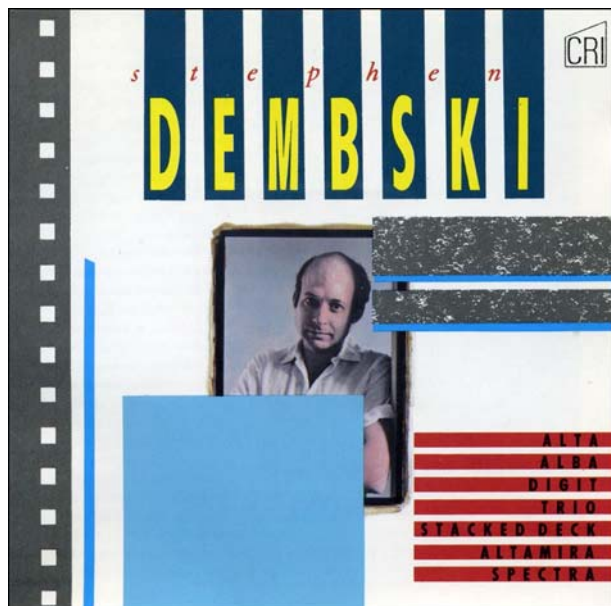


Stephen Dembski



1. *Alta* (1981-82)..... (7:28)
Alan Feinberg, piano
- Alba* (1980-81)..... (19:15)
2. *Pressante* (4:16)

3. *Calmissimo, sospeso* (2:27)
4. *Allegro* (6:37)
5. *Fast and loose, ma non troppo* (1:25)
6. *Moderato ben misurato* (4:06)
The New York New Music Ensemble; Jayn Rosenfeld, flute; Laura Flax, clarinet; Daniel Druckman, percussion; Linda Quan, violin; Eric Bartlett, cello; Robert Black, conductor
7. *Digit* (1978)..... (2:30)
Laura Flax, clarinet
8. *Trio* (1976-77) (13:22)
Rolf Schulte, violin; Fred Sherry, cello; Alan Feinberg, piano
9. *Stacked Deck* (1979) (7:32)
The Prism Orchestra, Robert Black, conductor
10. *Altamira* (1982-83)..... (1:16)
11. *Spectra* (1985)..... (13:33)
The Prism Orchestra, Robert Black, conductor

Total playing time: 65:56

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Notes

Dreams, as Delmore Schwartz suggested in a once-famous short story, beget responsibilities. In describing richly-conceived artistic work, we might just as well reverse his terms—indeed, the dialectic of dreaming and responsibility spins so quickly that the two terms seem to blur, and the artistic work seems to begin in several places at once. The music of Stephen Dembski is a case in point. A Princetonian concern for the conceptual is matched by a complex, eclectic sensibility: alternately dramatic and bemused, orthodox and desultory, laconic and driven. However, refined or multifaceted as the sensibility is, it is modeled in the composer's conception of musical structure. Thus, making a distinction between structure and expression begins to seem willful, even perverse. Indeed, the vivacity and sharp profile of the musical surface of Dembski's music at once signals and embodies conceptual and structural depth. Dreaming and responsibility (or, in Stefan Wolpe's words, fantasy and structure) are complementary aspects of a single conception.

Born in Boston in 1949, **Stephen Dembski** studied piano from an early age, and later (in elementary school) took up the flute. As a teenager, he played a lot of rock and roll and folk music, then became more involved with long-form improvised music, such as the jazz of Cecil Taylor. To support himself, he worked in mental hospitals and as a tree surgeon. While in his early twenties, the composition of strictly-notated music began to supersede his work as an instrumental performer.

In the early 70s, Dembski migrated to New York from Antioch College where he studied composition with John Ronsheim. After six months as a record salesman and two

months as a tour guide, he began composition studies with Büilent Arel at SUNY-Stony Brook. From there he went to Princeton, where he received an M.F.A. and a Ph.D., and where his primary teacher was Milton Babbitt. Over the past fifteen years, Dembski's music has represented the United States at international festivals in France, Germany, Denmark, Poland, and England. At home, his honors include several commission/fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lieberman Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He has taught at Princeton, Bates, and Dartmouth, and currently is responsible for the advanced composition program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His time is divided between Wisconsin and New York City, which has been his base since 1973.

The works on this disc chronicle the development of Dembski's mature musical language—a language that incorporates aspects of both tonal and twelve-tone methods. His approach to compositional structure takes the tonal system as a model for the relations between the various materials from which musical surfaces are constructed, and tonal polyphony as the model for the relations between the entities comprising those surfaces. But Dembski's craft also involves some of the fundamental aspects of twelve-tone thought. A conception of pre-compositional structure provides the basis for generating arrays of pitch classes; these, in turn, are the basis for harmonic and contrapuntal sketches that are rhythmically animated and re-imagined as musical gestures, textures, articulated segments. In this synthesis of twelve-tone and tonal thinking, a musical world comes into being.

The language spoken there is a hybrid of twelve-tone and tonal languages rather than a dialect of either. This hybrid aims to invoke, or perhaps more to the point, to possess through an act of reconstruction, some of the traditional distinctions of earlier music—such as the fundamental distinction between “harmony” and “line.”

However, the music is hybrid in another sense as well. It mixes a conservative, modernist strain with irreverent, post-modern pleasures: an arch, self-regarding wit, a disdain for teleology, and an indulgence of the pleasures of merely circulating. Insisting on idiosyncratic, clearly delineated conceptions at each stage of composition structuring, Dembski’s music lays claim to an original compositional voice.

The pieces performed on this disc fall into three generic categories: solo works (*Alta*, *Digit*, *Altamira*), chamber (*Alba* and the Trio), and orchestral works (*Stacked Deck* and *Spectra*). Dembski treats each of the three genres distinctly, each as an opportunity to consider particular compositional questions and challenges.

For example, the solo works develop from an apparent paradox: that rhythmic structure can be articulated when rhythm has been “neutralized,” by regularizing the rhythmic surface in a one-part texture. *Altamira* (1983) is, in a sense, the purest embodiment of this paradox, *Digit* (1978), the most elaborate—an instrumental obbligato is added to the “neutralized” line—while *Alta* (1981) is the most extended and developed. In all three pieces, the rhythm of repetition of pitches and the rhythm of structural displacements within the compound line articulate a rich rhythmic structure over the “neutral” surface.

Digit and *Altamira* share another similarity—their realization by an anachronistic technology. In the former composition, the technology in question is an old-fashioned digital sound synthesis program, Music 4B for the IBM 360-91 computer. In the latter, the sound processor is a mechanical Swiss music box movement, mounted in a case made by the luthier Ben Pyne. *Altamira* is adapted from the opening, middle, and close of *Alta*, which, in its primary incarnation, was written for Alan Feinberg. A juxtaposition of *Alta* and *Altamira* reveals another rhythmic dimension in these “rhythmless” pieces: the resonances of the instruments themselves articulate rhythm as they emphasize different events and imply different harmonic effects in the two realizations.

The chamber works, *Alba* (1980, commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York New Music Ensemble) and the Trio (written in 1977 for the New York New Music Ensemble) are, in several respects, flip sides of Dembski’s compositional personality. The former is episodic and mercurial in sensibility, fitfully alternating between static and progressive structural unfoldings. The latter is taut, overly dramatic, organic. Both pieces move from one compositional technique to another: The Trio begins as a twelve-tone piece and ends with a structure based on unordered collection of seven or eight pitches. *Alba* begins with such “collection” music but finally, within its third movement, comes to embody Dembski’s own original synthesis of collection and order structuring. The emergence of the new language is a refinement rather than a renunciation of the composer’s idiom. There are no “interplanetary breezes” of the sort felt in the latter part of Schoenberg’s *Second Quartet*.

The orchestral works, *Stacked Deck* (written for Efrain Guigui’s Vox Nova in 1979) and *Spectra* (written for Robert Black’s Prism Orchestra in 1985), recapitulate some of the pitch-structural issues of *Alba* on a large scale and with an enlarged orchestral palette. Indeed, the orchestral pieces seem especially ambitious and public—at least in part due to the beauty and intricacy of their instrumental craft and their protean timbral and textural inventiveness. Like the opening of *Alba*, *Stacked Deck* is “collection” music; *Spectra* tests the potential of the newer, more fully-evolved pitch structuring method at work in the conclusion of *Alba*. Unlike *Alba*, however, the orchestral works seem to maintain a single persona throughout. The consistency of technique in these orchestral works is paralleled by an especially refined sense of gestural and textural pacing.

Harmony and line, collection and order, articulation and continuity, progress and stasis, sobriety and wit—distinctions in so many different domains are at play in Stephen Dembski’s music. Such distinctions, like the dialectic of dreaming and responsibility, reflect the multi-dimensionality of musical thought. But dreaming of the responsibilities in dreams, Dembski has provided us with a group of works that questions our habits of distinction-making, at the same time that it relies upon and confirms them. And experiencing this final paradox lost and regained, of calling into question even while confirming, is one of those post-modern pleasures that will call us back to (dream with) such works of art again and again.

—Martin Brody

The New York New Music Ensemble is dedicated to providing a forum for the diverse voices of contemporary composers. Hailed by the *New York Times* as “player for player, perhaps the best new music group in the country,” the seven-member ensemble is renowned for its extensively rehearsed and emotionally charged performances of over seventy-five works of established and emerging composers in the United States and abroad. The NYNME has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Chamber Music America, the Fromm Foundation for Music, the Alice M. Ditson Fund, Meet the Composer, and the Department of Cultural Affairs for the City of New York. They have recorded for CRI, Opus One, Owl, and Bridge Records.

The Prism Orchestra, under its music director Robert Black, was founded in 1983 and has quickly distinguished itself both for its virtuoso performances and its innovative programming. PRISM’s repertoire ranges from Mozart through Liszt, Strauss

and Britten, and it has presented several American premieres of important twentieth-century works.

Alan Feinberg has been called the “Callas of contemporary-music pianists” by *New Yorker* critic Andrew Porter. His numerous performances across the U.S. and Europe have garnered him unanimous acclaim. Feinberg is a noted performer of Babbitt’s music and has premiered several of his works including the Grammy-nominated Piano Concerto. Feinberg was the first American pianist to be invited by the Union of Soviet Composers to give premieres by American composers in Leningrad and Moscow.

Laura Flax is one of New York’s most versatile clarinetists. Ms. Flax is assistant principal clarinetist with the New York City Opera Orchestra, a member of the Da Capo Chamber Music Players, the Music Today Ensemble, and performs frequently with Orpheus and the St. Luke’s Chamber Ensemble.

Personnel featured on *Stacked Deck*

Jayn Rosenfeld, flute
 Jennifer Graham, oboe
 Anand Devendra, clarinet
 Peter Simmos, bassoon
 Donald Batchelder, trumpet
 John Jowett, trombone
 Ronald Oakland, violin
 Chris Finckel, violoncello
 Cameron Grant, piano
 William Moersch, percussion
 James Baker, percussion
 Jonathan Haas, timpani
Personnel featured on *Spectra*

Jayn Rosenfeld, flute
 Jennifer Graham, oboe
 Laura Flax, clarinet
 Peter Simmons, bassoon
 William Purvis, French horn
 Donald Batchelder, trumpet
 James Baker, percussion
 Violin I: Ronald Oakland (principal), Mineko Yajima, Marcia Weinfeld, Mary Ellen Shea, Alice Poulson, Nancy Reed;
 Violin II: Elizabeth Field, Holly Owenden, Jule Supple, Roger

Zahab, Carol Sidowsky,
 Alan Carriero;

Viola: Veronica Salas, Olivia Koppell, Shelley Holland-Moritz, David Miller,
 Daniel Seidenberg, Eufrosina Raileanu;

Violoncello: Peter Rosenfeld, Styra Avins, Dorothy Lawson, Laura Blustein; cello
 Bass: Gail Kruvad, Melody Goldstein; bass

Production Notes

Alba, Digit

Recorded May 21, 1984

Spectra

Recorded April 4, 1985

Alta, Trio, Stacked Deck

Recorded December 2, 1985

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