

Judging from his track record to date—winner of the Gaudeamus Prize (2008), the Rome Prize (2010–11), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2012), and recipient of increasingly prestigious commissions, most recently from the Fromm Foundation at Harvard University (2013)—one might expect **Huck Hodge** (b. 1977) to be well along in years, or at the very least at mid-career or so. But in fact he's not yet forty, still in the junior professorial ranks at the University of Washington in Seattle—and, clearly, just getting started. The works on this CD, written over a period of half a dozen years, display a breadth of conception that is refreshing to encounter in such a young composer while also indicating the process of rapid development that has characterized his trajectory so far.

Certainly, the music is engaging on a very immediate level: many of the sounds are strikingly new, not only in themselves but in the originality of their combinations. You may never before have heard the melodica, for example, as a concert instrument; you have definitely never before heard it subjected to live processing in ensemble with an amplified string quartet. In his efforts to incorporate timbre integrally into compositional method, rather than relegating it to its traditional role of “color,” Hodge is hardly alone among composers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries: such diverse figures as Gérard Grisey, Helmut Lachenmann, and George Crumb readily spring to mind. Hodge's music, however, does not sound especially influenced by any of them: many of the novel performance techniques incorporated into his scores are designed to negotiate pathways between definite pitch, indefinite pitch, and noise that seem never to have been traversed before, by anyone. The “card bow,” for instance, a credit card with a heavily rosined edge that is applied vigorously to the wound strings of a piano, when heard in ensemble with electronically processed sound blurs all sorts of boundaries: not only between pitch and noise, but also between live and recorded sound sources.

Even more important to Hodge than the immediacy of sonic impression, however, is the *idea* that gives rise to a piece in the first place, which he speaks of as the “extra-musical”: not for the sake of constructing some kind of program, but rather as a matter of “uncovering some essential formal or expressive quality that can be reconstituted in music,” as he put it in a recent conversation. The sources of such ideas are as various as his compositions: literature, philosophy, visual art, even the natural world have all served in this capacity at one time or another. As will become clear from the notes that follow, all four pieces on this CD evince, in dramatically different ways, the power of the extra-musical to serve as a kind of generative spark.

In a certain sense, access to this power has freed up Hodge's compositional technique. In his earliest work as a composer, by his own account, he relied upon strict advance planning, with exact numerical proportions set for many dimensions of the eventual piece. An essay written in 2008, “Evocative Morphology,” speaks of a “continuum” between directionality and non-directionality and the importance of controlling one's position on that continuum, changing from moment to moment (or not) as the piece progresses. As time has gone on, however, Hodge has seen less need to exert this kind of strictness and now characterizes his approach as “more intuitive.” With this loosening seems to have come the understanding that structure, in the sense of conveying a linear narrative, is of paramount importance—and that the non-directional aspects, rather than representing an alternative mode of compositional procedure, “may only be implicit.” Quite possibly as well, coming to terms with structure in this fashion (as a framework) may have made feasible the occasional employment of what Witold Lutosławski termed limited or controlled chance techniques, generally taking the form of repeated “cells” of notes or gestural indications.

Hodge's compositional incorporation of the extra-musical is illustrated vividly in the initial impetus for the earliest of the pieces on this CD, *Out of a Dark Sea* (2006, revised 2007), for eight players, commissioned by the Stony Brook Contemporary Chamber Players and premiered by them at the Tenri Cultural Institute in New York City, under the direction of Eduardo Leandro, in October 2006. A visit to Montauk, on the extreme eastern end of Long Island, in the dead of winter occasioned a walk on the beach at night. Montauk is practically deserted at that time of year, and out on the beach there was no light at all. Besides finding the experience distinctly eerie, Hodge, as he describes his excursion in a prefatory note to the score, noticed that

with each wave came little grains of sand that shined an intense blue light for a short time and then would die out . . . The raw visual beauty of this image—of a vast and utterly dark sea endlessly dissolving into scattered points of light—was striking and seemed to suggest an interesting musical metaphor. Throughout this piece a variety of wave-like and pointillistic musical structures interact in antithesis and synthesis with each other as do dark and bright instrumental and electronic timbres. The piece also explores this metaphor through what Nietzsche might call a principle of individuation by means of a process of musical rarefaction spanning the spectrum noise–timbre–pitch–motive–theme.

*Out of a Dark Sea* falls into four sections of widely varying length. (1) Low, menacing sounds dominate, but arpeggiative gestures in the harp and piano occasionally rise out of this darkness. Although the intent is not particularly programmatic, it is clear that this opening sets the scene, devoid of light except for the points of blue phosphorescence, at the edge of the ocean at night. Performance directions such as “Rolling, like waves on the ocean” provide further evidence that the title of the work is meant to evoke a certain physical setting. The alternations between low pitches and occasional higher-frequency noise (some of the latter emanating from the computerized electronics included in the score) also offer a convincing analogue to the rumble of the surf and the hiss of water advancing and retreating on the sand. (2) By about one-fourth of the way through the piece, the steadily more evident presence of the high woodwind parts (flute and clarinet) has drawn the ensemble as a whole into a strikingly higher tessitura. The gentler character of this section, eventually emphasized in the passage marked “Dreamy, with rubato,” leads, roughly at the midpoint of the work, to (3) a lengthy cadenza for solo harp. (4) The music from here to the end comes across as one long, unbroken statement, which is initiated with the piano joining the harp, trading overlapping, cascading and descending gestures that come to sound almost canonic in their coordination. Overall, this final section is marked by increasingly obvious rhythmic coordination between the instrumental parts in various groupings, culminating in the closing minute or so in literal rhythmic unisons involving the entire ensemble.

*Alêtheia* (2010–11), for an ensemble of eleven players, was commissioned by Muziek Centrum Nederland for the 2011 Laboratoire Instrumentale Européen; the premiere was given in Paris by Insomnio and the Ensemble Aleph in April 2011. The piece came in part out of Hodge's meditation upon the philosophically contrasting views of Parmenides and Heraclitus—the former insisting upon truth as an unseen reality that is unchanging, the latter interpreting the nature of reality as constant flux, the evidence of which is ever present to our senses. The Greek word of the title means, roughly, “truth,” in the sense of that which is disclosed or unconcealed—as investigated at length by Heidegger in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*. As explained by Hodge in conversation, in his piece the essentially diametric opposition between the two ancient

philosophies is translated into metaphors for qualities of time, expressed in terms of duration, timbre, and harmony. At any given moment in the piece, one or more elements are held static, while others are mobile: for example, in the opening minutes of *Alêtheia* a great deal of timbral fluctuation is heard within a basically static harmonic framework bounded by the pitches C and F-sharp. These static/mobile identities, however, are always subject to change, whether sudden or gradual. One very gradual change, becoming ever more evident as the piece progresses, is the emergence of a melody from material that is, at the outset, distinctly unmelodic. About three-fourths of the way through the score, a distinctly continuous strand—arguably not yet quite classifiable as a melody per se, but definitely possessing linear continuity—is marked “Disjunctly lyrical.” If this expressive direction seems self-contradictory, it is meant, no doubt, to embody the opposition that provided the idea for this work in the first place. For the lyricism of this line is, at first, largely contingent: in its cross-faded deployment, moving by overlap of sustained tones from one instrument or group of instruments to another, it remains in a curiously ambiguous state, avoiding explicit presentation. Eventually, it is taken up in unison by all three wind instruments, all four strings, and the accordion; at the very end, the first violin is left with an actual solo—a literal melody—which, however, dies away almost as soon as it has begun: perhaps as if to confirm Philip K. Dick’s summarization of Parmenides and Heraclitus, quoted by Hodge in an epigraph to his score: “Nothing is real.”

*re[(f)use]* (2012), for live-processed melodica, amplified string quartet, and electronics, displays its extra-musical aspect quite literally. In the words of the composer:

Among the conceits of this work is an interest in uncovering the poetry of discarded technology, in creating beauty out of nominally ugly junk. The sounds in the piece represent a veritable list of the noises that are conventionally banished from the concert hall: speaker hum, wireless radiation, microphone feedback, cell-phone ringtones. In each case, pitch material from these sounds is isolated and repurposed to build intricate harmonic complexes, which exist in a realm of auditory illusion, on the threshold between noise and harmonicity. Through slight shifts in the voicing and registration of a group of pitches, a protean shift results in the perception of the listener. Noise becomes dissonant harmony, dissonant harmonies fuse into complex timbres, timbres melt into single pitches.

Exhibit A among the “discarded technology,” of course, is the melodica: “A toy, perhaps,” says Hodge, “but capable of great expression and a wealth of elaborate techniques.” Behind this almost gleeful appropriation of the “nominally ugly” in the service of creating art, one senses a didactic intention, in pursuit of an expansion of resources for musical composition beyond, say, the sounds of nature, or of industry, or other sources normally regarded as musically neutral and into the realm of the *anti*-musical. Hodge again: “There is poetry to be found in these unassuming sources, if one is willing to allow them to speak.” Hence the multidimensionality of the title, amalgamating “refuse,” “reuse,” and “fuse” each in its meanings as both noun and verb.

*re[(f)use]* can be heard as a succession of six large phases. (1) The beginning features the whole ensemble, with electronics, in a state of uniformly vigorous activity. The imitation of cellphone interference a few seconds into the work, which of course emanates from the loudspeakers in live performance, is meant to sound at first like a glitch, until one realizes that it is actually one of the “junk” elements of the sound world in this piece. (2) At about 4:30, the electronics drop out and

the texture changes drastically, with sustained tones and trills in the strings and sustained tones in the melodica, the latter treated here as a featured solo instrument. There follows a slow build to a point where rapid figuration in the strings takes over, then subsides into glissandos and sustensions again with the melodica joining in now simply as another member of the ensemble. This material gradually develops and morphs until about (3) the 8:30 mark, where the electronics re-enter with dial-tone/microphone feedback/touch-tone sounds. Seemingly in response, the strings unleash a barrage of noise-infested “sheets” of sound, rising to the uppermost extreme of their collective range and then descending again, through rapid-fire glissandi that eventually slow, then attenuate to a single high pitch. This serves as the point of departure for (4) the melodica’s improvised solo cadenza, of no specified duration in the score but on this recording lasting about two and a half minutes. It ends on the same high pitch at which it began and segues directly into (5) a solo for the electronics, in gradually overlapping fragments that are joined after a while by the melodica. Big chords made up of cell-phone ringtones cue the re-entrance of the strings, which play trills on increasingly complex pitches (constituted of successively added partials). This texture gives way to a tremendous glissando in all parts upward, then down into silence. (6) The final section, lasting just short of three minutes, begins in strictly metered fashion, in sixteenths at a tempo of quarter = 60. The descending patterns of fifths, played *détaché*, mimic open strings but, played as harmonics, they are all an octave too high. As this passage continues, the pitch content of the string parts diversifies, with “real” pitches mixing in with the harmonics; a general intensification in all dimensions results in a huge crescendo right up to the abrupt ending—where all sound suddenly ceases, as if someone has pulled the plug.

*re[(f)use]* was commissioned by Music at the Anthology, for the JACK Quartet, as part of the 2012 MATA Festival of New Music in Brooklyn, New York. It was premiered by the JACK Quartet and the composer on April 18, 2012.

The most overtly poetic of the works on this CD is *Pools of shadow from an older sky* (2011) for live-processed piano, computer-realized sound, and video projection, commissioned by the American Academy in Rome in commemoration of the first demonstration of Galileo’s telescope, which took place on Academy grounds. It was premiered by the composer himself, while in residence as a Fellow at the Academy, on April 14, 2011: four hundred years to the day after Galileo’s demonstration. Thinking about this anniversary, Hodge was evidently impelled to reflect on the various ways in which the past, veiled or even completely obscured by the present, nevertheless remains as undercurrent to and, in a sense, motivation of all that happens now. This theme is brought out in different ways in each of the five movements of the work, played without pause. In the first, whose title “Machine elegy—Do appliances sing of electric sleep?” alludes amusingly to the title of a Philip K. Dick novel (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), the overtones of plucked and scratched piano strings mingle with processed recordings of contemporary machine noise (cellphone chatter, fax transmissions) and radio waves picked up by the various exploratory spacecraft launched toward the far reaches of the solar system over the past half-century: machines bearing, among their various names, that of Galileo. Such recordings, continually supplemented and altered over the course of this work, constitute a kind of cantus firmus, if you like; another kind, more conventionally defined, makes its appearance in the second movement, named after the hymn “Ave maris stella” that served as cantus firmus for many compositions of the Renaissance (and earlier) and incorporating that melody in forms ranging from fairly audible to nearly impossible to detect without a score to refer to. Here the idea of the buried musical past, still serving as an important foundation for what is composed in the present, could hardly be

more clearly expressed. Embedded in the computer part during this movement, overlaid and helping to mask the hymn, are noises from contemporary Rome (ambulance and police sirens). The third movement, “Music for a starry night—*cadenza improvvisata*,” is the most extensive of the five in its requirements of virtuosic improvisation from the pianist; as in a fantasia movement from an older musical tradition, only a basic chord structure and a general indication of the figuration desired are given in the score. The fourth movement, “In lost Venetian air,” brings another explicit reference to “Ave maris stella,” this one from Monteverdi’s setting of it in his *Vespers* of 1610 (thus almost exactly contemporaneous with Galileo’s demonstration); the reverb and other distortion through which it is heard in computer realization makes it sound—appropriately enough in the context of this piece—almost submerged. In the last movement, “Shadows from an older sky,” the pianist is called upon again to display considerable improvisational dexterity, which in this instance eventually incorporates fragments and whole statements of the “Ave maris stella” melody. In the computer part, amid the continuing machine noise, church bells (from San Pietro in Montorio) are briefly heard, which we as listeners are invited to understand as yet another, quite literal, connection between past and present: the same bells, sounding across the centuries. Perhaps these bells are also meant to be heard as poetically transmogrified into the wind chimes that the pianist plays inside the piano, prior to exiting the performance space before the piece has actually ended.

—Jonathan Bernard

*Jonathan Bernard is Professor of Music Theory at the University of Washington in Seattle, and has written extensively about contemporary music.*

**Huck Hodge** (b. 1977) initiated studies in music during his formative years in Oregon. In 1999 he began a course of study at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Stuttgart, Germany and earned graduate degrees at Columbia University. His many awards include the Rome Prize, the Gaudeamus Prize and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His recent commissions include those from the Fromm Foundation, the Barlow Endowment, Music at the Anthology, the American Composers Forum, the National Concert Hall of Taiwan and the government of the Netherlands. He is currently Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Washington. While his technique and aesthetics bring his European training into play, his music draws extensively, if obliquely, on experiences from his northwestern American heritage. Uniquely Northwestern light patterns act as an inspiration in much of his music—the way that a piercing slant of light, breaking through a dreary Seattle cloudscape, casts an intense, otherworldly *chiaroscuro* on the landscape—the ethereal yellowness of the light in bas-relief against the yawning darkness of the sky. These stark contrasts in light and dark find their way into his striking combination of pure and dissonant harmonies, widely spaced orchestrations and vast, diffuse timbres.

The **Talea Ensemble** is the recipient of the 2013 CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming. The 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 regularly performs across North America, South America, Europe, and Asia, and has recordings on the Living Artists, Gravina Musica, Tzadik, Innova, and New World Records labels. For more information, please visit [www.taleaensemble.org](http://www.taleaensemble.org).

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Producer: Huck Hodge

Engineer: Ryan Streber (*Out of a Dark Sea, Alêtheia*); Michael McCrea, Douglas Niemela/DXArts (*re[ff]use*); Douglas Niemela/DXArts (*Pools of shadow from an older sky*)

*Out of a Dark Sea* was recorded on November 21, 2013 and *Alêtheia* on November 26, 2013, both at Oktaven Audio in Yonkers, New York City. *re[ff]use* was recorded on June 6, 2013 and *Pools of shadow from an older sky* on July 2, 2013, both at DXArts, Seattle, WA.

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HUCK HODGE (b. 1977)

*LIFE IS ENDLESS LIKE OUR FIELD OF VISION*

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1. *Alétheia* (2010–11) 17:42

Talea Ensemble: Barry Crawford, flute; Marianne Gythfeldt, clarinet; Rane Moore, contrabass clarinet, bass clarinet; Bill Schimmel, accordion; Steve Beck, piano; Alex Lipowski, Matt Gold, percussion; Miranda Cuckson, Emily Ondracek-Peterson, violins; Chris Gross, Brian Snow, cellos; Jim Baker, conductor

*Pools of shadow from an older sky* (2011) 18:14

2. I. Machine elegy—Do appliances sing of electric sleep? 3:42

3. II. Ave Maris Stella 4:18

4. III. Music for a starry night (cadenza improvvisata) 1:54

5. IV. In lost Venetian air 2:22

6. V. Shadows from an older sky 5:55

Huck Hodge, piano & computer

7. *Out of a Dark Sea* (2006, rev. 2007) 15:29

Talea Ensemble: Barry Crawford, flute, piccolo; Rane Moore, clarinet, bass clarinet; John Gattis, horn; Nuiko Wadden, harp; Steve Beck, piano; Alex Lipowski, percussion; Miranda Cuckson, violin; Chris Gross, cello; Jim Baker, conductor

8. *re[(f)use]* (2012) 17:15

JACK Quartet: Chris Otto, Ari Streisfeld, violins; John Pickford Richards, viola; Kevin McFarland, cello; with Huck Hodge, melodica & computer

TT: 68:40