

Neue Bilder: Music of James Harley. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 16010, 2010. 1 compact disc (61:37). Performers: New Music Concerts, Robert Aitken, artistic director. Contents: *Neue Bilder* (8:36) – *Portrait* (11:23) – *Épanoui* (12:19) – *Tyee* (16:20) – *aXis* (12:52). \$13.98

New Music Concerts (NMC) has been championing new music for over forty years, throughout the world, but most regularly in Toronto. Ten of its eleven recordings are compilations of the works of a single composer. This most recent one features the work of James Harley, who holds a position in digital music at the University of Guelph. Harley has been associated with Robert Aitken and the NMC for over twenty-five years, the span of the works on this recording. Thus a variety of compositional approaches and different instrumental combinations is evident. In the notes accompanying the disc, Harley explains the background of each piece, as well as its prevailing compositional aspects.

Neue Bilder (1991), a work for eight instruments, takes its inspiration from Mozart and an art exhibition in Salzburg. Harley describes his compositional technique as “iterative nonlinear mathematical (chaos) functions.” Since Harley uses other techniques (the use of the Queen of the Night aria as “a kind of *cantus firmus*”) to hold the work together, the soundscape of the work does not emerge as entirely chaotic. Superimposed on this structural framework is also a variety of colour manipulation, where instruments perform in atypical registers. Whether intended or not, there are notable tonal aspects to the harmony, although the randomness of successive, unrelated “statements” in the rhythm achieves the chaos that Harley intends.

Portrait (1984) is a three-movement work for solo flute, “framed” as Prelude, Portrait and Postlude. In contrast to the tonal flavor of *Neue Bilder*, the sound effect of *Portrait*, while not strictly serial, has that sense to it. By design the two outer movements are less lyrical than the central Portrait itself; this is achieved primarily by increasing the tempo, more frenetic rhythmic “patter,” and a shrill tone quality. Here again, a nonlinear rhythmic approach pervades the work. Aitken’s outstanding performance of the work emphasizes its angularity, yet helps to unify the multiplicity of thematic ideas.

Épanoui (1995), a trio for flute, cello, and piano, builds (“blooms”) from a starting single note (actually from several successive central notes that assume prominence as the work progresses). This composition has some lovely colour effects, and the stylized bird songs near the conclusion (which also frequently bloom from a single note) are charmingly effective. Although this work also is built upon a series of statements, the slower tempos and sustained sound provide a more connected sense to the rhythmic structure.

The conceit of the duet, *Tyee* (1995), is that it highlights the different kinds of colour offered by the bass flute and a variety of percussion instruments. These sound experiments range from multiphonics in the flute writing to a mix of regular and home-made percussion instruments. Owing to the extended length of this work, this creates a significant challenge for the performers, since it is difficult to sustain colour experimentation and nonlinear rhythm at the same time. However, in some ways this is the most thoughtful performance on the disc, primarily because of the speech-like performance skills of the performers, and their ability to sustain a sense of architecture during the silences.

From the pseudo-chorale chords of the opening, through the array of layered and overlapping textures that follow, *aXis* (2006), a work for thirteen instruments, is the most voluminous and dissonant work on the disc. Harley intends it to be “celebratory,” in homage to his teacher, Xenakis. The more noticeable use of motive and repetition in the thematic material helps to unify this work.

Even though these recordings cover a quarter century, the quality of the sound is strong throughout the disc; the centrality of colour experimentation which is essential to Harley’s music is served well by this consistency of technological excellence. The notes written by the composer are essential to an informed appreciation. He states quite rightly, for example, that the elements of structural design of *Neue Bilder* remain inaudible unless they are pointed out. Most commendable about this disc is that the various performers of the NMC, heard in many ensemble combinations, are consistently outstanding. Harley’s association with the NMC has been fortunate, as they bring a sensitivity to his music that is always apparent. On the whole, the works that use smaller ensembles appear to be more effective, in that they seem to be able to hold the rhythm together more coherently.

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