

Common Sense



1. Dan Becker: *Gridlock* (1994) (6:37)
2. Ed Harsh: *accommodating commonplaces* (1994) (8:21)
3. Carolyn Yarnell: *Sage* (1994) (9:00)
4. John Halle: *Structural Adjustment* (1994) (6:31)
5. Marc Mellits: *Polysorbate 60* (1994) (10:52)
6. Melissa Hui: *Solstice* (1994) (8:27)
7. Belinda Reynolds: *Over and Out* (1994) (5:07)
8. Randall Woolf: *My Insect Bride* (1994) (11:26)

The Common Sense Ensemble: Patti Monson, flutes (1, 3, 4, 6, 8); Jennifer Yeaton-Mellits, flutes (5, 7); Libby Van Cleve, oboe (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8); Matthew Sullivan, oboe d'amore (6); Michael Lowenster, clarinets (1-5, 7, 8); Neil Mueller, trumpet, flugelhorn (1-5, 7, 8); Julie Josephson, trombone (1-5, 7, 8); David Spies, tuba (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8); Sara Laimon, piano, keyboards (1-8); Gregor Kitzis, violin (1-5, 7, 8); Danny Tunick, percussion (1, 3-8); Bradley Lubamn, conductor (1, 2, 4, 8); Jeannine Wagar, conductor (3, 5, 7)

Total playing time: 67:22

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Notes

The Common Sense Composers' Collective is characterized by an optimistic, energetic American pragmatism. Arriving after the great ideological debates of the late twentieth century have receded into mere historical curiosities (modernism/minimalism versus post-modernism, etc.), the composers of the collective remind us again that new music survives simply because people need to make it and to listen to it.

The composers of the collective, trained in the academies and the streets of urban America, ask the obvious question, so hard to grasp because so close at hand—how shall we engage ourselves and our listeners with the best new music we can make?

Leaving the metaphysics to the metaphysicians, they concentrate on the processes of creation—from the composer to the performer and back again in a self-regulating feedback loop. If the music works it will play and be played. If not, fix it and try again. These composers' aesthetic choices are not (as with so many other new groups) their manifesto. What music delights and intrigues the composer, performer, and listener is itself their statement, their credo.

Instead of an end of the century malaise, a cynical and fatigued sigh of weary despair, hear here a joyous, witty, necessary music—a music that celebrates the notion that, among all of its proud refinements, our musical sensibility is also a common sense.

—Martin Bresnick

In the fall of 1993 the composers of Common Sense, friends and the kindred spirits, came together to begin an experiment. We assembled an ensemble modeled roughly on the ragtime bands from early in the century and began the first of several work-in-progress rehearsal sessions. These were informal but intense gatherings during which the participating composers and performers took time to carefully go over the prepared

material, freely interacting and sharing ideas with each other about the developing pieces. (This kind of interaction happens all the time in other mediums like theater and dance, but is often strangely absent in the “classical music” world.) Our conviction was that a spirit of group collaboration, both among ourselves and between us and the performers, would create a unique and positive dynamic that would inevitably show up in the finished pieces.

The resulting works were premiered as a group in concerts on June 21 and June 23, 1994, in Hartford, Connecticut and New York City respectively. Our hunch was proven right. Not only were the concerts a joy, but we've since gone on to do a similar collaboration with a different ensemble each year. If these works fit with and bounce off each other in compelling and unexpected ways, it's because they came into existence and grew up together. From their very conception they shared the same invaluable environment: an interesting and interested family of performers and composers.

About *Gridlock*: Do men and women write music differently? Are there fundamentally different ways that each gender explores the world around them? Put me with another composer and a pitcher of beer and I can bat these ideas around with the best of them. One such discussion resulted in the hypothesis that men are much more likely to understand the natural world by slapping a grid over it in order to break it up into tiny parts: approaching it from the outside in. Mapping it. Women however, it was proposed, are much more likely to get inside the natural world and pull something out from it: Excavate. Unearth.

One of the implications of this—if taken to its inevitable conclusion—is that my hard-wired patriarchal male brain, along with my longtime love of maps and grids, has contributed to the destruction of the natural world. Quite a

load. After realizing I was stuck with the brain I had, I decided to do what I usually do in a no-win situation: try and turn a detriment into an attribute by wearing it like a badge of honor. My piece *Gridlock* takes the idea of grids and runs away with it. *Magnifies it*. *Downright* celebrates it.

Dan Becker founded Common Sense in 1993 while completing doctoral studies at Yale University. He has studied and worked with many wonderful composer/teachers, the most influential being Martin Bresnick, Jacob Druckman, Jack Veas, Poul Ruders, Louis Andriessen, Terry Riley, and Elinor Armer. He has written for the concert hall, dance, theater, and film, and has received many of the usual awards and honors. His greatest interest, however, remains the exploration of the processes in which new works are conceived, written, rehearsed, and performed. He lives and teaches in San Francisco, California.

accommodating commonplaces celebrates the latent significances of the unashamedly prosaic.

Ed Harsh lives in New York City. He attended various familiar conservatories and universities on the east coast of the United States and in Europe, studying composition with Louis Andriessen, Martin Bresnick, Jacob Druckman, and Robert Hall Lewis, among others. A number of estimable ensembles have undertaken to perform his music at venues in diverse locations. Ed also is actively engaged in writing words about music, with essays and reviews published in books and periodicals of varying degrees of notoriety and visibility. He is gainfully employed as managing editor of the *Kurt Weill Edition*, a collected critical edition of that composer's work.

Sage has a lot of different meanings. Sage is the color bluish, grayish green. It is a fragrance of fields and open sky. Sage is a spice used in cooking and an herb used for purification of the living environment. It can mean grave; solemn. Sage reminds me of a landscape in the west hundreds of years ago, it reminds me of my grandmother and her Indian ancestors. It is one who possesses the quality of wisdom. Just as the word has multiple meanings, the music I have called "Sage" has multiple layers and shifting moods. *Sage* is dedicated to my friend Deniz Ulben Hughes.

Carolyn Yarnell, a native of northern California, received her formal education at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Yale University. She spent a year in Iceland as a Fulbright Scholar and has held fellowships at Aspen, Tanglewood, MacDowell, and Yaddo. Music has been commissioned from her by ensembles such as The New York Youth Symphony, The American Composers Orchestra, Tanglewood Festival Orchestra, the Juilliard Drama School, and the Bang on a Can All-Stars. In addition to music composition, Carolyn loves to paint. Her favorite award was a NEA Fellowship for the creation of an orchestral triptych accompanied by three large-scale oil paintings. Ms. Yarnell currently lives in Long Island City with her wonderful son, Dorian Blake Yarnelson.

Structural Adjustment was written during a period when I was trying to come to terms with what Hindemith called the "vast sewage system" of market oriented musics which constitute the basis of my (dare I say most of our) formative musical experiences. Whether the relationship to bubblegum pop, TV show themes, or advertising jingles is one of bemused contempt or resigned enthusiasm, for me the influence is omnipresent and, in this piece at least, celebrated pretty explicitly.

In addition to annual works for Common Sense, **John Halle** composes for and performs in his ensemble Invisible Hand which gave its debut concerts at the Knitting Factory in New

York City in the winter of 1995. He has been commissioned by the Jerome Foundation for a new work for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, and by the Meridian Arts Ensemble brass quintet for *Softshoe*, recorded by them on their 1994 Channel Classics CD *Smart Went Crazy*. Also active as a freelance new-music pianist, he presently is a member of the New York based Spit Orchestra, and has appeared on recordings on the Concord, Point, and CRI labels. He presently teaches in the Computer Music Center at Columbia University, where he is receiving his doctorate, and teaches undergraduate composition at Yale University.

Polysorbate 60 is a substance that we encounter every day. We find polysorbate in a great number of commercial products ranging from the junk food that we eat to the shampoo we wash our hair with. Similarly, the piece *Polysorbate 60* creates three different musics out of the same basic substance. This musical substance provides cohesion between the three larger sections (1. Fast; 2. Smooth flowing; 3. Precise) while still allowing for variety in musical style.

Marc Mellits is a native of Baltimore, Maryland. There, he studied in the Peabody Conservatory Preparatory Program. He went on to receive degrees from the Eastman School of Music and Yale University. His major teachers include Sam Adler, Martin Bresnick, Jacob Druckman, Karel Husa, Joseph Schwantner, and Steven Stucky. For his music, Marc has received numerous awards and recognitions including three ASCAP Young Composer's Grants and a full fellowship under which he has studied at Cornell University for the last five years.

I consider *Solstice* to be one of my most intimate pieces. In terms of the economy of materials (each instrument plays only a few pitches throughout) it is also one of my simplest, with silence playing a central role. The piece unfolds as one long phrase, revolving around an oboe d'amore melody inspired by the music of the hichiriki in the Japanese Gagaku court orchestra. The notes spin out in ever-widening circles, always returning home to the notes of the piano. Gradually more and more is revealed until the oboe d'amore drops out. The piccolo comes in to close the piece.

Melissa Hui was born in Hong Kong and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia. She received degrees from the University of British Columbia, the California Institute of the Arts, and Yale University where her principal teachers included Mel Powell and Jacob Druckman. Melissa's works have been performed by numerous ensembles, including the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the orchestras of Taiwan, Esprit (Toronto), and Saskatoon, and at Gaudeamus Music Week. She has received commissions from the Oregon Symphony and ASCAP, the orchestras of Vancouver, Winnipeg, and the National Arts Centre, the CBC, the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, and the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, among others. Recordings of her work have been released on UMMUS and Centredisc. Melissa is an assistant professor at Stanford University in California.

Fifths and canons: two long-standing elements in music. In *Over and Out*, I try to put a different aural perspective onto both of these structures. Using canons, I overlay different collections of fifths to create the melodies and harmonies that pervade this short work. Before you know it, the piece is over and out.

Raised throughout the United States by her Air Force family, **Belinda Reynolds** now considers herself to be an adopted native of California. She completed her doctoral studies with Martin Bresnick and Jacob Druckman at Yale University, and

received her M.A. and B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley, where she studied primarily with Andrew Imbrie. She has received grants and awards for her music from such associations as ASCAP and Meet the Composer. Her music has been commissioned and performed by the New Music Consort, Continuum (Toronto), and Alternate Currents Performance Ensemble, among others. Ms. Reynolds is also very active in childhood music education. Recently she was composer-in-residence for Clintonville Elementary School and was the music director for the Bethwood Youth Orchestra in Woodbridge, Connecticut. Ms. Reynolds lives in San Francisco, where she teaches privately.

My Insect Bride, inspired by the film *The Fly*, marries the cold cruel beauty of insects with humankind's soft sense of

compromise and empathy. Relentless and sentimental, it also creates a musical marriage of the heartless Hohner Clavinet with the sounds of "human" winds and strings. It's an imaginary soundtrack to a horror film for humans and a love story for arthropods.

Randall Woolf was born in Detroit, Michigan. He has studied composition privately with David Del Tredici and Joseph Maneri and earned his Ph.D. at Harvard University. His works have been performed at Tanglewood and Bang on a Can, Basso Bongo, Twisted Tutu, and by Kathleen Supové. A compact disc of his works will soon be released on CRI's Emergency Music label. Currently Mr. Woolf lives in Brooklyn, New York, where he also does computer-music engraving.

Production Notes

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Executive producer: Joseph R. Dalton

Engineering and editing assistance: Jeanne Velonis

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