Whereas the former is designed for fixed stereo medium, the latter is accompanied with a pianist. Within the acousmatic tradition, collaborative works, regardless of the nature of the collaborations, rank among the strongest. For example, Gilles Gobeil’s best works, including his individual recordings, are those involving composer-performer René Lussier. Simon Emmerson’s duets with Lol Coxhill outtrival the composer’s “fixed” works. Barry Schrader’s recent collaboration with Wadada Leo Smith has not only exposed his works, for the first time, to a wider audience, it is furthermore aesthetically varied in ways that are not true of his earlier output. The list goes on. And the hybrid variant of “Faisceaux” is no exception. Albeit suffering from what has already been discussed regarding hybrid media—namely, that the fixed sounds are accompanied with a narrow number of instruments or performers (in this case, one pianist)—the hybrid rendition is one of the most commanding works included in Illusion.

It is evocative but also pulsating and alive. The performer’s presence is able to disrupt, even if briefly, the moribund, idealistic narrative evoked by the fixed component. It is a refreshing take, compared with similar ventures of Vande Gorne into evocative sound worlds, such as “Terre” (1991) or the included fixed-medium variant, and although using instrumentation that is as of now depleted by composers time and again, it manages to stand out in a selection dominated by fixed media. What is evident, from “Faisceaux” but also the other examples noted above, is that the alleged mastery over time is, more than anything, an aesthetic qualifier. Although it is true to some degree that a narrative temporarily fixed also allows the composer to have more immediate control over the output, this is by and large incidental and furthermore subordinate to the primary function of the fixed medium, which is to redefine the work aesthetically.

Finally, it is the spirit of Arsène Souffrau that roams Illusion. The album’s opener, “Au-delà du réel,” with which I find apropos to close this review, is dedicated to the enigmatic composer. Obliquely reminiscent of Vande Gorne’s own “Métal” (1983), the piece pyramids percussive and instrumental resonance into hypnotic spectra, while conning at performative gestures. Compared with the former, its use of spectral mobility, pronounced by oscillations and rotations primarily, is much more vivid, thereby evolving faster with a magnetizing effect on the listener. As per the other dedications on Illusion, it is a material, not a merely symbolic celebration. The piece utilizes sound-objects from a rare collection gathered by Souffrau, catalogued according to materials, ranges, and frequencies.

It is as if instruments become doorways to the tenebrous. His self-described “instrumental” piece, “Incantation [N’sien ufo d’ra]” (1981), for ondes Martenot, tcheng, and three percussionists, albeit with a modus operandi different from that of Vande Gorne, in which both a score and performers are present, achieves analogous aesthetic results. The piece’s backstory is also one that pertains to the discussion on composer and performer reciprocity in the acousmatic strand. Allegedly, another version was intended by the composer but was never realized, due to the performers’ unwillingness to learn “the unusual notation of the score.” Vande Gorne may not be a romantic, yet the acousmatic tradition with which she identifies has always been prone to idealism. Acousmatic music, which, rather interestingly, positioned itself in contrast to concert-hall music, appears all the more today to suffer from the same set of predicaments besetting musique spectrale, once openly described by Grisey also as an aesthetic. And this is Illusion’s weakness as well as source of its partial strength. Acousmatic music, as aesthetic, is recognizable strictly due to the fixity of vision shared by its practitioners, and in that also, it cannot proceed forward unless opening up the creative space for performers, stressing reciprocity and collaboration.

David Felder: Jeu de Tarot


Reviewed by Ross Feller

Gambier, Ohio, USA

This disc features two, significant, multimovement works, as well as a violin solo, by composer David Felder. The first piece, “Jeu de Tarot,” is scored for violin soloist, eleven performers, and electronics. The second piece, “Netivot,” is for string quartet and electronics. The presence of virtuoso violinist Irvine Arditti is felt throughout this disc, as a soloist alongside an ensemble, as part of a string quartet, or as an unaccompanied soloist. The two ensemble works will be reviewed here.

“Jeu de Tarot” is based upon seven cards (one per movement) from a tarot deck. Each is, in a sense, sounded out by the soloist, ensemble, and electronics part. This piece is chock-full of unexpected
sounds, gestures, and combinations of materials. A keyboard part includes parts for piano, harpsichord, and a MIDI keyboard, which can, as instructed in the score, be played by two people if necessary. The MIDI keyboard connects directly to a Max patch. According to the composer, the electronics part was used for three reasons: to expand the keyboard setup beyond the piano and harpsichord parts, to trigger cues from the keyboard part itself, and “to expand the tuning world of the piece and to present premade orchestrations—impossible live—of a set of sonic images related to the characteristics that are latent in each of the Tarot cards.”

In “The Juggler,” the first movement, the initial tempo is marked Dramatic (Quarter equal to 60). Given the meticulously detailed notation utilized by the composer the word “Dramatic” becomes almost a tautology. It is impossible to hear the composer’s efforts as anything but dramatic. This is especially the case in the textures he wrought: sharp attacks that initiate entire gestural complexes, unstable changes of speed and dynamics, and chaotic, registral probing that leaves the listener not knowing what to expect next. These virtuosic materials negotiate a series of “sharp corners” that keep listeners on their toes.

“The Fool” begins with an explosive, violent energy not unlike some of the work from the Second Viennese School. Subtle, electronic sounds appear in the background. About 2 minutes into the piece the texture shifts subtly to one characterized by a repeated bass tone, a “pivot” axis around which other instruments revolve. At points it sounds like the materials are coming at you too fast to comprehend or register, the effect resembling a cross between Brian Ferneyhough’s concept of “too muchness” and Iannis Xenakis’s stochastic ideals. Additionally, there is a nontrivial application of spectral principles. This is music composed by someone who has mastered the art of writing for acoustic instruments, and knows how to expertly blend sonic colors.

The third movement, “High Priestess,” opens with a low rumbling sound played by bass clarinet and contrabass, at a slow pace, with an edgy sense of restlessness. Various layers move around and evolve at different rates of speed. Some of these share pitch material, so the effect sounds like layers are duplicated but slowed down or sped up with respect to material presentation or development. There are also marked timbral shifts and contrasts.

“The Hermit” contains overlapping pitch collections between the solo violin part and the ensemble. The pitch language makes reference to mid-20th century dissonance, a musical characterization of anguish perhaps. The violin part can be heard as an expression of the solitary nature of the hermit. About halfway through, the piece seems to end but is instantly rekindled with a greater level of dissonance, wherein the clarinet begins to carry more prominence, at times sounding like it was the violin’s duet partner.

The fifth movement, “The Empress,” sounds festive, using the full ensemble with bright timbres, reminiscent of the ensemble writing of Igor Stravinsky’s L’Histoire du Soldat. Materials fly by at a fast rate of speed. There is something like a circus or carnival aspect to the music, except that the carnival is extremely dark in tone, using repeated and parallel moving dissonances. One might imagine this movement as a backing track to one of Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings. About three fifths of the way through the piece the materials culminate to a strategically placed pause, which produces a subtle textural change that eventually coalesces into a sea of trills. There is also a coda tacked on to the end, similar in scope to the very beginning, which is cut short by a punctuated attack.

“The Hierophant” is also characterized by harsh dissonances. The keyboard part, almost as a pitched percussion instrument, blends into the background. The dissonances at times coalesce into late-Romantic gestural and pitch collections that add a strange feeling of harkening to the mix. The solo violin part soars above the ensemble, and at other times joins the texture as a participant. The electronics part plays a more obvious and significant role in this movement.

The seventh and final movement, “Moonlight,” begins with solo violin glissandi and scratch tones. The ensemble sneaks in to provide some textural support. The violin continues with cascading materials at very soft dynamic levels, at times sounding like birdsong as it plays notes in its highest register. Finally the texture completely thins out, leaving the violin to have the last word. The electronics part is so well integrated in this movement and in the piece as a whole, that it is difficult to hear it as a separate part. Instead it is used in a
fused way that effectively bridges the conceptual gap between electronic and acoustic.

The next work on this disc, “Netivot,” is written for string quartet, electronics, and an optional film part. It was composed for and is performed by the formidable Arditti String Quartet. The title is a Hebrew word for “paths.” According to the liner notes they are to be understood “in a pragmatic sense as the things that we walk on in order to get somewhere, but also in a spiritual sense as a way of being on the route to peace and self-fulfillment.” The first two movements: “Devekut” and “Hitbodedut” are named after forms of prayer as described in the Jewish Kabbalistic practices of Spanish mystic Abraham Abulafia. They can be considered as states on the path towards divine revelation.” The third movement, “Pillars of Clouds and Fire,” refers to the guideposts that the Israelites followed while traveling in the desert.

Interestingly, this work’s harmonic language comes from analyzed vowel formants produced by the voice. “Devekut” can be described as a sustained, microtonal, textural portrait. The various dissonances Felder uses produce different beating combinations that create viscerally shimmering effects. About three fourths of the way through this first movement the texture breaks violently as if the music had suddenly snapped to attention—revealing electronic resonant trails that were formerly almost unnoticed. The movement ends shortly thereafter.

“Hitbodedut” opens with falling and wailing gestures. The electronics part is more obvious in this movement. For example, near the 1 minute mark we hear some noise and granular sounds that may have been processed samples of pizzicati heard immediately prior in the string quartet. This is followed with a poignant section featuring harmonic sweeps, and octaves, set into extreme ranges. As this section continues, more noises are added that might make one think of close-up sounds of the bow or rosin. Whatever the case, they carry a certain visceral weight that leads one to consider that what is being heard is the inside of a giant string instrument composed of the four members of the string quartet, plus electronic modifications. Even though these materials capture one’s attention, they are also fragmented and distilled by the composer to achieve a level of unpredictability. The fast pacing of events suggests that objects are passing by the listeners while perhaps on a journey of their own. Elsewhere in the piece, material fragments are presented and passed around the quartet that are also diffused by the electronics part, creating a dynamic kaleidoscope effect. The movement seems to end on a pessimistic note. Perhaps the prayer remains unanswered?

For “Pillars of Clouds and Fire,” the third and final movement, the electronics once again are used to granularize the texture but in even more obvious ways than the other movements. Still, the electronics part is for the most part less present than the string sounds, which creates a well-blended mixture of acoustic and electronic worlds. This conjures the idea of a heightened sense of reality, as if one were looking to clouds or fire for direction. The music for this movement ends after a fadeout of a chord of open fifths, which is followed, oddly, by about 30 seconds of silence, perhaps a connection with the optional film part.

The pieces on this disc represent the mature work of a composer, and his ability to deftly blend acoustic and electronic materials into convincing compositions is worth exploring.

Jeff Morris: Hearing Voices

Reviewed by Ross Feller Gambier, Ohio, USA

On this compact disc composer Jeff Morris uses live sampling techniques to record and transform sounds that are happening in the moment of performance. Morris programs his live interactive “rigs” using Max software. A variety of voices are used as fodder for the composer’s processing techniques. The pitch and time shifting techniques he uses offers us a snapshot of current technologies and their common usage. Morris’s digital audio system involves a push and pull between autonomy and control. In the liner notes he describes this process: “I give my instruments the ability to make some creative decisions on their own, and they give me different

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