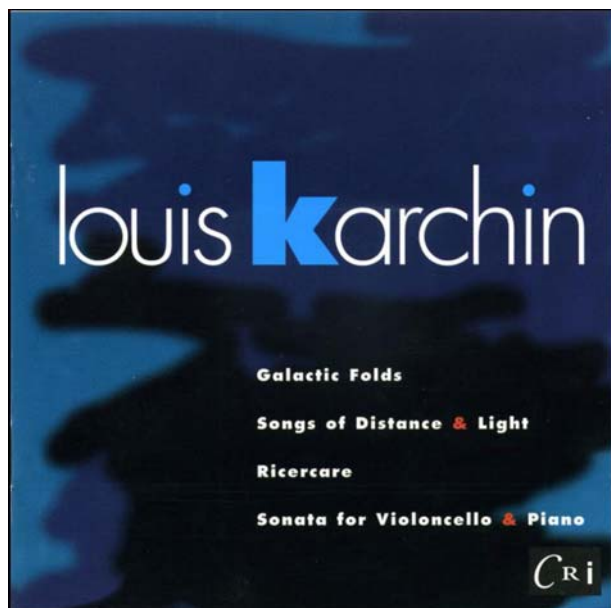


NWCR739

Louis Karchin

Music of Louis Karchin



Galactic Folds (1992) (20:29)

1. I. Allegro moderato e leggiero (13:20)
2. II. Giocoso (7:03)

The New York New Music Ensemble: Jayn Rosenfeld, flute, piccolo; Jean Kopperud, clarinet; Linda Quan, violin; Chris Finckel, cello; James Winn, piano; Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor.

Songs of Distance and Light (1988) (18:41)

3. I. Argument (Elizabeth Bishop) (6:50)
4. II. Rain towards Morning (Elizabeth Bishop) (3:09)
5. III. Midnight Swim, Yaddo (Jennifer Rose) (8:36)

Players of the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society: Jayn Rosenfeld, flute; Brian Greene, oboe; Jean Kopperud, bass clarinet; Daniel Druckman, percussion; James Winn, piano; Deborah Wong, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Theodore Mook, cello; Andrea Cawelti, soprano; Bradley Lubman, conductor.

6. *Ricerare* (1992) (7:16)
Curtis Macomber, violin;

Sonata for Violoncello and Piano (1989) (20:36)

7. I. Allegro moderato: Liberamente e con moto (11:04)
 8. II. Scherzando (4:17)
 9. III. Maestoso-Allegro (5:08)
- Fred Sherry, cello; James Winn, piano

Total playing time: 67:36

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Notes

It has become increasingly common in recent years to pronounce the death of modernism in a “postmodern” age. In music in particular, the great waves of minimalism, neoromanticism, experimentalism, and multiculturalism have all crested to present a seemingly irresistible front that renders “Eurocentric” American music anachronistic. Music that still looks to such leading early twentieth-century figures as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartok is often dismissed as “academic,” and the divide between “Uptown” and “Downtown” that was the great battle of the 1960s and 1970s seems firmly decided on the side of the latter.

But generalizations are always misleading. Today, “Uptown” and “Downtown” may still exist, but the music of each style is so markedly different from the period of both “classical” minimalism and serialism as to be of another species altogether. What’s more, the musics that are emerging from these seemingly inimical camps often share far more elements than most listeners and commentators recognize. American composers have all gained a new sense of freedom from the battles of the previous generation; in fact, the great triumph of our music has not been the obliteration of one musical style in favor of another, but rather the vast enlargement of the creative field within which composers of all backgrounds may find their voice. “Uptown” now often embraces lyricism and tonality in a way unthinkable even a decade back; certain “Downtown” composers incorporate formalistic elements (even twelve-tone

rows) into everything from electric guitar ensemble to gamelan to “post-jazz” combos. Perhaps this result should not be so surprising. When we look back at the work of elder statesmen within the two movements, it becomes clear that even two such diametrically opposed techniques as Milton Babbitt’s time-point system and Steve Reich’s rhythmic phasing shared a similar taste for both rigor and experiment. In short, the passage of time allows for a new perspective that highlights as many similarities as differences between seemingly irreconcilable aesthetics.

All of this is an admittedly roundabout introduction to the music of Louis Karchin, but one I feel is necessary if current listeners are to free themselves from dogmatic preconceptions and capture what is striking and original about his music. I first heard Karchin’s music in 1979, via a tape of his *Capriccio* for violin and seven instruments (currently available on a New World Records disc). At the time, what lingered with me most was the piece’s extraordinary cadenza, a torrential outpouring of notes whose energy and athleticism evoked associations that ranged from Johannes Brahms to Charlie Parker. Since then I’ve kept up with Karchin’s output, and watched it evolve into a substantially personal, expressive, and progressive oeuvre.

On the surface, Karchin is a fine, indeed unabashed, example of “Uptown” music (there’s no reason to try to hide his influences and proclivities). His work has the intense, edgy sound of New

York Modernism: sharp attacks, rhythmic flurries of notes, often-asymmetric phrasing, a largely chromatic palette, instrumentation that uses orchestral acoustic instruments. He has taught most of his career at New York University. He states that his encounter with the music of Charles Wuorinen was a defining moment early in his development. But from this grounding emerges a statement that is by no means a clone of its predecessors. As this disc demonstrates, Karchin's music is full of surprises and extremely varied in outlook, technique, and sound from one piece to another—and yet it consistently projects a distinct voice.

The first work on the program is among the most recent. *Galactic Folds* dates from 1992, and is written for what has become an almost classic ensemble from the second half of the century: the instrumentation of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* minus the voice. The first thing that strikes the listener about this music is its almost endless rhythmic energy and invention. This is also music with great surface density, full of rapid gestures and shifting harmonies. But even though the flow of ever-mutating information is at times breathtaking, there are also aural signposts throughout that keep us oriented. For example, there are the recurring moments after climaxes, when the full ensemble suddenly seems to be dying away with mysterious trills and tremolos, or the series of cadenzas over pedal tones that race past near the first movement's midpoint.

Karchin has stated that the piece's two movements are respectively introverted and extroverted, and that makes real sense. While both are propulsive, in the first movement there is a sense of musical ideas floating in space, jostling one another like a sort of Brownian motion. In the second movement, these same sorts of gestures begin to cohere, and string together into longer lines with even greater rhythmic drive. It is as though, in the spirit of the title, diffuse astrophysical elements are progressively coalescing toward some sort of "Big Bang." Indeed the work, while not having a specific program, was partly inspired by a discovery in astrophysics. "On a day in which a major compositional breakthrough [on the piece] occurred," comments Karchin, "I happened to come across an article describing a significant scientific breakthrough: the discovery of ripples—or folds—on the outer edges of our galaxy. The conjuring of a vision of peaceful galaxies quietly, but purposefully, rippling through space seemed to focus the final details of the work's first movement."

Songs of Distance and Light dates from 1988 and is a setting of three poems, two by Elizabeth Bishop ("Argument" and "Rain towards Morning," the former also set by Elliott Carter in his cycle *A Mirror on Which to Dwell*), and the final by Jennifer Rose ("Midnight Swim, Yaddo"). Whereas *Galactic Folds* concentrated its energies in a rigorous exploration of rhythm, this work focuses instead on exploring ways that the composer's harmonic practice can achieve a degree of radiance and lyricism to match its textual sources. From the first movement's opening, with its ringing fifths, to the scalar arpeggiated ostinati near its end, one senses a world of consonance and open sonorities not usually associated with High Modernism. The second movement provides a real virtuosic turn with its sparkling orchestration of skittering lines, darting birdlike over the ensemble's entire register—a scherzo in the spirit of Mendelssohn or Tchaikovsky updated to the current moment. The third movement, with its evocation of an epiphanic nightscape, is the most overt of all three in its tonal references, especially in a repeated harmonic progression that descends through different inversions of its constituent chords. Karchin has spoken of his search for a type of "tonal centering" in his music, which, while not traditional tonal practice, nevertheless relates groups of pitches to an important central

tone that exerts its "gravity" over the others. In this piece, one hears this remaking of tonal practice most clearly.

The *Ricercare* for solo violin was written a few months after *Galactic Folds*, almost entirely in a single evening. Karchin has spoken of his compositional explorations as "a search for a tradition," a customized choice of models from which to blend and mold an approach that is simultaneously personal and yet grounded in historical practice. In *Ricercare*, the model comes from the late Renaissance and Baroque *ricercare*, a rigorous instrumental form in which all ideas are spun out from a single source, in this case a set of four pitches. From its stately and pensive opening Karchin spins a musical line of ever-mounting intensity, taking the listener through Bachian counterpoint embedded in different registers of the violin, to virtuosic arpeggios and bariolage, to Bartokian *moto perpetuo*—all before a gradually paced descent returns us to the contemplative mood of the opening. No matter how ornate or dense the writing, there is always a sense of an inevitably unfolding background based on the opening gesture. *Ricercare* is dedicated to the present violinist, Curtis Macomber.

The 1989 Sonata for Violoncello and Piano (written for this recording's performer, Fred Sherry) evokes a different type of neoclassicism. Here we have a piece whose first movement fulfills the demands of full-scale sonata-allegro form, through its clear thematic ideas and equally clear harmonic landmarks (such as the dramatic tremolo on the interval of a fifth in the piano's bass). The second movement, scored for "two and a half" trio sections, is a scherzo that, with its elaborate set of recurrences, begins to suggest a rondo as well. Its brilliant hocketing (rhythmic interplay) between the instruments is reminiscent of the second movement from Webern's Piano Variations, Op. 21, but there is a sly jazziness in the writing that marks it as utterly American at the same time. The final movement begins with a stentorian theme in even quarter notes that then submerges into a series of increasingly complex variants, before making a triumphal return near the work's close. Karchin has stated that the Beethoven Cello Sonata, Op. 5, No. 2, a favorite work of his, exerted an influence on this piece. In its seriousness of purpose, sense of almost superhuman play, and lean, scrupulous harmonic structure, the work pays fervent but never imitative homage to its model.

Karchin revels in music that is dense, complex, and rich with information. He also demands that this same music exhibit the maximum clarity, invention, and expression possible. Though Karchin's art is subtle and quite stylistically focused, I still hear a real openness in this music, and a deep concern that every moment be one that merits repeated listening. May the listener to this recording find similar satisfactions.

—Robert Carl

Louis Karchin (b Philadelphia, 8 Sept 1951) received his musical training at the Eastman School of Music and Harvard University, with principal teachers including Samuel Adler, Joseph Schwantner, Fred Lerdahl, and Earl Kim. Further studies included instruction at Tanglewood with Gunther Schuller and Bruno Maderna, and seminars with Elliott Carter, Jacob Druckman, and Charles Wuorinen. Since 1979 Karchin has taught at New York University, where in 1989 he organized an advanced graduate program in composition.

Recognition for Mr. Karchin's work has come from such organizations and institutions as the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Tanglewood, the National Endowment for the Arts, Columbia University, the New Jersey State Council for the Arts, and the Fromm and Jerome foundations. His compositions, totaling over forty in number, has been

performed by ensembles throughout the United States and abroad.

Of the music on this collection, the Sonata for Violoncello and Piano was described as a work of “fearless eloquence” by Andrew Porter of the *New Yorker*. *Songs of Distance and Light* was acclaimed at its premiere by Alan Ulrich of the *San Francisco Examiner* as “a work of coruscating beauty—one of the signal new music events of the season.”

Mr. Karchin is himself active as a conductor with such groups as the Chamber Players of the League/ISCM and the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, which he codirects. Other works of his may be found on New World CD 80425-2 and CRI SD 518. His music is published by C. F. Peters Corporation and American Composers Edition.

Mr. Karchin lives in Short Hills, New Jersey, with his wife Julie Sirota Karchin and their daughters, Marisa and Lindsay.

Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor of the New York New Music Ensemble, and a noted percussionist, has been an active exponent of contemporary American music. He is a frequent conductor of the Juilliard Symphony and the Composer’s Alliance at Princeton University, and has performed with the New York Philharmonic, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and the American Composers Orchestra. He has recorded for Angel, Koch, EMI, London, and New World Records, among other labels.

The **New York New Music Ensemble’s** “extensively rehearsed and emotionally charged performances” (*New York Times*) of some of the most important and challenging music of the twentieth century have secured its role as one of the foremost contemporary chamber ensembles of our time. In addition to a full performance schedule, including a yearly series in New York City and national and international tours, the Ensemble may be heard on ten recordings released by CRI, Bridge Records, GM Recordings, Opus One, and O.O. Discs.

Andrea Cawelti, soprano, made her New York Philharmonic debut in 1985, with Zubin Mehta, singing Marina in *Boris Godunov*. She has performed with the American Composers Orchestra, the Oratorio Society of New York, the Aspen Festival Orchestra, and the Juilliard Symphony, among others; in 1987, she made her Carnegie Hall debut substituting at the last minute as soloist in Hugo Weisgall’s *A Garden Eastward*, for soprano and orchestra. With the Group for Contemporary Music, she has recorded Louis Karchin’s *Songs of John Keats*, among other works.

Bradley Lubman, conductor, has appeared with major orchestras and ensembles both here and abroad, including the Berlin Radio Symphony, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Ensemble Moderne, the Steve Reich Ensemble, the ASKO Ensemble of Amsterdam, the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, and the New York New Music Ensemble. He has been on the faculty of the Tanglewood Music Center and the Aldeburgh Festival’s Britten/Pears School, and has recorded for CRI, Bridge, Centaur, Koch, and Nonesuch Records.

The **Washington Square Contemporary Music Society**, currently in its twentieth season (1996–1997), has been recognized as a leading forum for the music of our time. The society sponsors a three-concert series in midtown New York halls, and is dedicated to furthering the works of both emerging and established composers with performances of the highest quality. Over two hundred new works have been presented by the Society’s core ensemble and featured guest artists. The Society is associated with the Department of Music of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at New York University.

Curtis Macomber, violin, has toured throughout the United States and Europe appearing in recital at Alice Tully Hall, the Kennedy Center, and the Spoleto Festival; he has performed as soloist with the Vermont Symphony and Juilliard Symphony, among others. As first violinist of the New World String Quartet, he has been an artist-in-residence at Harvard University. A prizewinner of the Rockefeller International Competition, he has recorded over fourteen discs for CRI, Nonesuch, Koch, Vanguard, and others.

Fred Sherry, cello, is one of America’s foremost champions of new music and contemporary American composers. He has appeared as soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, and L’Orchestre de la Suisse Romande; his musical travels have taken him to concert halls across four continents, and to forty-nine of the fifty states. He can be heard on as many as ten to fifteen new releases a year. He currently is on the faculty of the Juilliard School, and is a past director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

James Winn, piano, has made numerous solo and chamber appearances throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan. He is a solo pianist with the New York City Ballet, and a member of the New York New Music Ensemble, Hexagon, and Parnassus. A frequent guest with such groups as the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and Speculum Musicae, Mr. Winn, with his duo-piano partner Cameron Grant, was a winner of the 1980 Munich International Competition.

Production Notes

Galactic Folds: Recorded April 24, 1995, at Music Division Recital Hall, SUNY College at Purchase, New York. Commissioned by the Griffin Ensemble of Boston, and completed with grants from the New Jersey State Council for the Arts and the Research Challenge Fund of New York University.

Songs of Distance and Light: Recorded October 29, 1994, at the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Sonata for Violoncello and Piano: Recorded June 22, 1994, at Music Division Recital Hall, SUNY College at Purchase, New York. Commissioned by the Group for Contemporary Music for cellist Fred Sherry, and completed with a grant from the new Jersey State Council for the Arts.

Ricercare: Recorded March 16, 1994, at Music Division Recital Hall, SUNY College at Purchase, New York.

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman.

Assistant engineer: Jonathan Schultz and Jeanne Velonis.

All works published by C. F. Peters Corporation (BMI).

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