

NWCR653

# Kathleen Supové

## Figure 88



Randall Woolf

- Dancétudes* (1982-83) ..... (13:46)
1. allemande ..... (1:55)
  2. courante ..... (1:11)

3. sarabande ..... (3:45)
4. rag ..... (4:49)
5. shuffle ..... (2:06)

Lukas Foss

6. *Solo* (1981) ..... (11:39)

David Lang

7. *While nailing at random* (1982) ..... (10:01)

Marti Epstein

8. *Waterbowls* (1989; revised 1992) ..... (10:36)

Frederic Rzewski

*Four North American Ballads*

9. dreadful memories ..... (4:22)
10. which side are you on? ..... (7:13)
11. down by the riverside ..... (6:55)
12. Winnsboro cotton mill blues ..... (9:49)

Kathleen Supové – Piano

Total playing time: 74:58

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## Notes

In America during the late 1980s new music was revolutionized by two trends that passed almost without notice. The first was an influx of virtuoso performers. The academic establishment had long enjoyed the services of great instrumentalists, but from minimalism on, new music had primarily been a composer–performer genre. In the ‘80s, a stream of pianists and singers stepped forward to raise new-music performance standards, no one more actively than Kathleen Supové. A former student of Rosina Lhevinne and Russell Sherman, Supové became a regular guest at the world’s most prominent contemporary music festivals, including Darmstadt, June in Buffalo, and Bang on a Can. Today she’s well known, in both Downtown and Uptown Manhattan, as an explosive interpreter of tremendous range of music. The second trend has been a long-awaited synthesis between those antagonistic schools of the ‘70s: minimalism and serialism. Many composers born in the 1950s (three of whom are represented here) found themselves coming of age in an unacceptably polarized musical world. They admired the serialists’ subtle control and fluid technique, but not their arrogance toward audiences, their elitist hermeticism. On the other hand, they appreciated the chance for a new beginning that minimalism offered, but didn’t find the minimalists bland tonalities and repetitive patterns rewarding. Most of the music recorded here represents a new lingua franca, combining elements of both sides into a complex but still communicative music.

For example, the *Dancétudes* (1982-83) of Boston composer

**Randall Woolf** (b 1959) are tonally reductive yet rhythmically intricate (showing in these respects the influence of Woolf’s teacher David del Tredici). *Dancétudes* approaches the Baroque suite from a postmodern vantage point. The Allemande is a four-part chorale whose oddities—voices rhythmically staggered and separated by leaps of several octaves—don’t detract from its smooth, Schmanesque melancholy. The Courante offers non-repetitive minimalism; tiny motives shift jumpily with the 9/8-meter, like a Scarlatti sonata churned out by a computer with a virus. Played in tremolos, the Sarabande is a shimmering Bach prelude plagued by unresolved suspensions, polytonality, and harmonic wrong turns. The Rag shifts texture abruptly, abstracting its traditional ragtime melody into rows of octave-skipping triads. And blues patterns are embedded within the irregular repetitions of the Shuffle’s whirlwind bass, eventually surfacing in a bitter melody. It’s only fitting that an American dance suite end with jazz derived forms.

*Solo* (1981) by **Lukas Foss** (b 1922), celebrated composer and Brooklyn Philharmonic conductor, doesn’t sound minimalist, but it does share minimalism’s streamlined repeating patterns and perpetual motion. It’s almost a shame to reveal that the subject of this gentled, permutational meditation is a twelve-tone row, for the piece doesn’t sound like any other twelve-tone music (except possibly James Tenney’s *Chromatic Canon*, another minimalist twelve-tone essay also recorded on CRI). Such an attempt to fuse twelve-

tone with repetitive methods as early as 1981 shows a forward-looking imagination. Foss keeps his texture evolving through exhaustive invention. Moments of tonality are created by isolating and repeating a few notes of the row, different pitches are accented or held over, repeating patterns go through phase-shifts, pitches are frozen in register and suddenly unfrozen, and rhythms are contracted by overlapping parts of the row. Finally, the pitches relax into major triads, as though filtering tonality out of chromaticism. Foss's modest title conceals a memorization nightmare for the pianist, but a charming ear-bender for the listener.

**David Lang** (b 1957) is best known as one of the three composers who co-founded New York's internationally celebrated new-music festival, Bang on a Can (documented in two volumes on CRI). His aptly named *While Nailing at Random* (1982) hails from the sound world of the Stockhausen *Klavierstücke*, but instead of serialist complexity, the piece reduces to an interplay of three elements: a cluster chord hammered in nervous agitation, sequences of pianissimo chords that grow from the cluster chords as after rings, and a brilliant filigree of single notes dotted with recurring motives. The piece's most striking characteristic is that the cluster chords, as they pound, evolve by shifting one note at a time, a wholly original effect. And the clusters, after rings, and grace notes are linked by so many common pitches that all three gestures seem like un-folding of the same material.

*Waterbowl*s (1989; revised 1992) by **Marti Epstein** (b 1959), another Boston composer (on the Berklee College faculty), is also concerned with repetition, streamlining, and collage-like intercutting. But more than any other composer here, she works with a juxtaposition of unvarying sonic images, harmonic/rhythmic complexes that return essentially unchanged. It has been said that Morton Feldman's music reiterates rather than repeats figures, and *Waterbowl*s belongs to the imagistic world Feldman invented. Images aren't developed, but reappear in timeless suspension, delineating a non-European, un-dialectical form. Most un-Feldman-like, though, are the quotations among the images: one is a melody from Debussy's *Hommage à Rameau*, one a single chord from Feldman's *Palais de Mari*. The most obvious, of course, are the ghostly phrases from the variation theme of Beethoven's Sonata in E Major, Op. 109 (transposed to B Major).

**Frederic Rzewski** (b 1938) is a different case: composer-performer, virtuoso, and writer of political music in a style he calls "humanist realism." In his early career, he went through

both serialist and minimalist periods, and by the time he wrote the *Four North American Ballads* in 1978, he had not so much synthesized the two styles as transcended both in a wide-ranging personal idiom. The Ballads are all based on folksongs drawn from grass-roots political history. In *Dreadful Memories* Rzewski's accompaniment offsets the tune's squareness with delicate naturalness, before splintering the theme into dozens of polytonal shards, shattering the idyllic calm. In the second ballad, you can virtually hear the taunting union cry "Which side are you on?" echo from one side and then the other, as each phrase jumps from register to register; the piece settles into a bluesy ostinato rhythm before its last intransigent demand.

*Down By The Riverside* also gets a polytonal treatment, with nice cross rhythms resulting from out-of phase pentatonic patterns. The final chorus is played twice, one without the theme (whose motives still are abundantly suggested by the accompaniment), then with the theme in a lower voice. The most remarkable movement is "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues," a tour-de-force whose rapid-fire clusters turn the piano into a noise machine, a frighteningly realistic portrayal of the cotton mill itself. While Rzewski's compositional technique is equal to the most complex situations, his expressive means are often boldly simple. The result is a set of pieces that are aggressive and engaging, yet also thoughtful and multilayered, like the best of today's music.

—Kyle Gann

**Kathleen Supové** is one of the most captivating interpreters of new music on the East Coast, having premiered countless works for solo piano and piano with ensemble. She gives a regular series of concerts in Boston and New York featuring new music for solo piano, entitled the "Exploding Piano." She is a member of a newly-formed, innovative trio, Bermuda Triangle, including soprano Dora Ohrenstein and bassist Robert Black, which made its debut performing *The Political Songbook* at the Bang on a Can Festival in New York City. In Boston, she is co-founder of and pianist for Extension Works, and makes frequent appearances with many New Music groups.

Engagements for the 1993–94 season include a solo appearance with Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble in the premiere of Randall

Woolf's *Skin Deep*. Her recording of David Macbride's *Chartres* for Solo Piano is available on CRI CD 640.

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## Production Notes

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