

"Roger Reynolds is not easy to characterize," begins the biographical note that accompanies the Japanese program to Tadashi Suzuki's production of Chekhov's early play, *Ivanov*. And he is not. There is Roger Reynolds the distinguished Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer of concert music. There is Roger Reynolds, teacher and theorist, professor at the University of California at San Diego and author of books and articles on music. There is Roger Reynolds, experimentalist, a composer with training in both music and engineering and a pioneer in computer music. There is the Roger Reynolds who was among the founders of the legendary avant-garde ONCE Group in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the 1960s, and participant in innovative and multimedia theatrical situations. "I believe in as wide a range of musical involvements as is feasible given the reality of life," the composer says.

This CD presents what appears to be two of the less often heard, most extreme and hardest to categorize side of Reynolds. The music for *Ivanov* is collaborative, utilitarian music for the theater. *Versions/Stages* is abstract experiment, music inspired by the desire to investigate compositional phenomena. Both are works seemingly far removed from Reynolds' concert music, and, additionally, they reveal yet another facet of the composer--his quarter-century contact with Japan. Reynolds himself even observes that this recording "is not eh center of what I think of when I think of myself." Still, these are works unmistakably Reynolds'.

Indeed, what makes Reynolds' music rich and interesting is that the various wings of his musical house are not entirely compartmentalized. Even at his most experimental, as in *Versions/Stages*, Reynolds retains a grounding in the world of concert music. Unwilling to give up what he calls the vitality of natural sound, he uses the computer as a means to explore in depth the properties and hidden beauties of the sound of a wave or a flutist breathing into her instrument. That hyper-sensuality of sound often finds a visceral equivalent in both Reynolds' concert and theater music, just as his theatrical side can enliven the experiments. Moreover, both formal abstraction and a frequent underwriting poetic content (Reynolds has worked extensively with, or been inspired by, texts by Beckett, Ashbery, Shakespeare, and the classical Greek theater) characterize nearly all of Reynolds' diverse musical productions. On this program, for instance, bits of experimental music find their way into the theater while concert excerpts are fodder for the computer lab.

Then there is Reynolds' connection with Japan, which he has visited regularly for a quarter century, and where he has close ties with composers and artists, including Tadashi Suzuki, Japan's leading experimental director. Reynolds says that he and Suzuki had long wanted to work together, but it was only at the premiere of Reynolds' *Symphony (Myths)* in Tokyo in 1990 that the director approached him after the concert and said, "Now!"

A collaboration with Suzuki--who, as Reynolds notes, doesn't just use music but rather absorbs it into the very fiber of his work--is unusual. Suzuki told Reynolds that there were only two or three specific musical things he sought. He wanted to use a Japanese pop tune, he wanted some religious music, and he wanted some primitive music. "That's all he said," Reynolds recalls. "I didn't even know what play he was considering, and I found this very perplexing. I'm a composer who likes to start from a very specific seed and make everything come emotionally out of the sensibility of that beginning. So how could I do anything without that beginning?"

What Reynolds ultimately decided upon was the idea of opposition, looking at the religious and the primitive as if they were polar. The religious music, which sounds like a processional for grand reed organ but primarily consists of computer-processed violin sounds, would be, Reynolds says, "extremely organic, archaic, maybe just a little bit vulgar. Something that one could see as manipulative." He decided in contrast that the primitive music, with the obvious drums, would be "aggressive, unpredictable, and with a cataclysmic shattering impact."

And so the music became a series of opposing pairs. "Trumpet Dream" is a montage of recorded trumpet material stretched and circulated in space, while "Piccolo Dream" fragments piccolo material into small points of sound with strobe-like intensity. "The Scream", which is an extract from Reynolds' *Voicespace*, contrasts with "Monogatari" (Stories), the Japanese word stretched out to about three minutes. The center of the suite, "The Brides", with a Beckett-like text by Suzuki for Japanese actors and a chorus of actors, might be thought of as a contrast with the Japanese pop tune (not included here).

For his production of *Ivanov*, Chekhov's early, iconoclastic play about a late nineteenth-century decadent Russian intellectual, Suzuki made all the characters except the dissolute protagonist and his dying wife figments of Ivanov's imagination. Moreover, Suzuki places them in baskets, turning them into basket men and women who, as Reynolds puts it, become like crustacean thoughts, aberrations of a man's troubled intelligence.

Reynolds also gives a vivid example of Suzuki's unconventional application of music in the processional that accompanies the initial appearance of the "Religious Music": "From the wings come a row of young women in bridal dress but wheelchair bound, propelling themselves with their left leg only, the right tucked under so as to give the appearance of amputees. I had included some gongs and tam tams crashing to add a certain majesty to what I imagined as the processional, but at these tam tam crashes, the brides' legs shot up in a kind of SS kick. Then, after they were spread across the stage, at one of these alarming moments, they suddenly thrust both legs up into the air in a "V" formation, bent back over their wheelchairs and limberly extended their legs in a cross between a swimming crawl and lascivious insects of some unimaginable sort. This was hardly what I had in mind as *religious* music. But the conjunction of action and music was just stupefying."

The genesis of *Versions/Stages* couldn't have been more different from that of *Ivanov*. Reynolds says that as a student at the University of Michigan, he had heard, over and over again, that form and content in music were inseparable, but he wasn't sure he really believed it. Finally, years later, with the help of computer technology, he decided to test the thesis, to see "if you could actually hear a form apart from the sounds that illuminate it or give it life."

The process involved the use of computer algorithms that allow the composer to extend and enrich materials by fragmenting and recombining them in ways analogous to the practice of canon. In addition, he can slow down sounds without affecting their pitch, thus creating a slow motion that reveals something of the sounds inner working. For each of the five pieces, Reynolds expanded one minute of recorded sound into a five-minute movement with *identical* form. He employs structures he calls "windows of opportunity," which establish fixed positions in both space and time to define the form, and then allows the different source materials to project themselves through this potential in characteristic ways.

For the source material, Reynolds proceeds from highly organized sound to that with very little differentiation of character (although he does not choose such a rigid "order of complexity" in the collection offered here). The first is composed cello music, an excerpt from Reynolds' *Cello Concerto*, which is comprised of seven short phrases written to strict proportions. The second features a Japanese actress performing a fiery speech as Dionysus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. The third is Suzuki's Beckett-like text found in "The Brides" from *The Ivanov Suite*. The fourth is a recording of waves hitting the beach. The fifth is a delicate waterfall, a trickling sound that barely changes at all.

Initially, the formal pattern conflicts greatly with the highly organized cello music and the organized sounds of language (language which is, by the way, used here for its sonic character, not its textual significance). But gradually, as the sonic material loses character, the form alone takes on more prominence, becomes more "audible." "And so I decided," Reynolds concluded, "that form is indeed separable from content." Reynolds also discovered, although he was willing to accept the reverse if it had been the case, that the experiment was also music.

(A note on the stereophony of this disc. The music for *Ivanov* was created in an eight-channel format that mirrors the actors' movements; *Versions/Stages* is a four-channel work. In both cases the sound has been folded into a wide stereophonic sound stage for the CD.)

—Mark Swed

Mark Swed is a critic who writes for *The Wall Street Journal*, *the Los Angeles Times* and several music magazines. He is also working on a biography of John Cage for Poseidon Press.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Ambages. Harvey Sollberger, flute. Nonesuch HB 73028.

Blind Men. Peabody Concert Singers and Chamber Ensemble, Gregg Smith, conductor. CRI SD 241.

Coconino...a shattered landscape. Arditti Quartet. Gramavision R2 79440.

From Behind the Unreasoning Mask. Miles Anderson, trombone; Tom Raney, Roger Reynolds, percussion. New World Records 80237.

Personae; The Vanity of Words; Variation. Philip Larson, voice; Aleck Karis, piano; Janos Negyesy, violin; SONOR, Rand Steiger, conductor. NEUMA 450-78.

Ping; Traces. Roger Reynolds and Yuji Takahashi, piano; Karen Reynolds, flute; Lin Barron, cello; Paul Chihara, harmonium and percussion; Alan Johnson, electronics. CRI SD 285.

Quick Are the Mouths of Earth. The Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg, conductor. Nonesuch H-71219.

Transfigured Wind IV. Harvey Sollberger, flute. NEUMA 450-74.

Voicespace (Still, A Merciful Coincidence, Eclipse, The Palace). Philip Larson, Edwin Harkins, Carol Plantamura, Deborah Kavasch, Linda Vickerman, voices. Lovely Music VR 1801-2.

Whispers Out of Time; Transfigured Wind II. John Fonville, flute; members of SONOR; San Diego Symphony Ensemble, Harvey Sollberger, conductor. New World Records 80401-2.

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Cagne, Cole and Caras, Tracy. *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers*. New Jersey: Metuchen, 1981.

Reynolds, Roger. "John Cage and Roger Reynolds: A Conversation." *The Musical Quarterly*, October 1979; 573-594.

- "A Jostled Silence, Contemporary Japanese Musical Thought." *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 30, Nos. 1 and 2, Vol. 31, No. 2.
- *Mind Models, New Forms of Musical Experience*. New York: Praeger, 1975.
- *A Searcher's Path: A Composer's Ways*. Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn, College, CUNY, 1988.

Roger Reynolds Electroacoustic Music

The Ivanov Suite (1991)

(Created for Tadashi Suzuki's version of the play by Chekhov)

- 1- I Trumpet Dream (4:06)
- 2- II The Scream (3:09)
- 3- III Religious Music (8:16)
- 4- IV The Brides (1:32)
- 5- V Piccolo Dream (4:01)
- 6- VI Monogatari ("Stories") (2:17)
- 7- VII Primitive Music (8:28)

Versions/Stages (1988-91)

- 8- I Cello Dream (5:08)
- 9- II Dionysus (4:59)
- 10-III Waterfall (5:04)
- 11- IV Farewell Cult (4:56)
- 12- V Ocean (5:00)

Sound sources:

John Fonville: piccolo
Edwin Harkins: trumpet
Philip Larson: vocalist
Regina Mushabec: cello
Janos Negyesy: violin
Steven Schick: percussion
Kayoko Shiraishi: as Dionysus
Members of the Suzuki Company of Toga

Texts:

Euripides
Tadashi Suzuki

Notice: The playback levels of materials on this disc are critical to their proper representation. Some selections are to be heard at very assertive levels (particularly the "Primitive Music" and "Ocean"). If the listening level is set for a full, but not too loud level for the opening cut, the remaining levels should follow as intended.

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