

array summer 2004

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The International Computer Music Association Array

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**Eric Chasalow's
Left to His Own Devices
New World Records
*reviewed by Ivica Ico Bukvic***

The 20th century has now closed its doors and we have plunged into a new era of uncertain eclecticism. Yet, regardless of the newly-established historical status of the past 100 years, we are still hard-pressed to condense the elapsed time and the artistic innovations it brought in a coherent and unifying fashion. Perhaps the only apparent thread that permeates throughout the last century is the continuous effort of timbral emancipation, for which the stage was set through Schoenberg's breakaway from tonality, maturing of the percussion choir heralded through the works of Varese and Stravinsky, experimentation with new timbres foreshadowed by the Italian Futurists, as well as Cage's questioning of sound, silence, and structure, but perhaps most importantly through the efforts of the electro-acoustic music composers and researchers.

At the beginning of this new 21st century we are finally ready to accept timbre as an equal partner to the other musical elements which have constituted the backbone of the traditional Western music for centuries. In such environment, the music that is not any more concerned with existentialism and validation, but rather art itself can finally flourish. In such environment we are finally free to

combine our traditional notions with our newly-acquired technological prowess and seemingly endless timbral diversity. In such environment we are at last free to write music the way we want to, mixing styles and media without being hindered by the political and traditional aesthetic boundaries.

Of course, I am perhaps overly optimistic in my view of the current state of affairs in the ever-changing torrent of the contemporary arts scene. Nonetheless, the fact that nowadays we see more of such stylistic and instrumental cross-breeding than ever before is certainly difficult to contest. In this ever-changing current we, the artists, struggle to stay afloat. In this struggle, some of us happen to be the followers, slowly adapting to the trends of our times and/or expanding the paths that have been set before us. Others are the ones who lead, the ones who foreshadow the things that are to come.

Eric Chasalow's CD *Left to His Own Devices*, clearly establishes him as one of the leaders of our times. Most of the works on the disc predate this century, yet offer a wondrous fusion between distinct styles and mediums, nullifying many of the preconceived limitations and/or political borders beset by the ongoing struggle to recognize electro-acoustic art as an equal to the tradition-abundant world of acoustic music. In addition, the polarities between the works themselves reveal Chasalow's skillfulness in both the electronic and acoustic realm. Hence, one by listening will be exposed to the complexity of Babbitt, timbral integration of Davidovsky, the colorful spectra of jazz idiom, wit and skill of Beethoven and Brahms, improvisatory power of Miles Davis, with a few sprinkles of John Cage and Elliott Carter on top. The CD offers 9 distinct works, some of which are multi-movement endeavors. Rather than supplying an exhaustive journey from cover to cover, I will opt to entice you with just a couple of Chasalow's masterful creations that I personally found to be the most captivating, and hopefully in the process of doing so intrigue your musical taste buds strongly enough to make you explore the rest of the works under your own initiative. The first track on the CD, *In a Manner of Speaking*, opens up dramatically with a morphed sound of a clarinet that closely resembles an aboriginal didgeridoo and then quickly dissolves into its primal form. From there on, the piece quickly expands into a texture that bears strong resemblance to Davidovsky's *Synchronisms* series with the quasi-pointillistic incursions of both the acoustic and electronic counterparts. In this colorful conversation between the "real" and "fantastic," both the tape and clarinet coexist in a struggle to maintain timbral, textural, and rhythmic balance. Amidst the sea of colorful but relatively short phrases a texture surfaces, captivating listener's attention through perpetual introduction of new sonic flavors, many of which bear associations with the real-world sonic phenomena. As such, we are exposed to sounds of vintage synths, meta-banjoes, and various other pitched, but largely timbrally undefinable sounds. The resulting textural richness certainly exhibits the technological gap that separates Davidovsky's endeavors of the 60's and 70's and Mr. Chasalow's creation that was written right before the turn of the 21st century. Yet, the sonic palette remains true to its predecessor and the composer manages to generate a sound that is neither

plagued by the technological poverty of the mid-20th century, nor the over-saturation of our digital age. Perhaps the only gripe that I could associate with this work is its brevity, as I could have certainly enjoyed a longer work. On the other hand, such attribute can also be seen as a compliment to the author's modesty, rather than a sign of a frail design (something that, in my humble opinion, we ought to see a lot more, especially on the various conferences that are populated with marathon-like concert programs).

Yes, I Really Did, composed in 1998 populates the second place on the CD and bears a unique contrasting aesthetic to just about every other work in the collection. Not only is its medium completely acoustic, but even more so its aesthetics is built upon the *Common Practice* tradition, exhibiting influences of great historical figures such as Beethoven and Brahms. This piano trio is a warped reflection upon the past, as if the composer took a concave looking glass in an effort to read one of the early Romantic chamber works. Musical phrases and gestures boasting a relatively traditional architectural design of substantial rhythmic regularity, continuously infuse the overall texture, but they do so lacking one of the critical *Common Practice* elements — a tonal center. Chasalow utilizes evasive harmonic motions in order to avoid tonal implications, therefore generating a sound that closely resembles a piece from the Schoenberg's atonal period (albeit disregarding the Schoenberg's vigorous pursuit of avoiding even the feeblest hints of tonality, such as octave doublings). Composer's prowess with the traditional manipulation of the material truly shines in this single-movement work. The exchange of ideas among the players is suggestive of a meaningful introductory conversation that soon plunges into an energetic superimposition of pulse-driven ideas. However, despite the obvious allusions to the things past, Chasalow manages to overshadow the apparent influences with his own compositional character. It is also impressive to notice that the work exhibits none of the contemporary performance techniques as well as utilizes the oft-treaded post-Modern approach, yet nonetheless, sounds fresh and appealing.

Dream Songs is an ambitious five-movement work for tape (posing as a tenor solo) and orchestra, commissioned by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. If I had to describe it in one sentence, I would say that it is as if you took Stockhausen's *Gesang der Junglinge* and mixed it with the late 20th century post-tonal orchestral idiom, resulting in a Mahler-like orchestral Lied of the 21st century. An amazing balance between the vocals and the orchestra dominates the work. Chasalow manages to exhibit yet another one of his talents through masterful orchestration coupled with a convincing tape counterpart. Through author's masterful hands, both the acoustic and electro-acoustic worlds are merged together resulting in a convincing and structurally sane work of a mass appeal. All five movements, although somewhat different in their character, convey the same restless mood that is in part driven by the poetry contained in the tape part. This comes as no surprise as Chasalow used five poems from the same-titled collection written by John Berryman. Although personally I am not

a big fan of the *sprechstimme* and/or other semideclamatory text interpretations and incantations, in this case such treatment seems to work rather well, in part due to masterfully processed tape snippets that shroud the text and its respective vocalizations. The composer's boldness is apparent in his superimposition of a powerful sound of the traditional orchestra and the rich timbral possibilities of the electro-acoustic medium. Naturally, orchestra predominantly resides in the realm of soft dynamics in order to ensure the legibility of the text. Even so, the piece is an impressive endeavor in every aspect and is probably one of my favorite works on the CD.

Finally, what would this review be without touching upon the piece the whole collection was titled after? *Left to His Own Devices* is an old-school electro-acoustic piece with subtle processing of the Milton Babbitt's voice and various organ-like sounds that appear to be simple extrapolations of the FM and AM syntheses, mimicking Babbitt's now defunct RCA synthesizer. Most of the processing involves pitchbending without resampling, some soundstretching, as well as generation of nebulae of pitched material. In that respect, the piece attempts to retain the character of the times when Babbitt's infatuation with the RCA synthesizer was at its peak. Perhaps the most captivating aspect of the work is its micro-programmatic treatment of the text, as well as the overall storyline that in part appears to be Babbitt's semi-autobiographical journey. Several quotes of Babbitt's instrumental music filter through the work disguised in the Chasalow's synthetic interpretation. The piece also consciously reflects upon the Babbitt's last work utilizing RCA synthesizer that he never managed to finish due to unfortunate defacement of the expensive machine by unknown vandal(s). Composer's attention to intricate details in an attempt to recreate the RCA synthesizer, coupled by the subtle processing of the material yet once more speak of both his strong grasp of the technology as well as its tasteful deployment.

Many other remarkable works are a part of this collection, such as the *Suspicious Motives* with its intricate balance between the timbrally-rich chamber ensemble and tape, *Crossing Boundaries* that sonically resembles *Left to His Own Devices* while encompassing a much broader subject, *In the Works* as yet another purely acoustic work with a contemporary jazz-like aesthetics, as well as *Out of Joint* improvisatory piece for trumpet and tape, and *And It Flew Upside Down* that pays yet once more a tribute to both Davidovsky and Babbitt. The richness of the medium as well as styles offered herein consequently leaves something for every musical taste to appreciate. As such, *Left to His Own Devices* is a successful forward-looking compendium of Chasalow's creations that boldly integrates the combination of the traditional acoustic music idiom and the modern electro-acoustic art.