

A predominant trend in the history of computer music has been the attempt to make “better” sounds. Nowadays, we can produce computer-generated sounds that are both very beautiful and very realistic. Because of this, we frequently listen to early pieces in the repertoire and find ourselves making excuses for the way the music sounds: “Well, of course, that was the best they could do with the technology they had back then.” Thus, an unfortunate side effect of the improvement of technology is that a lot of those early works now sound dated. One of the most amazing things about Charles Dodge’s *Cascando*, completed in 1977, is that it sounds as fresh, relevant, and “right” as if it had been written yesterday.

*Cascando* is based on Samuel Beckett’s mysterious 1963 radio play of the same name. Originally written in French, with music by the composer Marcel Mihalovici, it was later translated by the author into English. The three characters of the play are Opener, Voice, and Music. Opener acts as a kind of “voice-over,” a master of ceremonies; he “opens” and “closes” the statements of the other characters, sometimes interrupting them. He is authoritative, masterful (Beckett characterizes him as “dry as dust”), but as the play proceeds, he reveals more than a touch of paranoia, talking about what “they” say about him, how “they” claim that he opens nothing, how “they” do not see him.

The character of Voice is very different (“low, panting”). Desperately, he is trying to tell a story. He speaks in short fragments, his anxiety palpable. He repeats himself, trapped, as he tries to communicate. He longs to “get it right” to “finish it” and then, finally, to no longer need to tell stories: to sleep. The story that Voice is trying to tell is that of Woburn, a hapless, somewhat shadowy character who is on a fitful journey. Woburn starts out, falls, first in the mud, then in the sand, then on the rocks, finally making his way to a boat in which he drifts. He passes an island, then heads out to sea “heading nowhere . . . elsewhere . . . anywhere.” Voice’s effort to tell the story could be seen as a representation of the plight of the author (or composer): the powerful compulsion to create, the painful process, the longing to “get it right” and then be finished with all of the struggle, to be free of the compulsion, to rest at last.

It is clear that Beckett thought of Music as a third character, but there is no real indication of what he is like (unlike the other two characters, for Music Beckett offers no description). His utterances are merely represented in the play by a series of dots. The open-ended nature of Music surely presents an interesting challenge to any composer attempting a setting of this work. Perhaps it was this, along with a natural affinity for Beckett, that first attracted Charles Dodge to *Cascando*.

Dodge was one of the main proponents of early synthesized speech. The available technology allowed a composer to record a speaking voice and to analyze its characteristics on the computer. These characteristics include the pitch of the voice, its amplitude, and whether it is pronouncing a vowel or a consonant (“voiced” or “unvoiced”). Based on this analysis, the voice could be resynthesized, but with various changes determined by the composer. For example, its speed and pitch could be changed independently of one another. Thus, a composer could resynthesize a spoken voice so that it was now singing specific pitches with composer-determined timings. Wonderful as these possibilities were, however, there were severe limitations. Synthetic speech of this era has a particular “low-fi” quality—it never really sounds entirely natural. Dodge had used synthetic speech in his *Speech Songs* of 1972, and the somewhat unnatural quality of the speech perfectly suited the surreal nature of the Mark Strand poems. Part of Dodge’s genius lies in perfectly selecting text to match the actual sound world available to him—if this is the case in *Speech Songs* it is perhaps doubly so in *Cascando*.

In Dodge’s version of the play, Opener is the unprocessed voice of the actor John Nesci, Voice is synthetic speech based on a reading by the actor Steven Gilborn, and Music is a mix of pitched and unpitched electronic sound derived from Voice. Dodge created *Cascando* over the course of five years, at the computer centers of Columbia University and the City University of New York, and at the Brooklyn College Center for Computer Music.

Nesci's portrayal of Opener is magnificent, and Dodge wisely leaves his voice unprocessed. It is in the depiction of the character of Voice that Dodge outdoes himself. Voice is desperately trying to communicate, to create, to express, and of course failing, but trying, trying. This is both painful and touching, and the obsessive, scratchy quality of the synthetic speech creates a perfect and moving depiction. One can almost imagine that it is the voice of the computer itself, trying but failing to be human. Dodge composed the rhythmic outline and the pitch contours of the music for Voice in such a way that, while they are "composed," with recognizable motivic fragments corresponding to particular repeated phrases, they follow natural speech contours. Thus, Voice is a curious hybrid of the natural and the unnatural. Voice obsessively repeats himself, and the feeling of being trapped, of circling endlessly over the same *idées fixes*, is reflected in the repetition in his music, the relatively narrow pitch range, and also in the hoarse, almost stunted quality of the synthetic speech (Dodge emphasized this hoarse, whispering sonority by mixing noise in with even the pitched, or vowel portions, of the speech).

The sound of Voice is certainly not beautiful, certainly not technically "slick"—it is coarse, rough, unformed, hopelessly flawed. But to call this a problem would be to simply miss the point, and to miss how perfectly Dodge has realized Beckett's material. The sound that Dodge gave Voice is a perfect embodiment of Beckett's character—indeed, after hearing Dodge's version, it is hard to imagine any other representation.

To depict Music, Dodge used a subset of some of the same material that he used for Voice, but removed the speech-like quality and greatly elongated it. Dodge has described the process: "It was to be almost as if you trained on the Voice a microscope so powerful that the larger patterns, forming words, would be imperceptible; only the microscopic details would be apparent." Thus, the pitched parts of Music have a flat, buzzing quality, while the non-pitched parts flutter like mysterious wings. This has a very curious effect—the character of Music is represented by a sound world that avoids traditional musical elements, such as melody, harmony, rhythm. In a sense Voice, with his clear motives and rhythms, is much more traditionally "musical." Music, in Dodge's version, is inhuman, otherworldly—a kind of musical moonscape. While some interpreters of Beckett's play have viewed Voice and Music as representing language and emotion respectively, for me Dodge's realization is more complicated than this, more subtle. Voice expresses a visceral pain and desperation, while Music, formed by zooming in on speech and focusing on it at an almost atomic level, bypasses human emotion and touches on an elemental quality. The result is haunting, uncanny, disturbing.

These three characters, then, never deviate from their path throughout the piece. Each is monomaniacally driven in his way of behaving. They do interact—there are a number of duets between Voice and Music, and Opener interrupts both on occasion—but it is hard to imagine that they actually hear each other: they certainly do not adapt their way of behaving to accommodate each other. Dodge's aesthetic is spare and austere, and it is an ideal match for Beckett's. The narrowness of the musical sphere of the piece beautifully and powerfully reflects the feelings of desperation, of being trapped, of persevering in the face of hopelessness that so pervade Beckett's universe. The actual sounds in the piece—grating, raspy, "imperfect" Voice, alternately flat and fluttering, inhuman Music, and powerful, clear, somewhat overwhelming Opener—could not be improved upon. If this sound world of early computer music had been applied, for example, to set a beautiful poem or love song, we might be left feeling that there was a mismatch between the material and the execution. We might wish that such a work could be remastered, in the way that the soundtracks of various old movies sometimes are. It is a great tribute to Dodge's artistic insight that he was able to use the limitations of the technology as an asset, to form a perfect expression of the content of the text.

The second two pieces on this disc are much later works. *Fades, Dissolves, Fizzles* was commissioned by the Groupe de Musique Expérimentale de Bourges and premiered in 1996; the *Violin Variations* were completed in 2009. These two works share much in common—both reflect Dodge’s interest in just intonation, and both reflect a sound world much changed from that of 1977. Here the computer has achieved a beautiful voice—indeed, beautiful enough that it can hold its own brilliantly with the violin. On the surface, perhaps, they do not seem to share a great deal with *Cascando*. And yet, beneath the surface, one can sense the same somewhat austere aesthetic that dominates *Cascando*. Perhaps even more importantly, however, one can sense again Dodge’s unerring ability to match sonic surface to musical and dramatic content.

In *Fades, Dissolves, Fizzles*, Dodge describes the three kinds of music in the piece as “chords,” “tinkles,” and “gamelan,” but however you describe them, they create a beautiful, serenely shining surface. Each of these musical “characters” has its own distinct personality, as in *Cascando*, and again, as in *Cascando*, each stays single-mindedly on its own individual track with nothing extraneous to distract it. The piece cycles through five sections, where each musical texture recurs, each time in the same order, but elaborated upon. And although these sounds and their music contrast with each other, all are derived from a common starting point: a single harmonic series. Perhaps it is this underlying driving force that gives the piece, in spite of the different characters of the three musical protagonists, a feeling of powerful concentration, of a steady and unerring vision. The overall effect is magical. The piece hardly seems to begin or end—rather, it is as if we have looked in briefly at a timeless process, an eternal music box perpetually chiming its harmonic series throughout the aeons.

Dodge suggests that the *Violin Variations* might be considered “canonic” variations, due to the imitative texture that prevails throughout each movement; he also points out that each movement is based on the same 31-tone scale. Indeed, the four pieces are very closely linked—the final one even including a reprise of the first. All feature beautiful, bell-like tones in the computer, and violin writing that ranges from sparse and almost chaste to a lively dance-like feel in the pizzicato of the third variation. If *Fades, Dissolves, Fizzles* calls to mind the aesthetic of *Cascando* by nature of its concise treatment of musical materials, the *Variations* do this as well, but with something more. With their fixation on a single justly tuned pitch world, the *Variations* hint at the quality of obsession that pervades the play. And I hear a kind of poignant echo of the pacing of *Cascando* in the persistence of short phrases throughout the *Variations*—they bear a trace of Beckett’s terseness.

The music on this disc was written over a period of more than thirty years. Over the course of those years, so much has changed in technology, in music, in life in general. But throughout the work represented here one can recognize the remarkable, entirely original voice of Charles Dodge. He is truly a composer who writes music that does not sound like anybody else’s. He has never been part of any “ism” or movement; he is his own category. And although his stylistic approach and his interests have changed over the course of the years, that voice retains the same unique, focused nature, a restrained expressivity, and an unapologetic economy of means. This voice is supported by a technique so flawless that it recedes entirely into the background, drawing no attention to itself while allowing the music to speak with exceptional clarity. Dodge has always been a true musician, an artist for whom the computer is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. And we as listeners are fortunate to have the opportunity to experience that artistry here, in three works that showcase it in all its nuanced simplicity, its variety, its similarity, and its surprising beauty.

—Frances White

*Frances White is a composer of instrumental and electronic music.*

**Charles Dodge** (born 1942) is an American composer best known for his electronic music, specifically his computer music. He studied with Richard Hervig and Philip Bezanson at the University of Iowa, and was a summer music student of Darius Milhaud at Aspen and Gunther Schuller at Tanglewood.

Dodge earned his B.A. at the University of Iowa with high distinction and honors in music. He was awarded his M.A. and the first doctorate in music composition (DMA) by Columbia University. His teaching career included professorships at Columbia University (where he initiated the graduate study of computer music), the City University of New York (where he founded the Center for Computer Music at Brooklyn College), and Dartmouth College, from which he retired in 2009 after sixteen years as a visiting professor. In addition to composing and teaching Dodge coauthored the highly praised book *Computer Music: Synthesis, Composition and Performance*. He is also the founder and co-owner, with his wife Katharine, of Putney Mountain Winery in Putney, Vermont, a leading winery in the state.

As a composer Dodge is best known for his computer music works, both with and without the addition of live instrumental and vocal performance. Dodge's most important and most often performed works include *Earth's Magnetic Field* (1970), *Speech Songs* (1972), *Cascando* (1977), *Any Resemblance Is Purely Coincidental* (1980), *The Waves* (1984), *Viola Elegy* (1987), *Violin Etudes* (1994), and *Fades, Dissolves, Fizzles* (1995). *Any Resemblance Is Purely Coincidental* combines a computer-synthesized "Caruso voice" singing "Vesti la giubba" with live piano accompaniment, sometimes to hilarious effect.

**Baird Dodge** is a professional violinist/violist with a wide range of interests in both chamber music and contemporary music performance. He joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a violist in 1996 and moved to its second violin section the same year. He was appointed the orchestra's principal second violin in 2002 by music director Daniel Barenboim. An avid chamber musician, Dodge's many credits include performing at the Bravo! Colorado Festival, the Taos Chamber Music Festival, the Marlboro Music Festival, and on tour with Music from Marlboro. He has appeared several times as a guest artist with the Chicago and Colorado string quartets. Dodge has a special affinity for contemporary music. He has often performed works by his father, Charles Dodge, including the premieres of his *Violin Variations* in 2009 and *Violin Etudes* in 1994. He recorded the *Viola Elegy* for New Albion Records in 1992. In 2006, with the Chicago Symphony, he premiered and recorded *Carillon Sky*, a chamber concerto written for him by Augusta Read Thomas.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Any Resemblance is Purely Coincidental*. New Albion NA 43.

*Earth's Magnetic Field*. On *Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center 1961–1973*. New World Records 80521-2.

*Etudes II & IV for Violin and Tape*. Miwako Abe, violin. New World Records 80641-2.

*Synthesized Voices*. New World/CRI NWCRL 348.

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Producer: Charles Dodge

*Cascando* was realized at the computer centers of Columbia University and the City University of New York and the Center for Computer Music at Brooklyn College.

*Fades, Dissolves, Fizzles* was recorded by Charles Dodge in 1995.

*Violin Variations* was recorded on June 14, 2009 in the WFMT radio station studio in Chicago. Recording engineer: Chris Willis; Editing: Baird Dodge.

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CHARLES DODGE (b. 1942)  
*A RETROSPECTIVE (1977–2009)*

80701-2

1. *Cascando* (1977) 32:38

*Realization of Samuel Beckett's Radio Play*

Opener: John Nesci

Voice: Computer synthesis based on a reading by Steven Gilborn

Music: Computer synthesis based on Voice

2. *Fades, Dissolves, Fizzles* (1995) 13:57

*Violin Variations* (2009) 8:24

(for violin and computer)

3. I 1:46

4. II 1:41

5. III 1:27

6. IV 3:30

Baird Dodge, violin

TT: 55:18

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