

Magister Ludi: Music of Gordon Fitzell. Performed by Ensemble contemporain de Montréal; Véronique Lacroix, artistic director. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 20414, 2014. 1 sound disc (60:01). Contents: *Magister Ludi* (11:14) – *violence* (10:29) – *Flux* (15:35) – *Pangaea ultima* (10:58) – *evanescence* (11:45).

Recorded by the Ensemble contemporain de Montréal under the direction of Véronique Lacroix, *Magister Ludi* showcases five works by the high modernist composer, Gordon Fitzell. Fitzell's musical language is gestural and abstract, and his scores combine both traditional and graphic notation, the latter providing opportunities for musicians to improvise. His interest in altered perceptions of time—e.g., thinking of it less as a continuum and more as a succession of “now moments...with no beginning, middle, or end”—is central to the music on this disc.¹

The title track, *Magister Ludi*, scored for a flute octet (pairs of piccolos, sopranos, altos, and basses, played here by L'Ensemble de flûtes Alizé) plus cello, and conceived “in the spirit of Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*,” is “intended as an audacious expression of the...seemingly eternal presence of the universe.” Constructed in a single, long arc, it begins with a gradual unfolding of brief, foreground, instrumental figures over a background of sustained low sounds, all emanating from, and returning to, silence. Creating a sense of time on a vast scale, the opening zen-like stasis slowly gives way through accretions of intensity, texture, volume, tessitura, and dissonance, to an intense middle section of superimposed layers of sound (Fitzell calls them “strata”) before slowly dissolving into the silence that “has always been.”

Pangaea Ultima is another musical study on what Fitzell calls “experiential time”—in this case, time on the scale of continental drift. The title refers to the supercontinent that may form about 250 million years from now, according to calculations based on the directions and rates at which the earth's tectonic plates are shifting. This is another work in arc form, moving from silence to agitation and back, as the composer tries “to reflect the rifting and patching movement characteristic of the supercontinent cycle.” From a calm opening with vibraphone and flute, it builds to a central section of frenetic bass clarinet activity over piano clusters, presumably depicting the raw energy of plate tectonics. About three-quarters of the way through, an atmospheric passage, with treble glissandi resembling whale calls in the strings and electric guitar, sets up the slow subsidence to silence.

Flux experiments with “perceived variances in the flow of experiential time.” Two contrasting musical events open the work: one an agitated linear element played by unaccompanied clarinet; the other a massive, dissonant, vertical sonority played by the ensemble. Though Fitzell doesn't allude anywhere that I could find to Edgard Varèse's concept of sound “objects” imbued with mass and depth, there seems to be some common ground shared by the two composers. Besides the concept of sound strata mentioned above, Varèse employed similar juxtapositions of static blocks of sound against dynamic solo



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1. All citations are taken either from the CD booklet or from a [podcast interview](#) of Fitzell produced by SOUNDLAB.

lines in several works (e.g., the beginning of *Intégrales*). Separated by ever shorter silences, the durations of which were determined by applying a retrograde Fibonacci sequence, Fitzell's two musical gestures eventually merge (the "flux" in question) into a single entity, breaking down the earlier dichotomy and achieving what the composer terms "an elongated state of now" by combining elements of both into a single "sound cloud" as the work continues.

Much of the work, *violence*, is surprisingly calm and subdued, and the listener once again gets the impression of events taking place very slowly. Unpitched sounds (e.g., key-tapping, air blown through instruments, bow-bouncing) create an unsettling "subtext of violence" around the edges of quiet pitched material played by piano, clarinets, and strings, over long "pedal" tones sounding on crystal glasses. Solo, cadenza-like passages on flute, cello, and violin take place at intervals throughout the work. At about the two-thirds point, aggressive interjections by cello and cymbals lead to extreme piccolo and clarinet dissonances over piano, followed by a brief assertive flurry from the violin over repeated gong strokes, but these soon pass, and the work closes peacefully.

Evanescence, the only work on the disc to include an electro-acoustic element, adds pre-taped and live, interactive electronic sounds to the *Pierrot Lunaire* instrumentation used in *violence*, on which *evanescence* is based. Calling them "sister" works, Fitzell has essentially added the electronics to the existing score of *violence*. This new element lends a long-breathed continuity and sonic foundation to the work that Fitzell achieves to a lesser extent in the other works on the disc by using crystal glasses or by elevating silence to a structural level.

Throughout the disc, Fitzell creates vivid tone colours through pitch-bending, multi-phonics, quarter-tones, slow vibrato oscillations, flute whistle tones and "breathy" passages, air blown through instruments, fingers slapping tone holes, and flutter tonguing, among other extended techniques on the wind instruments. The string techniques include multiple stops, harmonics, pizzicati, upward and downward glissandi, bowing *sul ponticello*, and bouncing or "grinding" the bow on the strings.

Fitzell is fortunate to have the Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal championing this music. Every performance on the disc is extremely well done. Individual parts are executed with great skill and intelligence, and the collective results are superb. Véronique Lacroix is to be congratulated for the discipline exhibited by the ensemble, and for the obvious care she and her musicians took in interpreting each work. The recording engineer and producers are also to be commended for the exceptionally clean, balanced pickup, and for the impeccable distribution of sounds in the final mix.

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