

The Quest to Escape Chaos: Robert Carl's Music for Strings

Robert Carl possesses one of the widest and most varied expressive ranges of any composer of his generation. This isn't the disc to prove that, however. In the string music here we focus in on what I think of as the central core of Carl's aesthetic: the devoutly ruminative music with expression markings like "achingly" and "fragile." In his string music, Carl aligns himself with Beethoven and Ives as a composer who asks musical questions, who frankly frames his own spiritual journey in sounds with all its doubts, hungers, epiphanies, and acquiescences. At the end of *Open* or Carl's Second String Quartet, we know the composer's response to the existential questions of life as definitively as we can know them at the end of Ives's Fourth Symphony, or Beethoven's Ninth. Carl can be playful, satirical, intellectual, or picturesque in his other works, but something about the soulful nature of strings makes him express his innermost yearnings through them.

And these three works, written within a three-year period, are even more closely related than this implies. Their motivic material seems to be cut from the same cloth: the imperious dotted-rhythm motive at the beginning of *Open*, the thirds encircling each other in the "Angel-Skating" Sonata, the leaping lines at the beginning of the Second Quartet, are all based on pairs of interlocking intervals, whose contours Carl weaves into tapestries whose underlying unity is felt viscerally without being analytically contrived. Carl is a master at sustaining an idea without seeming to do so. In a way, all of these are one-idea pieces, despite their wide ranges of tonality, tempo, and emotive expression. It's just that Carl's ideas are open-ended and evolve organically, never complete until they've reached some sort of fruition, suddenly reappearing in their original form as proof they were there all along.

More obviously, Carl fills his string music with slow glissandos, trills, clusters, tremolos, and other effects which late twentieth-century music left behind to enter the world of timbre and noise. Yet unlike Penderecki, Ligeti, Gloria Coates, Erkki-Sven Tüür, and other composers who have based pieces on such devices, Carl never uses them abstractly or as the main focus. They are the frayed edges of a music that is lyrical and harmonic at its center, in which tonality and dissonance still possess their traditional connotations, but seem always in danger of melting away into inchoate nothingness. The superficial physical thrill of a strange timbral effect holds no charm for him. It's the way his melodies emerge from trills or tremolos, or his harmonies from glissandos fanning from a central note, that counts, making their existence seem hard-won and not to be taken for granted. The success of coming-into-being of his comforting seventh chords and mountain-leaping lines is pervaded by an awareness of potential collapse that makes them all the more poignant. Carl's is, at times, a Romantic music fighting its way out of modernist chaos.

Robert Carl may seem to be an indistinct yet stable presence on the early-twenty-first-century musical scene. The very variety of his music has made him difficult to bring into focus, even as his prolificness has kept him visible. He has spent his adult life in academia—he took a job at the prestigious Hartt School of Music in 1984, right out of the University of Chicago grad school—but he has traveled much in Europe, living there on various residencies. He is not regularly counted among the New Romantic composers: George Rochberg, Joseph Schwantner, Joan Tower, John Adams, David Del Tredici, John Harbison. And yet he could be, because his music does represent a return of Romantic rhetoric and values within a modernist frame. Yet in other ways he stands apart. The New Romantics are sometimes spoken of as "postmoderns," with the implication that their use of nineteenth-century conventions has an ironic cast. There is nothing ironic in Carl's most serious music, such as the music heard here, and his hold on modernist devices is more unflinching. Though he is very much of his milieu, he has remained unclassifiable by doing some of the same things as other composers, but for very different reasons.

Born in Maryland in 1954, and raised in Atlanta, Carl is a Southerner who adopted New England. One of his most revealing and atypical works is a 1988 piece for Synclavier called *Nell Miller Op. 1*, based on an interview he recorded with his maternal Alabama grandmother. In describing musical conditions in rural Appalachia at the turn of the last century, Mrs. Miller says, "I imagined that I could hear music in the trees, and in the water, everything." Carl asks, "Did you ever try to re-create it on the piano?" "I did that all the time," the old lady replies. This, somehow, is a key to Carl's music. Much of it imitates natural phenomena, evoking the bells and chimes of Bellagio, Italy, in *Ritratto dei Giorni e delle Notti su Lago di Como* (1987), the buzzing of a hornet in *Die Berliner Hornisse* (1995), patterns of clouds in *Bells Dance, Drums Ring* (1996). I remember Carl once remarking that he had started a new work upon watching waves recede upon the sand in the moonlight at a beach in Italy. This is the more extroverted aspect of Carl's music, not much in evidence in the present recording, but it's worth keeping in mind that he projects his sonic archetypes onto nature.

In college—Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Chicago—Carl encountered teachers who grounded those archetypes in history: Jonathan Kramer, George Rochberg, Ralph Shapey. Also, in a 1980–81 residency in Paris, he took a course with the Greek stochastic composer Iannis Xenakis, which changed his life, teaching him “how to reconceive form in terms of space.” Studying at such august academic centers could have nurtured a tendency toward academicism, but Xenakis reinforced the connection between music and nature, Shapey was a devout intuitionist influenced by the Abstract Expressionist painters, Kramer was a postmodern theorist with a healthy skepticism toward modernist mandates, and Rochberg was the famous apostate who invented postmodernism for the symphonic world. In addition, Carl took as his doctoral dissertation the task of analyzing Carl Ruggles’s craggy *Sun-Treader*, a masterpiece of non-doctrinaire, deeply felt, dissonant counterpoint.

From these composers connections can be drawn to the elements of Carl’s early style. Shapey and Ruggles offered the dynamic counterpoint of leaping intervals that you’ll hear in the Second Quartet’s first movement; Kramer and Rochberg, the dialectic interplay of nineteenth- and twentieth-century idioms you’ll hear in the second movement. The piece with which Carl found his mature style may have been a 1984 piano sonata subtitled “Spiral Dances,” which begins in soft but solid dissonances à la Ruggles’s *Evocations*, but melts at last into a haunting dance.

Another watershed piece was *Time/Memory/Shadow* (1988) for sextet, or rather two trios, in which a march that Carl had written early in life appears spectrally, as a ghost quotation. Carl used a different sort of quotation in *Duke Meets Mort* (1992), a piece fusing the idioms of Morton Feldman and Duke Ellington: chords reminiscent of the latter’s “Blue Indigo” hover in a Feldman-like stasis. Other pieces comment on the world outside music. *Lesgedowdaheah* of 1996 (pronounce the title out loud to find the meaning) is a satire on Newt Gingrich’s “Republican Revolution” of 1994, while *El Canto de los Asesinados* (Song of the Murdered Ones, 1993) mixes dog barks and a children’s clapping game into the music as a protest against political and gang violence. But those are Carl’s more extroverted pieces, the ones he writes for large ensembles with woodwinds and brass. The string pieces inspire from him a confessional sensibility, devoid of reference to anything more public than the self, or smaller than the heavens above.

Open for string trio—“a spiritual journey in three stages” [played without pause]—was written at the MacDowell Colony in 1998 for the Adaskin Trio. The opening four-note motto in the viola, passing into the cello, is written against tonalities implied by the accompanying drones, which slowly glissando upward and downward. A generating motive is the “fan,” a symmetrical movement spreading outward from an opening pitch. The first grand pauses soon give way to the second “movement,” which consists of twenty “blossomings,” each only a few measures in length—cumulative variations on, not a melody or set of pitches, but a gesture of unfolding outward. In the first, the “fan” begins to take on characteristics of harmony; the second expands upon this process “like the echo of an already distant event.” The fourth, marked “prayerful,” creeps tentatively into ecstatic harmony, and in the seventh, the violin suddenly breaks into cadenza-like virtuosics, “like a bird in flight.”

The tenth blossoming introduces into the fan gesture chords that presage the return of the initial motto, which suddenly reappears in blossoming 12. No. 13 initiates a more melodic phase of the process, the violin and cello playing together in contrary motion. Throughout these next few sections the tempo gradually increases, until in 19 the opening motto appears in the context of rapid 16th- and 32nd-notes. The final blossoming reintroduces the fan motive, and then, following another grand pause, a violin melody enters that is clearly a lyrical transformation of the four-note motto. Just as the disturbing opening theme of Beethoven’s *Eroica* gets “purified” by movement’s end, this motto is morphed from anger to sad acceptance, and even the sadness is filtered out by the time the trio resolves on a glissando that is a rising, transcendent major triad. At some point during this final “movement” it dawns on the listener that the title is not an adjective, but a verb.

Those who love the delicate textures that often form the inverted climaxes of Carl’s works will love the Second Violin Sonata of 1998–99, for here they are the rule rather than the exception. Aptly subtitled “Angel-Skating,” the piece was written for the violinist Katie Lansdale. In three movements, the work moves in stages, somewhat typically for Carl, from dissonant sonority to rather simple tonality. Less typically, the movements are all couched in traditional forms: the first a rondo, the second a set of variations, and the third a chaconne. The main texture of the rondo that keeps coming round again is a high drone on E passing between piano and violin, in trills, tremolos, and repeated notes, around which other pitches quietly blink like stars.

Buried within those starry notes, and in the piano's dissonant counterpoint, is a motive of interlocking thirds—for instance, F-sharp to A, then G to B-flat—which will become the more explicit focus of the second movement. The theme here is a sparse but lyrical line in the violin, dotted morse-code-like by single notes and little clusters in the piano's highest register. Additional figures are added to each new variation in a crescendo of texture, speed, and volume: first trills and undulating 8th-notes in the piano, a perpetual motion in the violin as the piano takes over the melody in thirds, glissandos in the violin, undulating chords in the piano, dry staccato chords, and at last, “a newfound lyricism” in the violin as the piano accompanies with thick harmonies. The final, eighth variation is pervaded by the third motif, and on the whole, the presence of recurring pitches and intervals in one passage after another is reminiscent of Aaron Copland's similar technique in his *Piano Variations*.

The final chaconne Carl called at the time “the most overtly lyrical, simple, and romantic music I've ever written”—though the middle movement of the later Second Quartet will rival it in those respects. In any case, the subject of the chaconne is a simple eight-measure melody in the piano, next accompanied by the violin in whole notes, and eight measures becomes the recurring unit of the movement. A mi-re-do figure in 16th-notes attaches itself to the theme and pervades the counterpoint; the dynamics swell, but the music never goes beyond a remarkable delicacy of texture. Even without the movement's “State of Grace” subtitle, it is clear that this beauty is the entire work's goal, unifying the three movements in a gesture as tightly knit as that of *Open*.

The Second String Quartet, “Fear of Death/Love of Life,” dates from the summer of 2001, which Carl spent at Yaddo. As the subtitle rather implies, he planned the quartet as a two-movement work, but he found that the piece wouldn't gel until he added an additional movement, the “Hymn,” in between, as a bridge. It is this bridge, this “Growing Awareness of Beauty's Presence,” that takes us from the “Fear of Death” to the “Love of Life.”

The foreboding first movement, almost continuously in double-stops at times, must be one of the thickest movements in the quartet literature. The opening chord-glissandos, colored by all instruments playing fortissimo with practice mutes, and moving from dissonance to consonance, forecast in a nutshell the transcendence of the entire work. Angular lines inherited from *Sun-Treader* are soon much in evidence, and the texture sets up an antinomy that forms part of the quartet's basis: an opposition between the first violin and cello on one side and the second violin and viola on the other, the first pair framing the second by register. The sense of anxiety is heightened by the tendency of the glissandos to become more and more continuous.

The “Hymn” is the work's emotional center, and seemingly an emotional center of Carl's entire output. After an almost prayerful introduction comes a devoutly Romantic theme in the second violin and viola whose ambience and even rhythm (quarter-notes alternating with triplets) might remind one of Bruckner, though its contours do not. The sonic archetype is an Ivesian one: the very high first violin and the low cello, more sustained, seem to represent heaven and earth, the bounds of the stage within which the lament takes place. Even the motivic gestures begin to suggest Ives's *Unanswered Question*. Following a great increase in intensity, the viola begins wandering through glissandos notated to “imitate the snarl and growl of a nocturnal animal,” in whose caesuras the lingering heaven and earth chords seem even more patent. Afterward the melody returns with the plaintiveness of a folk ballad.

The new joyousness of the “Love of Life” movement, expressed in a motive of two quick 32nd-notes, begins with palpable hesitancy. The rapid scale passages of the opening give way to a rousing theme on a dotted-rhythm motive, but one whose harmony can still turn bittersweet. By the end, the opening two-note motive has been transformed into resonant tutti chords for the entire quartet. The halting, uncertain relief and rejoicing of this movement call to mind—in gesture, if not at all in style—the sense of relief expressed in the hesitant waltz passages from the slow movement of Beethoven's Quartet No. 15, Op. 132 in A minor, the “holy hymn of thanksgiving from a convalescent.”

One is left feeling that Carl's premises in chamber music writing are both Beethovenian and Ivesian: the former in the spiritual journey, the need for large-scale resolution, the musical catharsis that the listener experiences empathetically, the latter in the sense of texture as spatial metaphor, with the heavens, man, and the earth often audible. Carl may have gotten this latter from Xenakis as well, and perhaps from his grandmother. And from his roots as a Southerner, his adopted milieu as a New Englander, and his frequent sojourns in Europe, he absorbed an attraction to a concept of music as spiritual quest—not evident in every work he's written, but certainly in these, some of his best.

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann is a composer, new-music critic for The Village Voice since 1986, and music professor at Bard College. His books include The Music of Conlon Nancarrow, American Music in the 20th Century, and Music Downtown: Writings from The Village Voice.

Composer's note

These three works were written during a period of great creative ferment, at a time when I felt a necessity to write pieces that explored musical, aesthetic, and personal issues in depth, and that assumed a larger formal scale than most of my previous music. I'll mention a few of my ongoing concerns here that are common to all these works, but I'd also like to say that anything I say here that contradicts Kyle Gann should *not* be taken as more "true," as the artist is often the least qualified to understand his or her own work with anything like an objective viewpoint.

Having said that, I think these pieces are:

Engaging in dialogue with tradition. This doesn't mean subservience to the past. Rather, it is accepting the challenge of music that has survived, understanding its strengths and weaknesses, and then undertaking a vigorous debate with it. Earlier I referenced specific works and stylistic tropes; in these pieces I think I've produced a more synthetic and personal language, that has something to say to the repertoire that's both respectful and challenging.

Creating progression through a large harmonic field. I believe that the barriers between what's been called "tonal" and "non-tonal" (and I hate the word "atonal") are artificial, and one of the projects of the new century is to understand the nature of the harmonic *continuum* within which we work. Thus, all these works tend to move from highly chromatic, dissonant, or purely "sonic" worlds into more overtly tonal ones, whether diatonic or not. For me, such a progression is not a move to a "happy ending" designed to please either me or the listener. Rather, it is the result of a hard-won knowledge wrested from the initial musical materials of each piece, which allows a journey over a long span that encompasses differences of history, style, and expression.

Looking to create space. My goal is to provide the listener with a sense of amplitude, a sort of "opening up" of the ear and spirit that suggests a place where one can breathe more deeply, sense a broader expanse in which one can listen, and resonate in tune with what one hears. And that can occur even in the most fast and dense sonic environments.

Finally, I want to thank all the wonderful performers in this project who've given so much time and talent to realizing this music. It was written specifically for them, and they have repaid me far more in beauty of product than I probably deserve.

—Robert Carl

Robert Carl's Website is <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/CARL>

Robert Carl (born 1954) studied composition with Jonathan Kramer, George Rochberg, Ralph Shapey, and Iannis Xenakis. His grants, prizes, and residencies have come from such sources as the National Endowment for the Arts, Tanglewood, the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, the Camargo Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, the Bogliasco Foundation, the Djerassi Foundation, the Aaron Copland House, and the Rockefeller Foundation. His music has received extensive performances throughout the United States and Europe, at such venues as Carnegie Recital Hall, Alice Tully Hall, IRCAM, Orchestra Hall Chicago, Musical Spring in St. Petersburg (Russia), the Royal Academy of Music, London, and New Music America 1982 and 1985. He has been awarded a 2005 Chamber Music America commission for a string quintet to be premiered by the Miami String Quartet and Robert Black. He is also the recipient of the 1998 Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. For fifteen years he was a co-director of the Extension Works new-music ensemble in Boston; he is chair of the composition department at The Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford, and writes extensively on new music for *Fanfare* magazine, and in other venues. His music is published by American Composers' Alliance, Boosey & Hawkes, RonCorp, and Apoll-Edition.

The **Adaskin String Trio**, founded in 1994, has become renowned for interpretations of a vast repertoire ranging from works by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert to Heitor Villa-Lobos and Alfred Schnittke. They have

commissioned works by such composers as Robert Carl, David Macbride, Marti Epstein, Thomas Schuttenhelm, Raymond Luedeke, Ingrid Stölzel, and Ana Sokolovic. The members of the trio met in Montreal where they each studied chamber music with founding Orford Quartet cellist Marcel Saint-Cyr. They later completed two years as the graduate ensemble-in-residence at The Hartt School, under the guidance of the Emerson Quartet. In 1998 they were finalists for the prestigious Walter W. Naumburg Foundation chamber music award in New York. The trio is named in honor of Murray Adaskin, one of Canada's most loved and respected composers, and two of his brothers, violinist Harry Adaskin and producer and music educator John Adaskin.

Emlyn Ngai teaches violin and early music at The Hartt School of the University of Hartford. In 1995 he won First Prize on baroque violin at the Locatelli Concours Amsterdam, and has since given recitals worldwide including performances in Berlin, Boston, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. He is currently also Concertmaster of Tempesta di Mare.

Steve Larson teaches viola and chamber music at The Hartt School. In 1997 he won second prize at the Tertis Viola Competition, UK, receiving a special award for his performance of the commissioned work. He is currently also a member of the Avery Ensemble, and has performed as a guest with the Emerson, Miami, and Arthur-Leblanc String Quartets.

Mark Fraser holds degrees from McGill University, l'Université de Montréal, and The Hartt School, and studied cello with Walter Joachim, Aldo Parisot, and Yuli Turovsky. He performs regularly in recital with pianist Sooka Wang.

Violinist **Katie Lansdale's** concerto appearances feature both masterworks (National Symphony) and premieres (New York Spectrum Symphony). Acclaimed for her solo Bach, Lansdale has performed the cycle frequently in North and South America. Founder of New York City's Locrian Contemporary Chamber Players, she won grand prizes in national chamber competitions (Yellow Springs, Fischhoff), and is in demand on chamber series. Lansdale tours Europe regularly as member of the Lions Gate Trio, also serving residencies at Tanglewood, Yale, the University of Pittsburgh, and, currently, The Hartt School. The trio's most recent recording featured duos and trios of Robert Schumann (Centaur).

Pianist **John McDonald**, currently an associate professor at Tufts University, has earned international acclaim as a musician. His compositions have been performed worldwide, and his work is featured by such ensembles as Alea III, the Kalistos Chamber Orchestra, and Brave New Works, and by pianists Veronica Jochum and Andrew Rangell. Recently, McDonald served as a cultural specialist in Mongolia, premiering his "Music for Piano and String Orchestra." Commissions include a work for the Fleet Boston Celebrity Series, and he received First Prize in the Traynor Competition for music for viol consort. McDonald's recordings appear on Albany, Archetype, Bridge, Capstone, and New World, among other labels.

Violinist **Annie Trépanier** performs regularly with two American-based groups, the New World Trio and the Avery Ensemble. She performs regularly for broadcasts on CBC and NPR and has toured in Canada, Scandinavia, Austria, and Italy. As a former member of the Diabelli Quartet she was a finalist for the 2001 Banff Quartet Competition. Ms. Trépanier studied chamber music with members of the Orion, Emerson, Cleveland, and Orford String Quartets. Her violin teachers included Denise Lupien, Claude Richard, Philip Setzer, and Pamela Frank.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Bells Dance, Drums Ring: Die Berliner Hornisse, El Canto de los Asesinados, Haiku of Buson, Lesgedowdaheah, Nell Miller Op. 1, Roundabout. Robert Black, bass; Jerome Pruett, tenor; Robert Carl, voice; Mark Engebretson, saxophone; The Hartt Contemporary Players. innova Records 596.

Duke Meets Mort. Vienna Saxophone Quartet. Lotus Records 9722.

Piano music. Includes *Spiral Dances, From Him to Me, Ritratto dei Giorni e delle Notti su Lago di Como, Nach[t(raum)] ist Kommen, Warm Waxing Wail, Swing Shift, The Big Room.* Kathleen Supové, Anthony de Mare, Robert Carl, piano. Centaur Records CRC 2257.

Time/Memory/Shadow. Extension Works, Ronald Feldman; conductor. Neuma 450-81.

Towards the Crest. John Bruce Yeh, bass clarinet. Koch International 3-7088-2H1.

A Wide Open Field. Jeffrey Krieger, electronic cello, The Hartt Symphony Orchestra, Gene Young, conductor. Vienna

Modern Masters 3030.

Producer: Robert Carl

Engineer: Justin Kurtz

Digital mastering: Scott Metcalfe, Mind's Ear Studio

Violin Sonata No. 2, "Angel-Skating" recorded October 11, 2002, Lincoln Theater, .*Open* and String Quartet No. 2, "Fear of Death/Love of Life" recorded in Millard Auditorium, The Hartt School, University of Hartford, January 11–12, 2003.

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Open was composed at the MacDowell Colony. The final movement of *String Quartet No. 2, "Fear of Death/Love of Life"* was composed at Yaddo. Both are thanked for providing the ideal circumstances for the composition of these works.

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ROBERT CARL (b. 1954)

Music for Strings

80645-2

1. *Open* (1998) for string trio 16:57

Adaskin String Trio: Emlyn Ngai, violin; Steve Larson, viola; Mark Fraser, cello

Violin Sonata No. 2, "Angel-Skating" (1999) 27:14

2. I. Rondo: Intimations 6:25

3. II. Variations: Vision 12:36

4. III. Chaconne-Berceuse: State of Grace 8:13

Katie Lansdale, violin; John McDonald, piano

String Quartet No. 2, "Fear of Death/Love of Life" (2000–01) 22:55

5. I. Fear of Death 5:54

6. II. Hymn: In Growing Awareness of Beauty's Presence 10:22

7. III. Love of Life 6:39

Adaskin String Trio with Annie Trépanier, violin

All compositions published by American Composers Alliance (ACA).

Total time 67:26

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