

Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things: —  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and of art;  
Close up these barren leaves.  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.  
—William Wordsworth

I met Lee Hyla for the first time sometime during the fall of 1981 when he came to my apartment to go over the cello part of his String Trio, which I was preparing for a performance with the Boston new-music ensemble Dinosaur Annex. I had been given the part earlier that summer, and had been pecking at it for weeks. Barely out of music school, armed with too many opinions, I had concluded that Lee's trio was unplayable; that his notation was an inexact approximation of wild and aimless improvisation, and that my job as a cellist was to approximate his approximation.

Until the moment Lee sat down and played through the piece on the piano, I had believed it was beyond human capability to even imagine, much less notate, such pandemonium. Until he pointed out to me some phrasing and various connections between pitches, I had remained oblivious to the intrinsic order of the piece (despite the obvious clues like dotted lines in the score—"oh . . . THAT dotted line."). Even though I sensed the essence of order in what I had previously presumed to be chaos, I lay beached and gasping, striving to master the clarity and control required to play the piece well. I couldn't think, play, or count fast enough.

Once I realized that Lee really meant what he wrote, it slowly dawned on me that what he wrote meant something—something that could be parsed, understood, and felt, just like the music I had been playing all my life. This was a galvanizing experience for me.

So, my aim here is to describe why I think music in general is important, and why the music on this disc is important music. Acquiring a taste for a piece of music can be a highly personal experience, but it is also a social experience, shared by a composer, the performer(s), and a listener. Although it is seldom mentioned in the company of polite new-music enthusiasts, there must be a certain level of consensus among these three parties or things get all out of whack and the whole musical enterprise becomes entropic—check out a few new-music concerts and you will know what I'm talking about. I am eliminating from this essay the discussion of flash, fashion, eclecticism, iconoclastic behavior, and other superficial properties because they are merely decorative and completely irrelevant to the music on this disc. Since a shared musical experience requires both time and magic to achieve a consensus of greatness, a. k. a. "Masterpiece" (more time and magic than is allotted to anyone but vampires), I'm taking any arguments about Great-Works-of-Art-Throughout-History off the table as well. Instead I will concentrate on how these pieces work, and whether their language and logic are valid. After all, in an evolved social order like ours (no . . . really), culture is (among other things) a repository for the promotion and preservation of shared intelligence. Music is architecture freed of its earthly mass; syntax, grammar, and logic without concepts; both container and contents; noun and verb; breath and bone; and can be, in the right hands, a primary vector of species intelligence. Good music can keep an undetected spore of intelligence alive for centuries.

If the listening process is a step-wise sequence of an ear's registering musical events, it follows that a certain amount of forward motion in music is automatic. Unfortunately, certain composers have over-utilized this property as their pieces grind forward. The music starts, the clock ticks, the music stops. Voilà—a piece! The composer's real challenge is to organize the musical information into something more than a line connecting two points labeled "start here" and "stop now." Not for nothing have composers been obsessed with form and idea, and the great difficulty in inscribing their hard work on the thin shaft of time's arrow.

Once the ideas are presented, organized, and marked with enough contrast to be perceptible, the final hurdle is to touch the listener. The music of Beethoven, with all its formal integrity, would just have lined birdcages but for its optimism, deep faith, and humanity. After all, we don't drink the wine for the shape of the bottle.

In the music of Lee Hyla, without exception, I have always felt that the jagged, honking, barking, raucous, strongly articulated rhythmic layer patrols and protects an inner layer of timeless, crystalline beauty, almost too fragile to survive on its own. His obsessive recycling of material, subtly transformed over the course of the piece, rude interruptions, and unexpected glimpses of an internal radiance, all add to a sense of uneasy striving toward a kind of transcendent experience.

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies!  
suffering! magnanimity!  
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul !  
—from *Howl*, Allen Ginsburg

The three works on this disc are intelligent, but not intellectual. They are obvious siblings, though each piece sustains its own strong character. Lee has chosen, in all of these works, to tell a tale, to work within a musical space whose boundaries consist of wildly contrasting elements. Bluntly cut transitions range from slow to fast, soft to loud, classic and contained to raucous rock-and-roll—with an almost bizarre use of Beethovenian techniques exercised on poached riffs. The source materials diverge wildly, from The Art Ensemble of Chicago to Alban Berg. While at first it may seem like putting mustard on ice cream, such use of contrast maps out a large space and plants markers—very bright markers—at the boundaries. These are the unforgettable flags, made indelible by their very contrast, that articulate a large musical space. As in many works of Beethoven, the material is tightly controlled, but the scope of the pieces is vast.

### **Form and Memory**

The composer's objective is to construct a discernible form to contain his/her ideas. Now that physics has evolved from ordered Newtonian space to Mandelbrothian chaos, today's "frozen music/melted architecture" (apologies to Goethe) may not necessarily describe a grand or even comfortable physical space. The concert music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resembled the salons and halls in which it was performed: boxy spaces, classic sonata form, simple binary forms, variation form, the golden mean, and so forth. Even as the classic symmetries of the sonata form began to stretch and contort, musical space still adhered to the laws of Newtonian physics. Today nested, self-similar patterns can be infinitely generated by one equation; wormholes and folded space have altered our concepts of time and dimension. Musical space can now be a habitat for the mind alone, liberated from our Newtonian-based self-images, which breathe air and move through space at a human pace. It's difficult to describe the "shape" of the pieces on this disc, because they don't fit in the boxes we have traditionally used to describe music. Symmetry (to borrow from Cage and Feldman) is crippled by slight alterations, and the form is coeval with the material.

My grandfather, who advanced far into the Terra Incognita of geriatric senility before he died, kept a murder mystery next to his bed, which he would take up and read at random, wandering from page to page, floating free and unfettered within the narrative space.

"I can't remember anything, anyway."

Without memory there is murder, but no mystery; surprise, but no suspense. Form, regardless of its shape, creates suspense, fulfills (or confounds) expectations and prolongs, truncates, or completely withholds established patterns retained in the listener's memory. Even though form may be liberated from its box, it remains the partner of memory.

By using strongly identifiable rhythmic patterns, Lee can prolong or truncate a listener's expectations by altering the phases of repetition. For example, a simple reduction in the number of a riff's repetition accelerates the feeling of motion, intensifies the arrival. In a sense, these riffs are the bricks out of which each piece is built. Gil Rose, the conductor of the three spectacular performances on this disc, says:

I would say that the key to performing and preparing Lee's music is finding the rhythmic gesture that is implied by his very specific notation. . . . For me, in performing Lee's music, focusing on gesture seems to get you precision, not the other way around.

The phasing of various patterns (riff, gesture, phrase, or section) over time gives each pattern a kind of groundswell rhythm, which organizes the structure of the piece as a whole, even though, like a body of water, there may be several different wave systems occurring at once. In the last movement of *Trans*, for example, two opposing thematic structures pass through each other, like a slow-motion collision of two ectoplasmic creatures. Another very clear example of this use of contrasting patterns can be easily heard in the very opening of the Bass Clarinet Concerto, which divides into three roughly symmetrical subsections. The differences between the subsections expose Lee's compositional processes, and in many ways establish the dramatic ideas that propel the piece forward. In detail: The first section opens with the flute outlining a perfect fifth. The sonority and texture of this subsection gradually thickens, and a high-register violin melody adds a sparkling upper boundary, all of this moving toward an exclamatory, punctuated chord. The process starts over with the second subsection, only this time with a tremolo in the strings. More textural and harmonic enrichment leads again to another high register violin solo, this time even higher by one half step. Bang! Another exclamatory chord punctuates the second subsection. The piece begins again, for the third time, with the solo bass clarinet outlining a very wide span of intervals. The section builds again, like the others, but pours itself out into a two-bar rest without an exclamatory chord. These three subsections grow progressively shorter, more intense. The two-bar rest that bridges into the rest of the piece is packed with a kind of latent energy that gives the piece a hyper-ventilated power, energized by the differences contained in the three opening subsections.

### **Pitch, Register and Harmony**

Music is a flow of information over time, like water flowing through a pipe, or digital information delivered by a cable. Composers, very early on, devised techniques in which several contrasting channels of information were delivered simultaneously. In opera, for example, five characters could tell their story with every voice heard and every message heartfelt.

In Lee's pieces, pitch trumps pitch class, which makes register very, very important. It's a three-ring circus, where concurrent messages can be delivered in the high, middle, and low registers. Not exactly counterpoint, since in traditional counterpoint the voices are locked into codependent relationships—this is counterpoint on steroids. The utilization of registration, combined with augmented or diminished note values, permits music in different registers to progress at different speeds. It is important for a listener to be acutely aware of register as more than just instrumental coloration. The very first gesture of *Trans* (movement 1), played by the clarinet, is a widely spaced, three-note motive that spawns three threads (middle, high, and low registers) that weave through the first section of the piece. The first thread, a middle register murmur, alternates half steps. The second, a discreetly woven gold thread articulated only by the high pings in the flute and violin riffs, obsessively alternates half-steps in the highest register at a much slower speed. The third starts a ferocious melody shared by the cellos and bassoons, which crashes into the end of the eleventh measure, ending the section.

Pitch begets intervals, and intervals beget harmony. Lee's harmonic language is fundamental, organic, and tonal, based upon the power and identities of the intervals contained within a sonority, both vertically (in chords) and horizontally (in melodies). Intervals are not equivalent: There is a distinct hierarchy of consonance, and yet a freedom from the tagged diatonic structures of nineteenth-century chromaticism. Almost without

exception, even complex harmonic sonorities, once parsed into their component intervals, behave predictably, with each interval resolving according to its own gravitational weight. The opening of the Violin Concerto, which moves into and out of a radiant D-major chord is a study in intervallic conflict resolution and voice-leading, yet cannot be meaningfully scanned as a chord progression.

## **The Natural World**

All the pieces on this disc pull from the outside world, quoting from other pieces, birdsong, and reminiscences, which may or may not be completely subjective to each listener. (I keep hearing echoes of “O Alter Duft” from Pierrot in the Violin Concerto, but then again, I hear “There’s a Place for Us” in subway brakes.) Source material is directly quoted (the bass line from the 1970 Art Ensemble of Chicago tune “Theme de Yoyo” from *Les Stances a Sophie* in the Violin Concerto) or mined for its pitch content and subtly injected into a piece’s genetic fabric. (“Longest Train I Ever Saw,” an old country song, is used in the Bass Clarinet Concerto, which to my ear infuses the entire piece with a very subtle bluesy feel, like the apparition of an ancestral trait passing through a child’s face.)

Hearing these pieces for the first time can be like a confrontation with a big sack of snakes: a complicated, seething tangle of very active lines. These are big pieces, emotionally rangy, and full of music, devoid of filler. Sometimes the music is taxing, and it is necessary to resort to my emotional compass, trusting that my own internal software can emotionally engage with something that I don’t fully understand intellectually. I have known Lee for more than twenty years, and have yet to regret that trust.

\* \* \*

The Concerto for Bass Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra was composed in 1988 for the bass clarinet soloist Tim Smith. It was commissioned by the Fairfield Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Tom Crawford, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. It was first performed on January 14 of 1989, in Westport, Connecticut, and received its second performance with the same soloist and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (conducted by Gil Rose) in 2001, after minor revisions by the composer.

*Trans*, composed for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, was written at the MacDowell Colony and in Boston, and was completed in March 1996. The title partly refers to the importance of transformation of material as an ongoing concern in the piece. *Trans* was commissioned by the Mary Flagler Carey Charitable Trust, and given its premiere on May 11 of 1996 by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

The Violin Concerto was composed between February and November, in 2001. It was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and written for Laura Frautschi, Gil Rose, and the musicians of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. The first performance took place at Jordan Hall in Boston on January 19, 2002.

—*Ted Mook*

Ted Mook is a freelance cellist who lives in New York.

**Lee Hyla** (b. 1952) was born in Niagara Falls, New York, and grew up in Greencastle, Indiana. He has written for numerous performers including the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Kronos Quartet (with Allen Ginsberg), Speculum Musicae, the Lydian String Quartet, Tim Smith, Tim Berne, Rhonda Rider, Stephen Drury, Mia Chung, Judith Gordon, Mary Nessinger, and Boston Musica Viva. He has received commissions from the Koussevitzky, Fromm, Barlow, and Naumburg Foundations, the Mary Flagler Carey Charitable Trust, Concert Artists Guild, three commissions from Chamber Music America, and two Meet the Composer/Reader’s Digest Consortium commissions. He has also been the recipient of the Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, a Guggenheim fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, the Goddard Lieberon Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the St. Botolph Club Award, and the Rome

Prize. Recent projects have included *At Suma Beach* (based on the Noh Play *Matsukaze*) for mezzo-soprano and seven instruments, which was commissioned by the Japan Society of New York and premiered there by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in June of 2003; *Amnesia Redux* for Triple Helix which received its first performance at the Los Angeles County Museum in April of 2002; *Detour Ahead* for solo double bass, commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group and performed by Dennis Trembly at the first concert of the Green Umbrella Series in the newly built Disney Hall in November 2003; and a piece for House Blend, the resident ensemble of the Kitchen in New York City, to be premiered in May 2004. His music has been recorded on Nonesuch, New World, Avant, Tzadik, and CRI, and is published exclusively by Carl Fischer. He lives in Boston, where he is chairman of the composition department at the New England Conservatory.

The **Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP)** is one of the few professional orchestras in the United States dedicated exclusively to performing music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Founded in 1996, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's mission is to illuminate the connections that exist naturally between contemporary music and contemporary society by reuniting composers and audiences in a shared concert experience. In pursuit of its mission BMOP has produced more than thirty concerts of contemporary orchestral music, featuring more than one hundred works by American composers; presented twenty-six world premieres, including twelve commissioned by the orchestra; recorded more than thirty works previously unreleased on commercial recordings; produced three successful outreach initiatives; and launched Opera Unlimited, a new festival of contemporary chamber opera. A six-time winner of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming of Orchestral Music, BMOP has been presented by the FleetBoston Celebrity Series, Tanglewood, and the Boston Cyberarts Festival, and has performed at such venues as Jordan Hall, Symphony Hall, New York's Miller Theater, and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. BMOP recordings are currently available from Chandos, New World, Naxos, and Oxingale.

**Gil Rose** is the founding Artistic Director of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP), Music Director of Opera Boston and the Co-Director of the Opera Unlimited Festival. Active as a guest conductor, Mr. Rose has led the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra, the Warsaw Philharmonic, the American Composers Orchestra, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, the National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine, the Netherlands Radio Symphony Orchestra, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra Chamber Players. He made his Tanglewood Festival debut conducting Lukas Foss's opera *Griffelkin*, a work he recently recorded for Chandos Records. Recognized for his recordings of American orchestral and operatic repertoire, his discography includes premiere recordings of music by George Rochberg, Eric Chasalow, Tod Machover, Lukas Foss, and Arthur Berger. Forthcoming are discs of music by Steven Mackey, Stephen Paulus, Bernard Rands, and Gunther Schuller, as well as the first recording in fifty years of Samuel Barber's opera *Vanessa* for Naxos.

Mr. Rose received his undergraduate training at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. His Master of Fine Arts degree and Artist Diploma are from Carnegie Mellon University, where his teachers were Samuel Jones, Lukas Foss, Juan Pablo Izquierdo, and Robert Page.

Violinist **Laura Frautschi** holds degrees from The Juilliard School and Harvard College. She is a frequent recitalist and soloist with orchestras in the United States and Japan. As a chamber musician, Laura has appeared at the Caramoor, La Jolla Summerfest, Taos, and Topeka Sunflower festivals, and at the Wellesley Composer and Chamber Music Conferences. In addition, she has performed as concertmaster of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, the New York City Opera Orchestra, and the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. Laura has released a live recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* for King Records, several albums of short pieces for Pony Canyon Records, and five DVDs produced by Fuji TV.

**Tim Smith** performs widely as a soloist and in ensembles in the United States and Europe. He has appeared with Speculum Musicae, Elliot Sharp's Orchestra Carbon, the Vermont Symphony, the Fairfield Chamber Orchestra, the Prism Chamber Orchestra, and at the American Academy in Rome. He has recorded for the Avant, Centaur, New World, Mode, and Opus One record labels.

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*Amnesia Variance*. The Callithumpian Ensemble, Stephen Drury conducting. Tzadik TZ 7048.

*Ciao Manhattan*. Elizabeth Brown, flute; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Ted Mook, cello; Lee Hyla, piano. Avant 015.

Concerto for Piano and Chamber Orchestra No. 2. Aleck Karis, piano; Speculum Musicae, William Purvis conducting. New World Records 80491-2.

*The Dream of Innocent III*. Rhonda Rider, amplified cello; Lee Hyla, piano; Jim Pugliese, percussion. CRI CD 564.

*Howl*. Kronos Quartet; Allen Ginsberg, speaker. Nonesuch 79372-2.

*In Double Light*. Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Tim Smith, bass clarinet; Elizabeth Rodgers, piano; Jim Pugliese, percussion; Lee Hyla conducting. Avant 015.

*Pre-Amnesia*. Tim Smith, alto sax. Opus One Records 79. (LP)

*Pre-Pulse Suspended*. Speculum Musicae, Donald Palma conducting. New World Records 80491-2.

*Riff and Transfiguration*. Mia Chung, piano. Tzadik TZ 7048.

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String Trio. Dinosaur Annex String Trio. CRI SD 513. (LP)

*Third Party*. Judith Gordon, piano. Tzadik TZ 7048.

*We Speak Etruscan*. Tim Berne, baritone sax; Tim Smith, bass clarinet. New World Records 80491-2.

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Producers: Joel Gordon, Lee Hyla, Gil Rose

Engineer: Joel Gordon

Production Asst: Matthew Packwood

Digital mastering: Dirk Sobotka, SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC

The Concerto for Bass Clarinet and Orchestra was recorded January 21, 2001, at Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston. The Violin Concerto was recorded January 20, 2002, at Mechanics Hall, Worcester, Massachusetts. *Trans* was recorded January 22, 2003, at Mechanics Hall, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Cover art: Katherine Desjardins, *Untitled (Love) (natura morta series)*; oil, wax, ash, on Masonite, 48" x 72", 1996

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

**This recording was made possible by grants from The Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University and the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust. This recording was also made possible with support from the New England Conservatory.**

Special thanks to Laura, Tim, Gil, and the players in BMOP for their extraordinary musicianship, energy, and dedication; to my wife, Kate, whose work is on the cover of this CD; to Daniel Steiner and the New England Conservatory for their generous support of the recording of the Violin Concerto; to the MacDowell Colony where parts of all three pieces on this disc were composed; to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the Bellagio Study and Conference Center where parts of the Violin Concerto were composed; to Pietro Gallina for his generosity in Rome; to the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra; to the Fairfield Chamber Orchestra and Tom Crawford.

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**LEE HYL A** (b. 1952)

**BOSTON MODERN ORCHESTRA PROJECT; GIL ROSE, CONDUCTOR**

**TRANS**

80614-2

1. *Concerto for Bass Clarinet and Orchestra* (1988) 10:52  
Tim Smith, bass clarinet

*Trans* (1996)

2. First movement 7:42

3. Second movement 3:45

4. Third movement 6:37

5. *Violin Concerto* (2001) 24:22  
Laura Frautschi, violin

All compositions published by Carl Fischer.

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