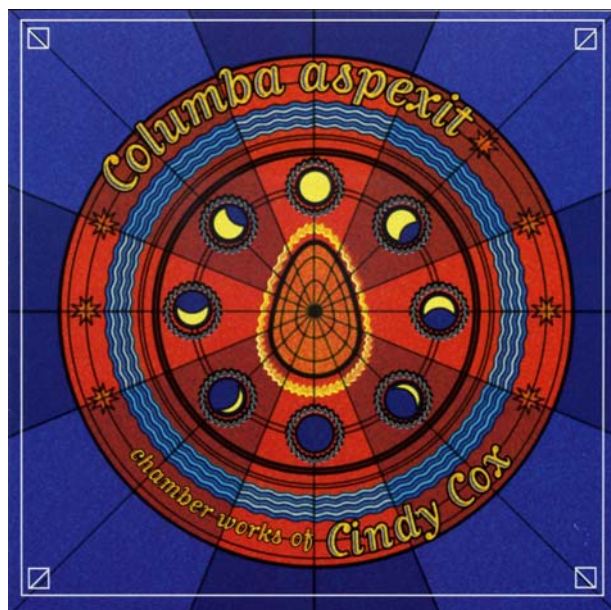


NWCR886

Columba asperit

Chamber Works of Cindy Cox



Geode for flute, clarinet, cello, percussion,
and piano (1996) (15:58)

1. I. Spiky
2. II. Sparkling
3. III. Fast

Earplay Ensemble: Tod Brody, flute; Peter Joseff,
clarinet, bass clarinet; Robin Bonnell, cello; David
Carlisle, percussion; Michael Orland, piano; George
Thomson, conductor

4. *Columba asperit: after Hildegard von Bingen*
for string quartet in four movements, played
without pause (1995) (23:47)

Alexander Quartet: Ge-Fang Yang, violin;
Frederick Lifszitz, violin; Paul Yarbrough, viola;
Sandy Wilson, cello

Primary Colors for violin, clarinet,
and piano (1995) (12:24)

5. Fast, Swinging-Bold, Fun
6. Delicate, Fragile
7. Cheeky and Cheerful
Peter Joseff, clarinet; Karen Bentley, violin;
Karen Rosenak, piano
8. *Into the Wild* for amplified violin, soprano
saxophone, Mallet-Kat, electronic drums,
electric guitar, and keyboards (1977) (11:50)

Paul Dresher Ensemble: Craig Fry, violin;
Paul Hanson, soprano saxophone; Amy
Knoles, Mallet-Kat; Gene Reffkin, electronic
drums; Paul Dresher, electric guitar; Phil
Aaberg, electronic keyboards

Total playing time: 60:04

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Notes

These works by Cindy Cox take the listener on an experiential journey affecting the mind, spirit, and body.

The rite of passage begins with *Geode* (1996) for flute, clarinet, cello, percussion, and piano, a piece of technical and formal prowess that carries the listener first into the presence of an object of mind, a geode—something to capture the attention for the experience to follow.

Like crystals forming around a dirty speck of earth, the shimmering glockenspiel, the high winds, and piano tremolos dance about the binding cello of the second movement. Indicating its bright features and high registers, the score is marked “sparkling.” This movement, nearly twice as long as the outer two, provides the central fractal for the piece’s larger inflorescence, which is replicated in the work’s overall structure. Here, Cox balances the piece’s formality with a demonstration of her facility to modulate complex patterns of melody, pitch, timbre, and resonance, through a loom work of breathtaking technique. As the cello’s shuttle gathers speed, the other instruments slow, their sparkling lyricism caught in the warp and weft of a series of darker waves.

As intimated, the outer movements frame the inner with sharp contrasts and share many formal parallels with each other. The first movement begins whimsically, full of irony, reminiscent

of Klee or perhaps the more menacing Miró. The short, syncopated upward gestures are led by the bass clarinet. The cello joins in with pizzicato but ultimately leads the voices into a series of fractured and asymmetrical gestures that take all of them into the clarifying middle movement. The last movement is a palindrome of the first. Somehow the first movement’s gags are inverted as well. The jokes aren’t as funny having passed through the center of things. But they do shine. Ultimately, the journey is an inward descent that we might bring back that crystalline jewel through a recollection of our lost dreamtime. Finally, both the conscious and the unconscious minds are necessary and necessarily symbiotic in the attentive mind now called to attention.

Columba asperit (1995) for string quartet is based upon a chant by Hildegard von Bingen, a twelfth-century abbess, who transmuted the hallucinatory visions of her childhood into an art of gnosis, mysticism, and spirituality. Her oracular painting, music, and writing became so renowned for wisdom that popes and kings across medieval Europe sought her counsel.

She dictated her visions and prophecies in a large volume called the *Symphonia armonie celestium relationum* (*Symphony of the Celestial Harmonies*). Among the collection’s

fourteen chants, “Columba aspexit” presents a fantastic and symbolic vision of Saint Maximinus as a celebrant at Mass.

Roughly translated, the text opens:

Through the crosses
in the window,
the holy dove
gazed upon
a contemplative Maximinus,
anointing as with oils
his temples,
from whence spring
the jewel of purest heart
like the sun
burning its gloam....

—from “Columba aspexit”
by Hildegard von Bingen

The music’s ecstatic and transcendent character is achieved through the combinatory effects of its tremendous range, references to the major mode, and the special work of a personal elegy. Cox captures the unique melodic material of each section and releases its breadth, scope, imagery, and inward spirituality.

Apropos of Maximinus in his devotion, the first movement opens meditatively, slow, still, with a high-pitched violin in a disjunct theme (not based upon the chant), which is marked “elegy” and dedicated to Elisabeth Terrell Cox-Hurst, the composer’s child who died at birth. Cox weaves this theme in and out, purifying it in the crucible of Hildegard’s hermetic chant. The pathos of the music rests in this deep collaboration, tragedy made numinous with understanding. The contrasting, active chant appears shortly after, and is elaborated and treated in canon (a kind of strict imitation between members of the quartet). This is followed by musical gestures in chorus and response—resembling the participation of communicants in the Chant’s Mass.

This participation is recaptured in the second movement’s three mensural canons and gestures that involve inversions and retrogrades, thus also mirroring the relationships in Hildegard’s chant between the devotees and the adored. In this movement, the active voices of the first are slowed into a series of dirges leading into the critical third movement, where the experience of devotion reaches its apex in the music. Here, a cello solo plays the chant and is gradually merged with a violin solo of the elegy. In this critical moment, a mysterious conjunction transpires: the division between the personal and transpersonal is dissolved, and the gap between the worshiper and the object is bridged. In short, the form and content of the music are united.

The unity persists as the fourth movement opens in a single canonical line. Gradually, and necessarily, the moment passes. Just as the communicant returns to the mundane following the ecstatic, a process of division of voices gradually occurs. The different instruments play at gradually differing times, and the feeling changes. The listener tracks the movement to another series of call and responses, and further reversal of roles. The personal elegy now reappears to remind us how we came to be here. But consciousness has been changed by its bath of inspiration. The composer now brings the gnosis of Hildegard’s chant unelaborated and unadorned to bear.

The extreme vicissitudes carried in the experience of *Columba aspexit* give way to the relief of play, albeit post-modern play, in *Primary Colors* (1995) for violin, clarinet, and piano. The title refers to outer movements one and three. The music in these movements is bright, strong, fast, and fun, with lots of

syncopation and allusions to popular music. The music in the second movement is contrasting; it uses the resonance capabilities of the piano’s sostenuto pedal, artificial harmonics in the violin, and lyrical melody in the clarinet.

Altogether *Primary Colors* provides the exercise of a game of perceptions involving the sense of motion and stasis in music. The first movement creates the feeling of motion through juxtaposition between sound and pauses: a montage of bold, ironic, strange, short, discrete gestures derived from the scrapbook of ragtime, blues, and other popular forms. Helping to shape the second, the final movement layers bold and even cheeky gestures to give a sense of drive and purpose. These create a tumbling effect only to start over at the end with a return, as the music of the first movement comes back. The outer games bring us to the center, like *Geode*. Here, Cox explores all the possibilities of surface. And through the discrete characteristics of the piano’s sostenuto pedal, an oscillation between stasis and motion is effectuated, bringing about a new kind of movement, arrived at non-temporally.

The “opal” of great price is in the center. The river of perceptions revolves around it and brings us to it. Thus, we are too often distracted from our journey, but inevitably brought back to matters of concern. The opal’s horizontal surface carries its own depth. Its identity is combinatorial, carrying both changing and eternal identity. This understanding is yielded, finally, by the guiding and distracting pair of outer movements and through the double entendre at center.

Just as *Primary Colors* balances with its coyote humor the perfect formality of *Geode, Into the Wild* (1997) for amplified violin, soprano saxophone, Mallet-Kat, electronic drums, electric guitar, and keyboards brings the spirit of *Columba aspexit* back into the body. In this way, Cox creates harmonic ballast for her listener’s journey, and coterminously, an earthly place for a high form of love, a human expression for diving culture.

As related in Jon Krakauer’s book *Into the Wild*, in August 1992, the starved and emaciated corpse of twenty-four year old Christopher McCandless was discovered at a remote campsite in the Alaskan wilderness. Dissatisfied with the comfort and strictures of modern society, McCandless sought the raw, unfiltered experience of life, unencumbered by money and possessions. He got rid of his car, burned his money, and, armed only with a small caliber rifle and a ten-pound bag of rice, survived four months “in the wild” before becoming ill and trapped by weakness and insurmountable obstacles.

Cox speaks for herself: “it is difficult to put my finger on what attracted me to this story; I do not wish to romanticize what in some respects seem to be the actions of an over-wrought teenager. However, there is more to this story than its bare details, and there is a compelling psychological drama in his solitary search for transcendence and escape from modern society. What interests me is McCandless’s capacity for high-risk action, the wish to walk so close to the edge—his was a sensibility which seems very far from my own (comfortable) life. How many of us have ever been alone, really alone in nature?”

Cox’s *Into the Wild* explores the psychological aspects of this young man’s journey and musically takes the listener through a mirror’s rite of passage and “into” the wild: from innocent and joyous anticipation, eager recklessness, frustration, fear, pain, sorrow, and finally to acceptance. Bringing us face to face with our own fear, Cox has us confront our own painful evasion of life where we, like McCandless, are left free to choose some other karmic womb to be born into.

—John Campion

Born in Houston in 1961, **Cindy Cox** studied piano with Lili Draus, and composition with Harvey Sollberger, Eugene

O'Brien, John Eaton, and Donald Erb. She has held Fellowships at the Tanglewood Music Center, the Aspen Music Festival, the MacDowell Colony, and the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy. Awards and commissions have come from organizations such as the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fromm Music Foundation, ASCAP Grants to Young Composers, and the International Competition for Women Composers. Recent performances include those by the Kronos Quartet, the National Symphony, the Oakland Symphony, the Alexander String Quartet, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the Paul Drescher Ensemble, Earplay and the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group. Recordings may be found on the Capstone, Mark, valve-Hearts-Studios (Cologne), and CRI labels.

Cox holds a B.M. in piano performance from Texas Christian University and a M.M. and D.M.A. in composition from Indiana University. She is presently an associate professor at the University of California at Berkeley. Her music is widely respected for its intelligence, complexity, fluency, and for the numinous sensibility it emanates.

Earplay Ensemble is a San Francisco-based chamber music ensemble made up of some of San Francisco's finest musicians and dedicated to the performance of new American music. Founded in 1985, Earplay has, for the past seventeen seasons, provided audiences in the San Francisco Bay Area with

superlative performances of contemporary art music, commissioned numerous new works, and provided an important forum for the voices of emerging American composers.

Since 1981 the **Alexander String Quartet** has performed in the major music capitals of four continents, securing its standing among the premier ensembles of its kind. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven and Bartók, the Quartet has also established itself as an important advocate of new music through over twenty-five commissions and numerous premiere performances. In 1999 BMG Classics released the Quartet's nine-CD set of the Beethoven cycle on its Arte Nova label to tremendous critical acclaim. The quartet has also recorded works of Mozart, Brahms, Dvořák, and others on the Foghorn label.

The **Paul Drescher Ensemble** is one of the foremost and unique contemporary performing ensembles in the United States. The Ensemble has three main goals: to produce and tour the Ensemble's own works of collaboratively-created opera and experimental music theater; to perform as the Electro-Acoustic Band with a repertory of commissioned works from a diverse range of contemporary composers on an instrumentation which combines traditional acoustic and contemporary electronic instruments; and to collaborate and perform live with a wide variety of media artists, and dance and theater companies from around the United States.

Production Notes

Sound engineering: Robert Shumaker (*Geode, Columba aspexit, Primary Colors*) and Gregory Kuhn (*Into the Wild*). *Geode, Columba aspexit* and *Primary Colors* were recorded at Hertz Hall, UC Berkeley; *Into the Wild* was recorded at the studio of the Paul Drescher Ensemble.

Grateful acknowledgement is due to my husband, John Campion, for his loving support and assistance in this project.

Special thanks also to Edmund Campion and the Center for New Music and Audio Technology at UC Berkeley for their assistance with *Into the Wild*.

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