

The vast array of compositional, performative, and listening practices that have grown out of the phenomenon we can collectively refer to as “electronic music” have, in some way or another, engaged with an inherent and essential provocation: the coexistence of “artificial” technology with more “organic” resonances of musical tradition and human experience. Perhaps the foremost perception is that technology, and all of the various aesthetic possibilities it represents, settles squarely within the realm of the “unnatural.” Certainly when compared to the decidedly human qualities of acoustic instrumental and vocal practices, it can seem somewhat foreign. Yet in reality, this is only one side of the equation—or, more accurately, one vantage point within the larger spectrum of what is “real” and what is not. For just as technology has made possible new approaches to musical sound and structure, it has also opened windows into the natural world, into raw gesture and organic harmony, and past these into the complex aesthetic realm of our inner being. A truly symbiotic relationship between technology and acoustics can alert us to the fact that what we might think of as “natural” tastes are, in fact, just as “artificial” as processes of digital signal manipulation and re-synthesis.

For Rand Steiger, technology is such a vehicle into the beyond. The five pieces presented here span a decade of work in a variety of media, from solo to small mixed ensemble, some including live processing and others “purely” acoustical. But networks of commonality between the works are quickly apparent—Steiger’s keen ear for deep, shimmering textures, sweeping timbral migrations, delicate nuances of intonation, and rich harmonic refrains unite the music into a *grande oeuvre* of flexible interdependence between the natural and the unnatural, with technology forming the essential basis for resonance and coalescence.

The opening work, *Résonateur*, points directly to Steiger’s ability to fuse organic and artificial forces. Commissioned in 2005 by Ensemble Sospeso to honor Pierre Boulez on his 80th birthday, the work pays homage by deploying patterns of reverberation in which entrepreneurial solo instruments have a resounding influence on other members of the ensemble by proposing materials that become dispersed and developed throughout the group. The idea of resonance is carried further by the use of live electronic processes that supply additional reverberation and delays to the work’s acoustical forces. All of this creates an iridescent quality in which our perceptions of the “natural” and the “unnatural” are thrown somewhat off balance. Rather than simply bolstering the acoustical elements of the music with sustaining effects, the technology actually brings the original acoustic sound closer to “natural” sonority than is naturally possible by utilizing beatless, just intervals both to harmonize melodic lines and to provide the harmonic backdrop of *Résonateur*’s gestural refrains.

Perhaps the clearest example comes by way of the keyboard instruments. The seeming artificiality of sampled, rather than acoustical, harpsichord actually facilitates a tremendous harmonic flexibility: the sampled sonorities played by the keyboards are constantly retuned with a computer, allowing the pitch content to exist in a just relationship with the fundamental tone of each phrase. In other words, the “unnatural” rendering of a “natural” sound allows it to overcome the inherent artificiality of temperament and achieve the “more natural” sonority of just intonation. Technology transforms the organic into something still purer yet also decidedly unfamiliar and unique, blurring the distinction between harmony and timbre and giving the work its otherworldly sense of color and depth.

A Menacing Plume (2011), the most recent of the five works, continues to explore the richness of nuance and sonority inherent in overtone series harmonies and live signal processing, although with a slightly different interpretation of what is technologically possible and how this might be implemented expressively and structurally. From the start, the piece presents an enormously vivid sonic palette, yet one that does not have the same artificial sparkle as *Résonateur*—here the electronic component plays a more supportive role, with many of the same techniques deployed but subtly interspersed with the enlarged ensemble (three winds and three strings, compared to two) to create what the composer calls “a halo of transformed sound.” In many ways, this serves to reinforce a variety of specialized acoustical techniques—rendered with spectacular accuracy by Talea—including an array of delicate percussive sounds in the strings and winds, playing in extreme registers, and bowing a pair of specially tuned vibraphones that allow for microtonal pitch content within the percussion parts (again drawn from the just intervallic relationships of an overtone model). The detail and fragility of acoustic sounds are afforded an unusual degree of stability and sustain thanks to the artificial resonance of electronic processing. It is a beautiful landscape without any rough edges, making it as mysterious as it is captivating.

It is also a landscape of immense textural depth and variety. Numerous sections follow the opening collection of luminous timbre-harmonies, led by different instrumental groups and incorporating different processing techniques (some hovering just above the music’s surface, others entirely submerged). Each is the product of ongoing harmonic exploration as well as highly detailed gestural writing for the instruments—at times working in coordinated groups, at times making a kind of very complex counterpoint, evolving from simple textures into more densely populated ones. All the while, the electronic processes continue to support and occasionally interact with the acoustical forces, contributing to textural complexity with delays and harmonizations, coloring individual lines with just harmonization and timbral filtering, and generally acting as a resonating space for the work’s myriad expressivities. Eventually, however, the technology begins to assume a more menacing role as the music gradually accumulates density and momentum, leading to the formation of a tremendous surge of electronic sonority—a wall of sound quite divorced from the lively acoustical forces that have nonetheless fueled its existence. The instruments continue to project individual layers of material until they are swallowed up and the electronic surge is all that remains.

Once this has dissipated, the final section of the work brings acoustical sonority into a surprisingly new light. Just after the 14-minute mark, the strings enter with an outline of the same harmonic material heard at the very beginning of the piece, only now our experience of the sound has drastically changed: the amazing, radiant sonorities of the opening have lost their “halo,” for what we hear are the raw, fragile sounds of human beings playing difficult techniques on unadorned acoustical instruments. The rough edges that the electronics have so carefully concealed are now laid bare, and the result is in its own way quite lovely (the imperfections of acoustical sonority being, after all, its greatest source of richness), yet also foreign somehow, and ultimately devastating. This brings the piece to a very particular conclusion: *A Menacing Plume* is a programmatic work, reflecting on the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil platform on April 20, 2010 and depicting events following in the wake of the disaster—the “plume” here refers to the mass of oil released into the ocean. Steiger writes that the piece “begins with an image of the vast undisturbed surface of the sea as the blinding, bright morning light first arises, followed by a flock of seabirds that soar above. Then layers of material emerge though all the instruments,

inspired by the diversity and complexity of undersea life. Finally, an ominous darkness enters and ultimately squeezes out all life.”

Many of Steiger’s works draw upon natural concepts as models and source materials (whether programmatically or perhaps more poetically), and in so doing create scenarios of emulation in which we can hear a symbiotic dialogue between the artificial and the organic—the imitation of nature in art, but also the manipulation of nature in art, so that at times it is the one and at times the other that claims our attention. Other works grow out of similar dialogues with memory. *Elusive Peace* (2000) is the earliest work in the present collection, and in some ways perhaps the most personal, built from the composer’s physical memory of the very raw and direct musical language of rock drumming. The entirely “natural” rhetoric of drumming patterns is, nonetheless, filtered through the rather artificial medium of notation, in which nebulous gestures are quantized and have to be read and re-created by a performer with a similar yet different vocabulary of learned motions—and all this at a decidedly unnatural rate and density. This, of course, changes the quality of the materials drastically, especially when one considers the percussion, performed with stunning energy and accuracy by Ben Reimer, as an opposition to the more “natural” sonority and pacing of the amplified cello materials played so expressively by Leanne Zacharias (here electronic processing serves only as a source of balance between the two parts).

The work is a manifestation of multiple layers of conflict, representing worldly political struggles just as it introduces the seemingly disparate sound worlds of the percussion and the cello: the main sonic feature of the cello is its ability to sustain, and recurring low open-string sonorities point to a vast resonance far beyond that of the percussion, whereas the driving characteristic of the percussion (reinforced with so many triple rim shots) is the agile rhythmic nature that grows out of its comparatively dry collection of sounds and capacity for quick articulation. Defining coalescence as a trajectory toward “sameness,” we will not find such a result in this piece, but in subtler, perhaps more artificial ways, the instruments do indeed enter into fleeting moments of coordination and symbiosis. There are numerous aspects of conflation (the cello gradually developing into a very rhythmically aggressive cadenza, the percussion concentrating its array of swift attacks to draw out and sustain the sonority of a single instrument), but the main source of coalescence in the work grows out of the convergence of the two instruments into a contrapuntal network of give and take. The result is a kind of unity-in-cooperation that blossoms into moments of greater depth before submerging once more beneath the surface of quickly migrating percussion patterns and slowly evolving cello timbres.

Elliott’s Instruments also conjures up fleeting images from the past, with more than a nod to the music of Elliott Carter. Commissioned in 2010 for Richard Pittman and Boston Musica Viva in honor of Carter’s 100th birthday, *Elliott’s Instruments* pays homage to over sixty years’ worth of Carter’s own chamber music by referencing, in chronological order, all of his works composed for flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, and cello (the instrumentation of Steiger’s piece) since 1948, sometimes uniquely and sometimes as recurring refrains. “I see the piece as two simultaneous conversations,” Steiger writes, “one among all these pieces, and one between Carter and myself. There are a few brief quotations, but mostly the piece consists of passages that are reminiscent of, yet not identical to, the sources.” Steiger also notes that he has always been drawn to the complex polyphony in Carter’s music, which “grows out of the simultaneous presence of multiple, contrasting musical streams,” a resounding influence readily heard in Steiger’s other works.

Historically, ideologies and practices of polyphony have been the source of a fair amount of aesthetic conflict, viewed off and on as an “artificial” textural complexity that interferes with the more “organic” qualities of line and harmonic progression. At the same time, however, it might be argued that counterpoint, with its vast framework of nested relations that keep a multitude of different forces in balance, is perhaps the most nature-like form of musical expression known to us. Given the differences in style between Carter’s angular gestural language and Steiger’s fluid sweeps, the meeting points between these layers are quickly brought to the forefront of the musical experience, creating a shimmering network of provocation and resonance. This can also be traced back to notions of filtering and manipulation, although—unique among the works collected here—*Elliott’s Instruments* relies on no electronic processes of any kind (showcasing, perhaps more than any of the other pieces, the enormous technique and musicality of the Talea Ensemble).

Nonetheless, here we encounter once again the sense of moving past the “natural” and into the familiar-yet-unfamiliar world of the “more natural.” In the same way that electronic processes formed a halo of sound around the acoustical origins of sonority in *A Menacing Plume*, in *Elliott’s Instruments*, manipulations of tone color via acoustical scoring patterns move the music in and out of Carter’s chromatic palette and Steiger’s “natural” overtone sonorities, creating a subtle and exciting interplay between contrapuntal coordination and timbral fusion. As the piece nears its close, examples of color doubling become more prominent, although the basic conversational characteristics of “angularity vs. sweep” continue their dialogue until they blossom and combine into the intensity of the piece’s final thirty seconds, in which Carter-like gestures appear with quintessential Steiger overtone voicings, as though Carter’s iconic language had passed through the filter of some kind of live acoustical processing and emerged with a spectral halo.

The last work, *awhirl* (2008), returns not only to the beguiling “artificiality” of live processing, but also to the rich harmonic progressions built from spectral content that have come to be so familiar over the course of these collected listening experiences. Here, the intimacy of a solo piano with the subtle reinforcement of electronic processing brings everything full circle and renews the currents of resonance and coalescence between acoustical and electronic sources. In achieving this dynamic balance, Steiger once again transports us beyond the veil of natural acoustical properties: the glimmer of digital processing is always present, sometimes gently assisting the piano in its quest for spectral resonance with a wash of reverberation, sometimes causing it to grow into something much more than it could otherwise be through surface enrichments such as spatialization and filtration effects. As the music unfolds, the luminous array of lines and chords manifested in the grand, sweeping trajectories of Steven Beck’s brilliantly iridescent playing begin to function essentially as timbre, a notion that finds a natural home amidst the other recurring elements in Steiger’s work: primacy of harmonic progression, fluidity of gesture, richness of texture, vividness of color—a perfect blend of the artificial and the organic.

—Daniel Tacke

Daniel Tacke is Assistant Professor of Music at Arkansas State University, where he teaches composition, music theory, and harpsichord performance.

Rand Steiger's music has been commissioned and performed by many ensembles, including the American Composers Orchestra, Ensemble Intercontemporain, International Contemporary Ensemble, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, San Diego Symphony, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he served as Composer Fellow. Soloists he has composed for include Matthew Barley, Maya Beiser, Claire Chase, Daniel Druckman, Peter Evans, Alan Feinberg, George Lewis, Susan Narucki, and Steven Schick.

Many of Steiger's works combine orchestral instruments with real-time digital audio signal processing and spatialization. They also propose a hybrid approach to just and equal-tempered tuning, exploring the delicate perceptual cusp between a harmony and a timbre that occurs when tones are precisely tuned. Some examples of works deploying these techniques include: *Ecosphere*, developed during residencies at IRCAM and premiered by the Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris; *Traversing*, written for cellist Mathew Barley and premiered by the Southbank Sinfonia in London; *Cryosphere*, premiered by the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, and the *Coalescence Cycle*, a set of six new works that was recently premiered in New York by the International Contemporary Ensemble.

Steiger has also conducted many premieres and recordings. His compositions and performances are recorded on the Cambria, Centaur, CRI, Crystal, Einstein, EMF, Koch, Mode, Neuma, New Albion, New Dynamic, New World, Nonesuch and Tzadik labels.

After serving on the Faculty of California Institute of the Arts from 1982 through 1987, Steiger joined the Music Department at U.C. San Diego. In 2009 he was a Visiting Professor at Harvard University. For further information please see <http://rand.info>

The **Talea Ensemble** has given many important world and U.S. premieres of new works by composers including Pierre Boulez, Tristan Murail, Olga Neuwirth, John Zorn, Unsuk Chin, Rand Steiger, Beat Furrer, and Fausto Romitelli. Talea has performed at the Lincoln Center Festival, Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt, Wien Modern, Contempuls, Newport Jazz Festival, La Ciudad de las Ideas (Mexico), Art Summit Indonesia (Jakarta), and the International Contemporary Music Festival (Peru). Radio broadcasts of performances have been heard on ORF (Austria), HRF (Germany), and WQXR's Q2. As an active ambassador for new music Talea has joined forces with the Austrian Cultural Forum, Consulate General of Denmark, Korean Cultural Service NY, Italian Cultural Institute, and the Ukrainian Institute. Assuming an ongoing role in supporting and collaborating with student composers, Talea has served as ensemble in residence at Harvard University, Columbia University, Stanford University, Ithaca College, Cornell University and New York University. Talea has recorded works on the Living Artists label, Gravina Musica, Tzadik, and New World Records. For more information, please visit www.taleaensemble.org

James Baker is Music Director and conductor of the Composers Conference at Wellesley College, director of the Percussion Ensemble at the Mannes College of Music, and conductor of the New York New Music Ensemble. He is guest conductor of the Slee Sinfonietta at the Institute for 21st Century Music in Buffalo and also with Speculum Musicae and the Talea Ensemble. He has led concerts across North America, Europe, and Asia at festivals including the Beijing Modern Festival, Monday Evening Concerts, US Library of Congress, and the Transit Festival. He has collaborated with composers on numerous world and American premieres including John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Earle Brown, Charles Wuorinen, Mario Davidovsky, Hans Werner Henze,

Roger Reynolds, Hans Abrahamsen, Milton Babbitt, Donald Martino, Elliott Carter, Stefano Gervasoni, David Felder, and George Crumb. An active composer of electro-acoustic music, Mr. Baker won a Bessie award for composition for dance. Past commissions include works for Dance Theater Workshop New York, the Lyon Opera Ballet and Netherlands Dance Theater with his longtime collaborator, choreographer Tere O'Connor, and at EMPAC at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

American pianist **Steven Beck** continues to garner acclaim for his performances of a wide range of music. Highlights of the 2013–14 season include performances with the Alabama Symphony, recordings of Elliott Carter's late piano works for Bridge Records, and a performance of Messiaen's final work, *Concert à quatre*, with the New York Youth Symphony.

Canadian percussionist **Ben Reimer** has a Doctorate in Music from McGill University, Montréal. His main focus of research and performance is exploring how the drumset, traditionally an improvising instrument in popular music, has emerged as a solo instrument in Western art music. Ben was the drumset soloist for two concertos by Nicole Lizée: Triple Concerto for Power Trio and Orchestra and *The Man with the Golden Arms*: Concerto for Drumset and Orchestra. He has commissioned drumset solos by composers such as Lukas Ligeti and Nicole Lizée, and is featured on the CD *This Will Not Be Televised*. www.benreimer.com

Canadian cellist **Leanne Zacharias** is a dynamic soloist, interdisciplinary artist, and performance curator blazing a trail in the post-classical era, collaborating with composers, visual and video artists, poets, architects, choreographers, and musicians of all stripes. On the faculty at the Brandon University School of Music, she also leads the Correction Line Ensemble and contributes to the Odyssey Works performance project. Recent performances include the FastForwardAustin and X-Avant New Music Festivals, International Cello Festival of Canada, Ottawa Chamber Music Festival, Austin's New Music Co-op, Winnipeg's Warming Huts Art & Architecture competition, and with songwriters Christine Fellows, John K. Samson, and The Mountain Goats.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

13 Loops. New York New Music Ensemble. Included on *New Electro-Acoustic Music*. Centaur CRC 2338.

Double Concerto. Aleck Karis, piano; Steven Schick, percussion; SONOR Ensemble. New World Records/CRI NWCR 652.

Ecosphere: Music for instrument and electronics. EMF Media 078. (CD/DVD)

Trio in Memoriam. Aequalis. New World Records 80412-2.

Woven Serenade. Included on *Für Wolfgang Amadeus*. Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Donald Crockett, conductor. New World Records/CRI NWCR 669.

All pieces (except *Elusive Peace*) originally recorded in January 2013 at Oktaven Audio in Yonkers, New York: Ryan Streber and Rand Steiger, producers; Ryan Streber, engineer.

Elusive Peace recorded May 11, 2012 in Studio A, Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Montréal: Scott Levine, producer and engineer. Additional editing and mixing followed in January 2014 at U.C. San Diego Department of Music: Joseph Kucera, engineer.

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RAND STEIGER (b. 1957)

A MENACING PLUME

Talea Ensemble

80747-2

1. *Résonateur* (2005) 7:01

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute; Arthur Sato, cor anglais; Steven Beck, Stephen Gosling, keyboards; Matthew Gold, Alex Lipowski, percussion; Yuki Numata Resnick, violin; Chris Gross, cello; James Baker, conductor; Olivier Pasquet and Rand Steiger, digital audio signal processing

2. *A Menacing Plume* (2011) 16:32

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute, alto flute, piccolo; Arthur Sato, oboe, cor anglais; Rane Moore, clarinet, bass clarinet; Steven Beck, piano; Matthew Gold, Alex Lipowski, percussion; Yuki Numata Resnick, violin; Elizabeth Weisser, viola; Chris Gross, cello; James Baker, conductor; Miller Puckette and Rand Steiger, digital audio signal processing

3. *Elusive Peace* (2000) 14:12

Ben Reimer, drum set; Leanne Zacharias, cello

4. *Elliott's Instruments* (2010) 12:11

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute, piccolo; Rane Moore, clarinet, bass clarinet; Steven Beck, piano; Alex Lipowski, percussion; Yuki Numata Resnick, violin; Chris Gross, cello; James Baker, conductor

5. *awhirl* (2008) 7:57

Steven Beck, piano; Rand Steiger, digital audio signal processing

TT: 58:13