

NWCR777

Randall Woolf

Rock Steady



1. *Shakedown* (1990) (10:11)
New Millennium Ensemble; Meridian Arts Ensemble; Bradley Lubman, conductor
- New Dancétudes* (1988) (9:01)
2. I – Allemande (1:34)
3. II – Courante (3:55)
4. III – Sarabande (3:26)
5. IV – Gigue..... (1:39)
Kathleen Supové, piano
6. *Ice 9* (1992) (12:43)
New Millennium Ensemble; Bradley Lubman, conductor
7. *Quicksilver* (1992) (8:07)
Jean DeMart, flute; Lynn Chang, violin
8. *Your Name Backwards* (1995)..... (7:41)
Lyrics: David Terhune; Twisted Tutu: Eve Beglarian, voice, keyboards; Kathleen Supové, keyboards

Total Playing Time: 49:39

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Notes

Everyone who knows him has a Randy Woolf story, and I will be no exception. My story is particularly appropriate because it's a first meeting story, the sort that tells everything about a person like a little parable. It has the germ of everything that follows embedded within it.

I was living abroad for the first time, Fall in Paris. I was determined to hear as much new music as I possibly could: the time was 1980, IRCAM was in full swing, and it seemed that every night I could open my Pariscope listing and find something I had to hear. One night, I think it was in November, I was at a concert at the Palais de Chaillot (Ensemble Intercontemporain playing all-Ligeti that night? Perhaps...), and during intermission, aimlessly milling in a lobby full of people I didn't know (and who were all far more stylishly decked out than me), I was suddenly accosted by a lithe, bushy-haired, bearded guy who blurted out, "Are you an American composer? You look like an American composer!"

That, of course was Randy (aka Randall Woolf, *b* 1959). He quickly introduced himself, told me that he had just graduated from Michigan State (studies with David Liptak and Charles Ruggiero) and headed to Paris because it seemed the thing to do. He taught piano to support himself, and already knew his favorite bars and cafés on the Left Bank. For the remainder of that year we saw each other regularly, I now and then occupied his apartment for a few hours to check my week's output on his piano (since I didn't have one), and we went to concerts together, followed by long nights of drink and talk in some bistro afterwards.

The story encapsulates qualities that are deep within Randy and which are equally evident in his music. Among them are: a great openness to new experience, a fearlessness about relationships, an honesty of expression, and an unashamed acceptance of his American-ness without a trace of provincialism.

Cut forward about four years. Randy had moved to Boston. By now he was thoroughly committed to music. In rapid succession he got a job teaching at the New England Conservatory Extension Division, met his eventual wife (the virtuoso pianist Kathleen Supové), founded a new music ensemble named Extension Works (still going after sixteen years), and began studying privately with David Del Tredici. Randy now views this relationship as critical to his artistic development. He has said, "In 'DDT' I found the perfect teacher for my tastes: deeply traditional yet totally individual, a musician devoted to colorism as well as emotional effect." After a couple more years, Randy went back to school, gained a doctorate at Harvard (studying part of the time with guest faculty composer Milton Babbitt), and professional breaks began to occur. Most notably, he attended Tanglewood, where he won the Paul Jacobs commission, leading to a performance of his *White Heat* for orchestra, conducted by Oliver Knussen.

Cut to the present day. Randy and Kathy have moved to New York. Amid a flourishing artistic scene they thrive in their neighborhoods of Brooklyn (where they live) and Downtown Manhattan (where they perform). Randy is constantly involved in presentation of his work, as a member of the collective Common Sense (heard on CRI 731, which includes his *My*

Insect Bride), running his own avant-garde rock group CAMP, doing arranging for Velvet Underground legend John Cale, running a music-copying business, and writing as a freelance composer for a wide range of ensembles and venues, which range from traditional acoustically based new music groups to experimental media bands and solo installations. He is the very model of the contemporary postmodern composer, open and supple in his adaptations to the dizzying range of opportunities available to those willing to tackle them.

Which leads to the works on this disc. They limn for us a portrait of Randy's music, covering the period 1987-97. They don't begin to show us everything that Randy does, but they do bring into focus aspects of his art which recur from piece to piece, and begin to suggest a "voice." Some of these characteristics are as follows:

- 1) A personal take on classical music. The *New Dancétudes* of 1987 (successor to the *Dancétudes* of 1982-3, available in a performance by Kathleen Supové on CRI 653), evoke the tradition of the Baroque dance suite with the movement titles, but they also suggest the quirkily swinging rhythms of post-bop jazz—Bach and Monk are having a jam here. Randy says that, "Here I took the classical collage thing to an extreme of 'shortness of section.' I wanted to see how few notes I could use to establish a section, and just how quickly I could make the switches while still creating a feeling of a tonal passage." That very rapidity of change, a blend of classical development and turn-on-a-dime improvisatory spirit, inspires *Quicksilver*, written in 1991 for Jean de Mart and Lynn Chang. It is precisely what its title suggests—a concise and compact essay, based on an endlessly mutable line in each instrument, each breathlessly racing the other, the lead shifting back and forth, looping one around the other like a double helix.
- 2) A brilliant sense of orchestration. This applies above all to Randy's writing for mixed ensembles, such as *Shakedown* (1990, written for Alea III). Here thirteen players create a sound whose fullness is truly orchestral. Colors are bright and contrasting, sharp and primary, like the best Pop Art. Attacks are edgy and intense, etching lines with the quick violence of a knife-slice. And the music can shrink and balloon in an instant, moving from full-throated *tuttis* to delicate two-part melody/accompaniment textures.
- 3) A willingness to mix classical and popular idioms, without a trace of self-consciousness. A perfect example is *Ice 9* (1991, written for Boston Musica Viva), whose title comes from Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and describes a chemical agent which can bring about the end of the world through freezing. There are ostinatos throughout, a descending bass line in the first half that owes equally to the idea of the passacaglia and hip-hop loops, rhythmic "stutters" for the pitched instruments in the second half over which the percussionist takes a solo on the cymbal. In the case of *Shakedown*, Randy says, "it integrates Detroit-style boogie and blues that I grew up playing (soulful but mechanically intense, hard-edged, gaudy from the town

that brought you Bob Seger, Iggy Pop, Motown, Domino's Pizza, and Jack Kevorkian) with Baroque and Classical period concepts of large form created via harmonic areas."

- 4) An ability to embrace the tender, as well as the rough. Randy stands apart from many young composers currently working the rock/classical hybrid in that he can accept the quiet moment. He doesn't have to inundate you with sound. Power-chords happen only when necessary. The music is so fun, it's often easy to forget where you were genuinely touched. He still believes in the power of the all-acoustic ensemble, though he's completely comfortable with amplified and technologically advanced instruments. For me, a perfect example is the sad little clarinet tune in *Shakedown* that slowly takes over the piece, hijacking it with its quiet beauty.
- 5) A personal take on pop music as well. Randy isn't just spicing up classical music through an adrenaline transfusion from rock and R&B. He's also doing the reverse, bringing ideas of form, counterpoint, and orchestration to pop genres and media. Take *Your Name Backwards* (1994, rev. 1997), written as an inaugural work for the duo Twisted Tutu. Emerging from a forest of samples, Eve's voice intones the lyrics of David Terhune. To quote Randy, "It's about stalker-ish unrequited love, crazy thoughts when you're all worked up about someone, evil aspects of intense desire." Of course, this isn't your standard classical piece, but it's not a typical song either. The polyrhythmic texture at the opening, the breathy chanting of the lyrics, the chord progressions that move in surprising directions, the through-composed multi-section form, the *accelerandi* that spiral out of control in tune with the lyrics' psycho tone—these come from a composer who has a distinctly non-traditional perspective on pop stylings.
- 6) So listen up and listen in. Randall Woolf is on the loose Downtown, equally comfortable with Milton Babbitt and John Cale, whichever chooses to sit at his table. Knowing Randy, I bet he's hoping they'll both join the party.

— Robert Carl

Randall Woolf studied composition privately with David Del Tredici and Joseph Maneri, and at Harvard. Recent commissions include works for the Seattle Symphony, Paul Drescher Ensemble, Dogs of Desire orchestra, and a new ballet of *Where the Wild Things Are*, in collaboration with Maurice Sendak and Septime Webre. Upcoming performances include American Composers Orchestra, the Rotterdam Festival, California EAR Unit, the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, and Music at the Anthology. His works have also been performed by Kathleen Supové, Bang on a Can/SPIT Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony, David Leisner, Twisted Tutu, Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, and others. He has also arranged music for Kronos Quartet, David Lang, and John Cale. Also on CRI's Emergency Music: *Dancétudes* (Kathleen Supové, CD 653), *My Insect Bride* (Common Sense Ensemble, CD 731), and *Your Name Backwards* (twisted tutu, CD 770).

Production Notes

Ice 9, *Shakedown*, and *Quicksilver* produced by Judith Sherman, and recorded at Recital Hall, Performing Arts Center, SUNY Purchase, November 1977 and June 1995.

New Dancétudes produced by Judith Sherman, recorded at the Recital Hall, Music Division, SUNY Purchase, January 1998.

Your Name Backwards, produced by Eve Beglarian, recorded May 1997.

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Executive producer: Joseph R. Dalton.