach are severe limitations or constraints in musical materials and/or processes. Pisaro’s work is performed worldwide and he remains active as a performer. His music, composed for a wide variety of media, is published by Edition Wandelweiser, and there are numerous recordings of his work.

The original version of *ricefall*, for sixteen or multiples of sixteen players, dates from 2004; there have been other versions of the piece, including a version in which the individual parts are recorded on multiple tracks, and a version that layers instrumental and sine-tone sounds on top of the rice/object sounds. Pisaro arrived at his materials through experimentation. The players are deployed in a 4 X 4 grid, which the composer sees as a kind of landscape, and each of the sixteen squares of the grid contains a medium on which the rice will fall. There are eight different types of material: metal, wood, stone, paper, hard plastic, rice, dry leaves, and ceramic or glass; each appears twice within the grid but the two instances should be sonically different (e.g. two types of metal). There are also eight different levels of performance intensity, ranging from single grains dropping every few seconds to continuous sound, a rainfall-like stream of rice.

Opening and closing with a minute of silence, *ricefall* is in sixteen one-minute sections, with each player working through a different ordered series of intensities that visits all eight levels twice. Each section has a different average aggregate intensity. I mention these details to suggest one way of listening to the piece—one might focus visually on a single performer to see how these intensities play out, which also helps to focus the hearing. Or one

might “zoom out” to get the effect of the whole. In addition to its sonic dimensions, the piece is a communal, even ceremonial action, heightened by the possibility of its being presented by non-professional performers. As an audience member, one might feel a sense of group participation, of shared experience with the onstage players.

Virtuoso vocalist, writer, and composer **Kate Soper** (b.1981) has become known for theatrical and quasi-theatrical works pushing the limits of vocal and instrumental possibility. Her work explores the interstices and continuities among sound, words, written and spoken language, and varies forms of communication; between semantic meaning and expression; between sound and music. Although most her works involve language and the voice, she is an incredibly deft and imaginative composer for instruments as well, as *door* will attest.

Among Soper’s major works is *I Was Here I Was I*, a ninety-minute piece with text and stage direction by Nigel Maister and composed for Alarm Will Sound, which was premiered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in June 2014. Her *Ipsa Dixit*, an evening-length, modular series of works for voice, flute, violin, and percussion, was composed over several years, premiered movement by movement, and given its first full performance this past fall at Smith College by Soper and Wet Ink, of which she is co-director. (Soper is the Iva Dee Hiatt Assistant Professor of Music at Smith.) Her opera *Here Be Sirens* was premiered in January 2014 with the composer as one of the three vocalists.

In her subject matter Soper is often drawn to mythological and legendary subject matter, and especially narratives examining the role of female protagonists. A devotee of language for its own sake, she has a fascination for writers with pithy, intensely poetic voices, such as the Canadian Christian Bök, from whose *Eunoia* she took the text of her *Helen Enfettered*. Her *now is forever 1: Orpheus and Eurydice*, with text by Jorie Graham, was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra. Recently with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, who commissioned the work, she premiered *The Ultimate Poem is Abstract*, on a text combining the composer’s words, quotes by other writers, and Wallace Stevens’s titular poem. Soper is currently at work on an opera based on the medieval *Romance of the Rose*, projected for spring 2018. Her *Voices from the Killing Jar* for voice and ensemble with electronics was recorded by the Wet Ink Ensemble for CD, and the Mivos Quartet released an album including *Nadja* for soprano and string quartet. Her music is published by Schott/PSNY.

Having studied piano as a child, Soper studied at Rice University, the Tanglewood Music Center, and Columbia University, where she earned her doctorate working with Mario Davidovsky, Fred Lerdahl, and Fabien Lévy. She has also worked at IRCAM and attended the Aspen and June in Buffalo festivals. She has been a Radcliffe Institute Fellow as well as a recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, among other honors. She studied voice with Lucy Shelton and Pamela Dellal, and also trained in the Indian Carnatic tradition.

Soper wrote *door* in 2007, immediately after joining Wet Ink, and its performers led to her choice of flute, saxophone, electric guitar, and accordion, the latter due to pianist Eric Wubbels’s temporary fascination with that instrument. *door* was the first piece of concert music she wrote for herself to perform. Always attentive to the possibilities of texts, Soper came across Martha Collins’s suite “Door” in an issue of the *Paris Review*. “What drew me in was the sparseness and delicacy—it just seemed very musical to me, lightly orchestrated and contemplative. I was particularly captivated by the icy beauty of the third poem, which basically just has three words in it: ‘shell,’ ‘my hand,’ ‘pearl’—I felt powerfully how deep connections emerged between these words in my mind just from her simple (but expert) act of selecting them and placing them in proximity, which is a common compositional procedure (if you replace ‘words’ with ‘sounds’).”

As an explorer of language herself, Soper isn’t entirely content to let Collins’s simplicity stand alone: she elongates, breaks apart, and spotlights different sonic fragments within words, melding the singer’s voice with the purely instrumental roles, for example at the start of the first song with the word “Sounds.” The prevailing delicacy of sound in the instrumental writing parallels the aerated language of these poems. A rare exception is the instrumental writing of “(outside my office window),” which is the one song of the six in which voice and ensemble seem to have different opinions. (The expressive marking here is great: “mechanical; slightly idiotic.”) The free-jazz-like cadenzas at the word “door” in the fifth poem are the set’s clear climax; the ensuing song “(I love you)” distills the work’s essence to its purest.

From our present vantage point, it’s hardly possible to overstate the impact György Ligeti (1923-2006) had on music in the past fifty years, but much of that impact was the result of his recontextualizing influences via his own imagination and tendencies. His experiences with electronic music led him to new instrumental textures; encounters with John Cage’s thinking resulted in ideas about theatricality in concert works, and somewhat later American minimalism in the music of Steve Reich and Terry Riley combined with explorations of African

drumming and the piano etudes of Conlon Nancarrow in launching the long last phase of Ligeti's musical style in the early 1980s. Even through clear changes and evolutions in his style, Ligeti maintained certain predilections and identifiable approaches from his earliest works—the *Musica ricercata* for piano and the String Quartet No. 1, for example—through the works of the end of his life. The Violin Concerto (1990/93), as if to underline this continuity, explicitly quotes *Musica ricercata*. Throughout his career, he frequently used one work as a springboard for the next, deepening and re-examining ideas both specific and general.

Ligeti famously cited a number of childhood experiences in explaining the origins of his musical world, which we can state most directly as “clocks” and “clouds” (and in fact *Clocks and Clouds* is the title of one of his pieces, a 1973 work for twelve women's voices and orchestra). The “clocks” idea, heard most clearly in the Chamber Concerto's third movement, derives from the composer's memory of a Gyula Krúdy story of a house full of clocks. Its “cloud” counterpart was Ligeti's childhood dream in which he couldn't return to bed because the room was full of densely packed spider webs. The idea of a highly complex network made up of single strands (i.e., melodic lines or sustained pitches) recurs again and again in Ligeti's work, beginning with the groundbreaking orchestral work *Atmosphères* and also found, variously articulated, in the Chamber Concerto (as dense, sustained harmonies or as rapid, overlapping figures).

Ligeti wrote the Chamber Concerto for 13 instruments while living in Berlin in the late 1960s, composing it for the Vienna-based ensemble “die reihe” and composer-conductor Friedrich Cerha, who premiered the first three movements in May 1970. The complete four-movement work was given October 1 of that year at the Berlin Festival. The ensemble for the Chamber Concerto is a mixture of the expected and the unusual: flute, clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), horn, trombone, harpsichord (doubling Hammond organ), piano (doubling celesta), and solo strings, and the requirement of independent virtuosity makes the work's title especially apt. In his pieces leading up to the Chamber Concerto Ligeti had become interested in using audible melodic lines, which here emerge from dense, constrained contrapuntal networks in definite, clear passages, an effect the composer would continue to refine in the Double Concerto and ensuing works.

The opening of the Chamber Concerto echoes the beginnings of both the Cello Concerto (1966) and the Ten Pieces for Woodwind Quintet (1968): atonal counterpoint leading to a dramatic unison. Textures become light and frenetic, and a broad atonal unison melody appears near the end of the movement. The second movement is timbrally quite different, its harmonic world more transparent, short, lyrical melodic passages defining the first part, and an intense “thick line” melody high in the treble in the second half. The third movement's “Movimento preciso e meccanico” marking echoes the Second String Quartet's “Come un meccanismo di precisione,” both harking back to the Fluxus-influenced 100-metronome experiment of *Poème symphonique* (1962) and forward to the multi-tempo aural illusions of the Horn Trio, Piano Etudes, and other works. The final Presto features difficult, fast melodic lines in conversation, each instrument briefly establishing its own character. Following a long, static tritone dyad, the concerto ends with a few brief flurries.

Robert Kirzinger