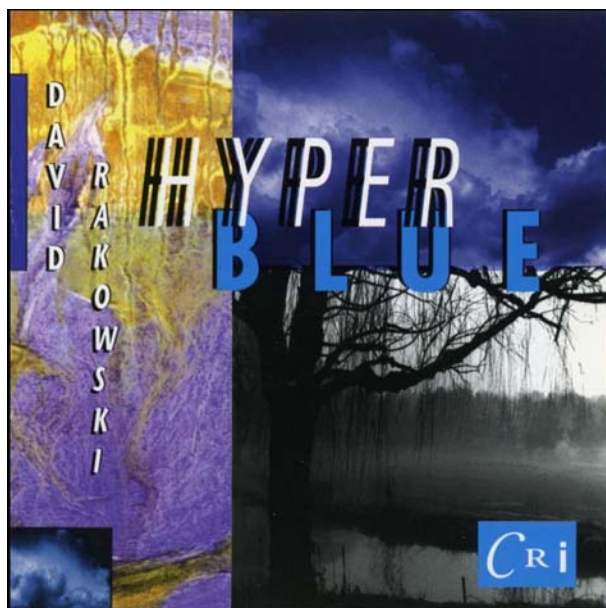


NWCR820

# Hyper Blue

David Rakowski



1. *Martler* (Étude #14, 1997, Crossing hands étude) (2:27)  
Marilyn Nonken, piano.
- Hyperblue* for piano trio (1991–93) (12:51)
2. I. Scherzo I: Fantastico (4:47)
3. II. Lento subito (4:08)
4. III. Scherzo II: Poco Pesante (3:56)  
The Triple Helix: Bayla Keyes, violin; Rhonda Rider, cello; Lois Shapiro, piano.
5. *Les Arbres Embués* (Étude #7, 1995, Étude on melody with thick chords) (6:08)  
Marilyn Nonken, piano.

- Sesso e Violenza* (1995–96) (22:52)  
Chamber concerto for two flutes and small ensemble.
6. I. Disquieting (8:10)
  7. II. Sostenuto (6:45)
  8. III. Scherzo: Vivacissimo (7:57)  
Tara Helen O'Connor, flute, piccolo; David Fedele, flute, alto flute; Ensemble 21: Curtis Macomber, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Darrett Adkins, cello; Marilyn Nonken, piano, Paul Carroll, percussion; Peter Jarvis, conductor.
  9. *Corrente* (Étude #10, 1996, Repeated note-étude) (2:03)  
Marilyn Nonken, piano.
- Three Songs on Poems of Louise Bogan* (1989) (7:31)
10. Late (1:43)
  11. Cassandra (2:15)
  12. To Be Sung On the Water (3:25)  
Judith Bettina, soprano; James Goldsworthy, piano.
  13. *E-Machines* (Étude #1, 1988, Repeated note-étude) (2:03)
  14. *BAM!* (Étude #2, 1996, Étude on swirls of notes) (2:03)  
Marilyn Nonken, piano.
- Attitude Problem* (1996-97) (15:15)
15. I. Anzioso, Molto Agitato (5:18)
  16. II. Calmo, flessibile (4:53)
  17. III. Scherzo: Poco agitato, Vivacissimo ... (5:04)  
The Triple Helix: Bayla Keyes, violin; Rhonda Rider, cello; Lois Shapiro, piano.

Total playing time 75:37

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## Notes

David Rakowski's music is fun—fun to perform, to listen to, and I'm sure, to write. It's also challenging in a number of ways. Unlike the bulk of music being written in our current era of low expectations, it aspires to the same levels of meaning, coherence, and expression as did the best music of the past. While being thoroughly informed by the classical tradition, it also has its ears wide open to American music of all kinds written over the past thirty years. This, Rakowski's first complete CD (his *Imaginary Dances*, performed by Speculum Musicae, is available on CRI CD 617), is an excellent introduction to his multifaceted and individual world.

The recording begins with one of a series of now twenty études for piano. These little pieces are quintessential Rakowski—imaginative, impeccably crafted, and sometimes more than slightly wacky. The composer describes his études as “brief, virtuoso pieces that develop a singular idea based on

some technical problem of performance or an abstract musical idea.” In composing them, he “enjoys taking an idea, however simple or silly it may be, and drawing music from it that simply never would have occurred to me in any other context.” These études, then, are a kind of workshop in which compositional notions may be tried out. Some of the composer's more bizarre essays in this form include *Pollici e Mignoli*, étude for thumbs and pinkies only; *Touch Typing*, étude for index fingers only; and *Plucking A*, an inside-the-piano étude. The Études aren't merely involved with the solving of compositional “problems,” however. There are moments of expressivity in each of them, and a healthy dose of wit as well.

First of the sampling of five Études sprinkled throughout this recording is *Martler*, one of three Études which take their inspiration from the composer and pianist Martin Butler. Composed in 1997, *Martler* (the title comes from a long-

standing nickname consisting of a conflation of his first and last names) is loosely based on the opening of Butler's ensemble work *Jazz Machines*. A perpetual motion piece (as are many of Rakowski's shorter pieces and some movements of his longer ones too), it's a crossing-hands etude and can be played smoothly only by using this particular piano technique. The surface is one of relentless forward motion which outlines a registral progression from low to high, and back—to the lowest depths of the piano this time.

*Hyperblue* (1993) is the first of two pieces written for piano trios featuring the Boston musicians Rhonda Rider and Lois Shapiro. It was commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard, and premiered by the Itzkoff-Shapiro-Rider Trio at Boston College in March of 1993. In the form of what Rakowski describes as a "scherzo sandwich—two scherzi surrounding a slow movement," the three movements are played without pause.

As the composer describes it, "one of the original ideas for *Hyperblue* was visual; when walking around Lake Como in Italy, I was struck by an image of flocks of birds flying in tight formation which would split into two pieces when one bird would violate the formation, carrying others with it, and then would somehow get back into another tight formation." This image suggested a piano trio in which "...the instruments would begin something very fast in unison, fly apart, come back into unisons, break apart, etc., as the piece demanded....other strategies came into play, particularly the temporary formations of alliances of two, which would dissolve and reform in other ways as well."

The fast, jittery, and jazzy kind of unison beginning has become a hallmark of the current Rakowski style. It can be heard to good effect in two other pieces here, *Attitude Problem* (his other piano trio—this time a rhythmic unison with four to six part chords) and, in a more lyrical vein, in *Sesso e Violenza* (1996). In *Hyperblue*, the dramatic effect is one of breathless forward motion, only temporarily suspended by the second movement with its two part string writing of almost Renaissance purity followed by an extensive passage for piano solo. *Hyperblue* was likened by the original performers to "the dark side of jazz."

*Les Arbres Embués* (Steaming Trees, 1995) was written as a response to Martin Butler's request for a Debussy-influenced etude with a simple melody embedded in thick chords. The title "refers to trees at the MacDowell Colony that were emitting a thick haze of steam in the sunlight in the morning after a heavy rain." A good example of the more lyrical side of Rakowski, it boasts harmony of great lushness, as well as a sense of long line which is never lost in spite of the extremely slow tempo.

*Sesso e Violenza* is for two solo flutes and chamber ensemble, and was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation for Ensemble 21. It is the longest and, in many ways, most dramatic work on this recording. In three movements, played without pause, the piece traverses fantastical landscapes. The writing for the two flutes (the first doubling piccolo, the second doubling alto flute) highlights a wide range of flute behavior, from the sexiest low purrs to the most violent high *sforzandos*, but it's the interaction between the two protagonists and their single and dual interactions with the ensemble that are most compelling.

The opening unison passage for flutes and strings is particularly important. As Rakowski says in his program notes, "The drama of the rest of the piece is guided by various reappearances and disappearances of the unison music in all but the flutes...until eventually the flutes are sucked back into

the unison at the end, kicking and screaming." This closing music, with its pedal D tolling away, is one of the most hair-raising and visceral passages I've heard.

*Corrente*, an étude featuring a slowly unfolding melody in the right hand over repeatedly descending figuration in the left, is "a representation of piano music (which) I heard in a dream." In a fluidly undulating triple meter, *Corrente* centers around the pitch A with which the long melodic line of the right hand begins. At key moments, we find rapidly reiterated octave As in the accompaniment. This gesture, so intentionally melodramatic in *E-Machines*, here has an elegantly detached affect—in keeping with the dream-like quality of the piece.

In *Three Songs on Poems of Louise Bogan* (1989), the lyric impulse, inherent in the instrumental music, comes to the fore. The culmination and focus of the work is "To be Sung on the Water," a love poem in a highly expressive melismatic vocal setting. "Late," with its continuously active piano part in the low register, has a text "whose imagery reminded me of driving on California's Route 1 at dusk and the rumbling sound I remembered coming from the sea." "Cassandra" is described by the composer as "a kind of accompanied recitative." Its markedly static quality and transparent texture are a welcome contrast to the eventful and densely multi-noted "Late."

*E-Machines*, also from the late 1980s, is the first of the Études. Composed under "the addling influence of the Arizona sun," and inspired by Martin Butler's tape piece, *Night Machines*, *E-Machines* is also the first in a long line of perpetual motion pieces, this one chock full of repeated notes. Hilarious at times, a particularly funny moment is set up when the frenetic embedded counterpoint is winnowed down to the single pitch E. This pitch is then rapidly moved from lowest to highest register in an intentionally contrived and grotesquely overblown gesture whose upshot is an appalling quote from *Für Elise*. The final measure reverses this upward gesture with a headlong descent to the lowest register and a hammered B-flat-D-flat, played "with fist."

*BAM!*, a companion piece to *E-Machines*, was composed in 1991 for Karen Harvey, a young pianist in the Boston area. *E-Machines* is quoted toward the middle of the piece, and *BAM!*'s ending is "a loose inversion of the ending of *E-Machines*." The title comes from a reminder to herself which Karen had written over a *sforzando* chord in another Rakowski piece. A perpetual motion tour de force, *BAM!* begins with the same two hammered notes with which *E-Machines* ended. This is used as occasionally as a humorous interruption of a continuous stream of sixteenth notes played at a ferociously fast tempo.

The piano trio, *Attitude Problem*, representing as it does the current "state of Rakowski," is a fitting way to close the recording. It was composed for the Triple Helix Trio, who premiered it in Boston in 1997. The movements, fast-slow-scherzo, played without pause, each dramatizes a different "attitude problem." The first movement has a slow harmonic rhythm which is unaffected by "frantic and anxious surface gestures." The second, a slow movement beginning with a piano solo, has a kind of disagreement between the pulse units of the piano and those of the strings. There's much lyrical writing here—first for the piano, then for the cello and violin in long arching melodies. A rough, frenetic transition leads to the third movement, a scherzo reminiscent of the final movement of *Sesso e Violenza*. The "attitude problem" in this movement is a conflict between flowing notes in a rhythm of three and staccato notes in a rhythm of two. It moves at supersonic speed throughout but, nevertheless, is full of

striking moments, including a suddenly quiet conclusion.

David Rakowski doesn't shy away from complexity, but neither does he revel in it. His musical metabolism is fast, but with attentive listening, it is also eminently easy to follow. For Rakowski, as with the finest of his predecessors and contemporaries, the desire to communicate clearly is very strong, so much so, that a younger colleague has christened him as one of the foremost exponents of "the New Clarity." The rewards of listening to the music of this most adventurous, humorous, expressive, and individual of younger composers are great. More and more people have been reaping these rewards. I'm glad that you're among them.

— Ross Bauer

**David Rakowski** (b 1958) was born and grew up in St. Albans, Vermont, where he spent and missed a good portion of his youth playing keyboards in a rock band and trombone in community bands. He first became excited about new music when his high school music teacher lent him recordings of Boulez's *Le Soleil des Eaux* and Babbitt's *Ensembles for Synthesizer*. He received his musical training at New England Conservatory and Princeton University, where his teachers included Robert Ceely, John Heiss, Milton Babbitt, Peter Westergaard and Paul Lansky; he also studied with Luciano Berio at Tanglewood. His music has been performed all over America, in Mexico, and in Europe, and he has been commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Speculum Musicae, Parnassus, Boston Musica Viva, the Riverside Symphony, Ensemble 21, Alea II, and Alea III, as well as other ensembles and individuals. He has received awards and fellowships from the American Academy in Rome (The Rome Prize), the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Fromm Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and various artist colonies. His *Persistent Memory*, commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Currently teaching composition and theory at Brandeis University, he has formerly served on the faculties of Stanford, Columbia, and Harvard Universities. He was a founder of Boston's Griffin Music Ensemble, and has also directed Alea II at Stanford and the Brandeis Contemporary Chamber Players. Rakowski is also the co-editor, with poet Joseph Duemer, of *Making Musics: Collaborations Between Poets and Composers 1978-2000*, published by Garland Press. Formerly a second-rate trombonist and third-rate pianist, he currently lives in Maine with his equally blonde wife, Beth, where they share three cats and a canoe.

**Marilyn Nonken**, piano, "enthusiastically explores modern and other contemporary areas where a lot of pianists fear to hang out," wrote the *Village Voice*, "and she packs enough artistry and technique for the journey." Since her 1993 debut, upon which she was heralded as "a determined protector of important music" (*New York Times*), Ms. Nonken has been recognized for her interpretations of contemporary works. Also a chamber musician, Ms. Nonken performs regularly with the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, the League of Composers/ISCM, and Ensemble 21. Composers who have written for her include Milton Babbitt, Michael Finnissy, Jason Eckardt, and David Rakowski. A graduate of the Eastman School, Ms. Nonken received the master of arts, master of philosophy, and doctor of philosophy degrees from Columbia University.

**Bayla Keyes**, violin, is a founding member of the Muir String Quartet, with whom she won the Evian and Naumburg Awards and subsequently played over one thousand concerts on the international touring circuit. An active performer in

Boston Musica Viva, Sonos, and the Boston Chamber Music Society, she is known as a champion of new music, recently premiering concertos in both Europe and America. She is co-chair of the string department at Boston University and teaches at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute and the Interlochen Chamber Music Conference.

**Rhonda Rider**, cello, is a member of the Naumburg Award winning Lydian Quartet, and holds degrees from the Oberlin Conservatory and the Yale School of Music. With the highly acclaimed Lydians, she maintains a demanding schedule of concert tours in both the U.S. and abroad as well as performing and teaching responsibilities as quartet-in-residence at Brandeis University. Ms. Rider has additionally garnered significant recognition as a soloist, and as an ardent and compelling advocate for new music. Her solo disc of contemporary cello music (CRI CD 564) and her duo recording with Lois Shapiro (1996) have both been cited as "Best of the Year" in the Boston Globe.

**Lois Shapiro**, piano, has concertized as soloist and collaborative artist throughout the U.S. as well as abroad. The range of her music passions and affinities is reflected in a repertoire of considerable scope: from period instrument performances and recordings of eighteenth and nineteenth century works to premieres of new pieces written for her. An articulate, lively speaker with a keen interest in cultivating an enlightened and engaged audience, Ms. Shapiro gives numerous master classes and lecture-recitals on topics such as the music of Robert Schumann in cultural perspective, and the late piano sonatas of Beethoven.

**Ensemble 21**, the new music performance group, was founded in 1993 by composer Jason Eckardt and pianist Marilyn Nonken. The Ensemble has been heard in New York at venues including Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, and the Guggenheim Museum. Ensemble 21 has presented nearly thirty premieres and commissioned over fifteen new works, many from lesser-known and emerging American artists. Recognized for its top-caliber performances, the Ensemble has also earned a reputation as a champion of important European composers rarely heard in America, specifically those associated with the New Complexity and Spectral movements.

**Peter Jarvis**, conductor, studied percussion with Raymond Des Roches at William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey. As co-director of the acclaimed New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, and director of the Composers Guild of New Jersey, Jarvis is very active as a percussionist, conductor, administrator, and educator. As conductor, Jarvis has appeared with Saint Luke's Chamber Ensemble, Cygnus Festival Orchestra, Composers Guild of New Jersey Performance Ensemble, Ensemble 21, in the San Francisco Symphony's New and Unusual Music Series, and others.

**David Fedele**, flute, made his critically acclaimed New York recital debut in 1988 at the 92nd Street Y as winner of the Young Artists International Audition Award. He has won many honors, including the Olga Koussevitzky Competition of the Musicians Club of New York, grants from Arts International and the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, a top prize in Japan's Kobe International Flute Competition, and First Prize in the New York Flute Club Competition.

**Tara Helen O'Connor**, flute, gave her Carnegie Hall concerto debut in 1986 and her solo recital debut in Weill Recital Hall in 1992. She is a founding member of the 1995 Naumburg Award winning New Millennium Ensemble, which recently released their first CD entitled *Here Comes Everybody* (CRI CD 772). O'Connor has performed with the

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Orion String Quartet, the Bach Aria Group, Orpheus, Barge Music, and performs regularly at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and Spoleto U.S.A.

**Judith Bettina**, soprano, is hailed for her proficiency in an extraordinary range of musical styles. She has appeared as guest soloist with such orchestras as the Houston Symphony, San Francisco Symphony and St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Highly acclaimed for her performances of contemporary music, Ms. Bettina has had works written for her by Mel

Powell, Tobias Picker, Chester Biscardi, David Rakowski, Richard Karpen, and David Olan. She has premiered works by Charles Wuorinen, Milton Babbitt, Lori Dobbins, and Vivian Fine.

**James Goldsworthy**, piano, has performed as an accompanist, chamber musician and soloist throughout Europe, Israel, Japan, Canada, and the United States. He has accompanied the singers Judith Bettina, Benjamin Luxon, Marion Kilcher, William Harness, and Edith Zitelli in recital, and concertized with violinist Lilo Kantorowicz-Glick.

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## Production Notes

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman.

Engineering and editing assistance: Jeanne Velonis.

Recording

*Sesso e Violenza* and *Three Songs on Poems of Louise Bogan* recorded March 11, 1997, at the Recital Hall of the Conservatory of Music, Purchase College, State University of New York. *Martler*, *Les Arbres Embués*, *Corrente*, *E-Machines* and *BAM!* recorded September 16, 1997, at the Recital Hall at the Performing Arts Center, Purchase College, State University of New York. *Hyperblue* recorded September 17, 1998, at the Recital Hall at the Performing Arts Center, Purchase College, State University of New York. *Attitude Problem* recorded September 18, 1998, at the Recital Hall at the Performing Arts Center, Purchase College, State University of New York.

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

CRI Production Manager: Allison Wolf

This CD would never have gotten off the ground without the legwork, earwork, and tireless making of phone calls by Jason Eckardt of Ensemble 21. To Jay, Marilyn Nonken, and Ensemble 21, I am extremely grateful. —*David Rakowski*

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

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