

The first layer of the unexpected that we encounter in an Eric Moe piece is the title: his imaginative titles are little stories or images suggestive of parts of innumerable and widely scattered fictions. Many suggest a kind of poignant humor, or an inside joke that he and the listener share: *Meanwhile Back At The Ranch*, on the current disc, is one such, the clichéd phrase from movie Westerns to keep the audience from being thrown by a zealous edit. While often funny, Moe's titles are, more importantly, provocative, coaxing the listener, before hearing a note, into a state of anticipation. "What's going to happen? What in the world could Dance of the Honey Monkey or Dead Elf Tugboat sound like?" (Funky-jazzy and quirky-delicate, respectively.)

The five works on this disc tap into a wide and deep current of sources and ideas, a microcosm of Moe's fascinations, with references to Goethe and Richard Wilbur as well as his own already wildly allusive *Tri-Stan*. As was David Foster Wallace, whose short story "Tri-stan" provided the basis for Moe's 45-minute monodrama, Moe is an artist with chops and pedigree. A monster pianist of huge stylistic range (from Chopin to Cage to Moe), he only began composing after he arrived at Princeton University, where he worked with Paul Lansky. He went on to earn his doctorate from the University of California–Berkeley, and since 1989 has been on the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh. He serves as co-director of the University of Pittsburgh's Music on the Edge concert series. Like Wallace's novels and stories, Moe's music moves easily between the extremes of the (supposedly) high- and lowbrow. *Tri-Stan*, for example (an aria from which is the source of *Preamble and Dreamsong from the 4–5 a.m. REM Stage* on this disc), quotes *Tristan und Isolde* and *The Magic Flute* as readily as the sitcom themes of *The Brady Bunch* and *Gimme a Break*, and somehow to similar effect. (Wagner would object; Mozart, probably not.)

The compositional craft by which Moe achieves his expressive purposes is as varied as his musical moods, though we can detect certain trends toward process and pattern, such as cycling pitch and rhythmic collections. Also pointedly informing Moe's music is its performer-centricity: as a performing pianist himself he knows what it is to enjoy what one is playing, whether a syncopated, dancing texture or a long, lyrical melodic line. The latter impulse has been deeply shaped by the composer's continuing engagement with vocal music, in the monodramas *Tri-Stan* and *Jozaphine Freedom* (text by Denise Duhamel) as well as in song cycles setting poetry of Rilke (*Sonnets to Orpheus*), Bill Kushner (*& A Warm Hello from the Alien Ant Farm*), and the various authors of the half-hour *Siren Songs*. Some of the instrumental writing here—particularly *Dreamsong*, based as it is on an aria—is eminently vocal.

The cello line that begins *Frozen Hours Melt Melodiously Into The Past* (2009) is a singing phrase. Composed for the musicians of the Firebird Ensemble, *Frozen Hours* draws on their specific voices and talents to full effect; cellist David Russell, featured here, himself commissioned another piece on this disc, *Mud Wrestling at the O.K. Corral* for cello and piano (2007). *Frozen Hours* is the first half of the two-part tone poem *The Deeds and Sufferings of Light*, which takes its title from Goethe's *Theory of Colors*: "Colors are the deeds and sufferings of light." Inspired by the great proto-Romantic poet, Moe writes that the pair of pieces "consciously evokes Romantic notions of the sublime, placing heroic struggle and pathos in a contemporary context and seeing how they fare." His use of the term "tone poem," so associated with symphonic works of Richard Strauss or Franz Liszt, suggests a narrative or pictorial value for these two pieces, which notion is substantiated by the ebb and flow of the different kinds of music here.

Frozen Hours, commissioned by the Jebediah Foundation, was premiered by the Firebird Ensemble on October 26, 2009, at Pickman Hall in the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The one-movement, eighteen-minute piece for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, and piano takes its lyrical impulse from Moe's own *Lavished Sunlight, Frozen Hours* (2009), two songs on poems of Richard Wilbur. The piece begins with the cello's long, lush phrase, an almost-chromatically saturated melody covering two-and-a-half octaves in a few measures. Note how the phrase can be heard as several smaller sections of a few notes apiece, a motif viewed from various perspectives making up a complete picture. This kind of approach—Bach-like—obtains for the lyrically contrapuntal, slowly expanding first half of the piece. The cello's harmonic glissandos, later reflected by background scales in the piano, fill out the sonic spectrum. As though triggered by the increasingly impassioned lyricism, a brief but aggressive episode of repeated notes marks the work's central point. A second lyrical phrase in a higher register than the opening gives way to a pointillist, patterned texture. This scherzo-like passage begins in the foreground but later acts as a foundation for further displays of lyricism. Changing focus between these two characters spins the piece out to its end.

The second half of *The Deeds and Sufferings of Light*, and the final work on this disc, is *Meanwhile Back At The Ranch*, composed in 2011 for the same ensemble plus percussion (marimba, vibraphone, and drums). Dedicated to the composer Hayes Biggs, it was premiered by the Firebird Ensemble on March 13, 2012, in Salmon Recital Hall at Chapman University in Orange, California. Initially marked "Jaunty," *Meanwhile Back At The Ranch* is constructed of smallish sections, moving from rhythmically activated to legato and sustained material. The composer writes that "The title refers, among other things, to the music that reappears in the course of the piece as if it had been evolving out of sight on its own." The effect is almost that of a modified kind of rondo, with passages returning in new guises, continuing to transform, and then being supplanted by other ideas. Compare the music at the start of the piece to the scherzo-like section (ca. 11:30) of *Frozen Hours*, in which a similar kind of buildup of small motives occurs in a fast texture. Here, that texture gradually broadens and grows more sustained, becoming a clearly defined slow, contrapuntal episode, the piano and marimba, drivers of the opening music, having dropped out. The pointillist opening idea returns (ca. 5:45) with a new chordal idea, but is succeeded rather quickly by a gentle dance. The ensuing return of the opening material is the shortest yet. The second half of the piece introduces non-pitched percussion (drums and cymbals), which lends a new character to the mostly fast remainder of the piece. There is a gossamer coda.

"Riprap," writes the composer, "is a collection of large broken stones thrown together loosely to form a foundation or rough wall. The title provides a metaphor for the construction of the piece, in which blocks of improvisatory material are juxtaposed." The earliest (1989) work on this disc, *riprap* for flute, cello, piano, and percussion, represents the composer's rock-n-rolly, jazzy rhythmic voice, and is assembled using short but expanding, syncopated, rising phrases propelled by a steady pulse. The composer describes the form as "two large sections plus a coda." The first section and the coda, both with drums, have a drier sound and more halting forward progress; the second, featuring marimba, is virtually a perpetuum mobile. *riprap* is dedicated to one of Moe's UC-Berkeley colleagues, "the late John Swackhamer, extraordinary musician and greatly missed friend." It was premiered by its commissioning group, the Stony Brook Contemporary Music Ensemble, at Merkin Hall in New York City on April 29, 1990.

Preamble and Dreamsong (2003) for violin and piano was originally composed for alto flute and piano; there is also a version for viola. The original flute version, composed for Rachel Rudich, was premiered by Rudich with the composer at the piano on February 11, 2004, at Pomona College in Claremont, California. The violin/piano version was premiered by violinist Roger Zahab and pianist Rob Frankenberry on April 22, 2007, at First Baptist Church, Pittsburgh. The “dreamsong” second part is based (as mentioned above) on the goddess Codependae’s aria from *Tri-Stan*, while the first—in keeping with its new context—apparently represents an unsettled, pre-dream anxiety. In the violin’s melodic figures, we can hear a clear additive process as Moe cycles through, and adds to, a small group of pitches to great lyrical effect. Moe found a precedent in the continually cycling static harmonic progressions of Monteverdi’s delightful madrigals *Zefiro torna* (fast) and *Lamento della ninfa* (moderate). The expansion of a basic melodic cell, readily heard in *Dreamsong*, is an essential technique in Moe’s compositional thinking. On a larger scale, the second half of the piece can be heard as an ABA form, with the music going further afield and waxing rhapsodic in the middle. In the suspended meditation of the final section, the piano takes over the basic melodic idea while the violin muses abstractedly.

Mud Wrestling at the O.K. Corral (2007) was the second Moe work commissioned by Firebird cellist David Russell. (The first was *The Lone Cello*.) Russell premiered the piece on March 14, 2008, at the Phoenix Concerts in New York City. The two “combatants” are apparently the cello and piano, whose irregularly shaped, similar phrases are sometimes together, sometimes out-of-phase. The composer tells us, “The title of the piece reflects its desperate and slippery nature, and also combines a sport and a locale each commonly used to describe current political battles.” There is a steady pulse, but frequent pauses create a halting, off-balance effect. The piece is in several sections, all with a strong pulse but each with a distinct tempo. Note the recurrence of the cello’s six-note major seventh/major sixth figure, which acts as a root from which the piece proliferates, along with a scale idea introduced in the piano. The cello’s ability to sustain pitches creates a resonant halo for the prevailing mosaic. Ultimately, though, the piano and cello seem to be in conflict not with one another but with the musical situation: the two form almost a meta-instrument for much of the piece, so closely do their parts adhere and interlock.

A story might be told more appropriately as a comedy than as a tragedy, or might better fit a cartoon than a painting; a prayer and a joke can both convey a basic truth. In Eric Moe’s work the cosmic distance between Goethe and mud wrestling is agreeably small. There’s really little telling how title or source might reflect the music of a given piece, nor is there any way to assess the effect of these apparently widely diverging moments except cumulatively, after hearing the whole. The far-flung, ground-covering referentiality of Moe’s ostensible subjects, as well as the music itself, aim at an aggregate density of experience, echoing life in its odd juxtapositions and weird coincidences, its intellectual and poetic richness, its intricacy, intimacy, and avoidance of easy answers.

—Robert Kirzinger

Robert Kirzinger is a composer and writer based in Boston. He is on the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as an annotator, editor, and lecturer, and teaches occasionally at Northeastern University.

Eric Moe (b. 1954), composer and pianist, has received copious critical and tangible support for his work, including an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Guggenheim Fellowship, commissions from the Fromm Foundation, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Barlow Endowment, and Meet-the-Composer USA, and numerous fellowships and residencies, including ones at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Bellagio, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the UCross Foundation, the Camargo Foundation, and the Aaron Copland House.

As a pianist and keyboardist, Moe has premiered and performed works by a wide variety of composers. His playing can be heard on a number of CDs, including a solo recording, *The Waltz Project Revisited—New Waltzes for Piano*, featuring music by two generations of American composers. A founding member of San Francisco's EARPLAY ensemble, he currently co-directs the Music on the Edge new-music concert series in Pittsburgh.

Moe studied composition at Princeton University (B.A.) and at the University of California at Berkeley (M.A., Ph.D.). He is currently Professor of Composition and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh and has held visiting professorships at Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania. More information is available at his website, <ericmoe.net>.

Founded in 2001 and directed by violist Kate Vincent, **Firebird Ensemble** (Kate Vincent, director and viola; Aaron Trant, assistant director and percussion; Jeffrey Means, conductor and percussion, Sarah Bob, piano; Sarah Brady, flute; Gabriela Diaz, violin; Rane Moore, clarinet; David Russell, cello; and Cory Smythe, piano) has earned a reputation as one of the premier new-music ensembles in the United States. Known for its highly varied contemporary repertoire, virtuosic performances and wide audience appeal, Firebird Ensemble's repertoire spans a time period from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. Firebird Ensemble has performed about 180 works and commissioned and/or premiered more than 50 works, including compositions by Luciano Berio, Lisa Bielawa, Donald Crockett, John Eaton, Elliott Gyger, Curtis Hughes, Derek Hurst, Lee Hyla, John McDonald, Eric Moe, Donald Martino, Gerard Pape, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Nicholas Vines, and Rolf Wallin. Firebird Ensemble's contribution to contemporary music has been recognized with support from organizations such as the Aaron Copland Fund, Argosy Foundation, Chamber Music America, Free for All Concert Fund, Harvard Musical Association, Massachusetts Cultural Council, and Meet the Composer, among others. Firebird Ensemble has performed extensively throughout the United States and last year celebrated its tenth anniversary, the highlight of which was a self-presented and fully staged world-premiere run in Los Angeles of Donald Crockett's opera *The Face*. In 2011, Firebird Ensemble was the recipient of the national Chamber Music America CMAclaim award, which recognizes an exceptional contribution to the field of chamber music. For more information please visit: www.firebirdensemble.org

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Kick & Ride. Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose conducting. BMOP/sound 1021.

Kicking and Screaming. Speculum Musicae, Donald Palma conducting; Eric Moe, piano; et al. Albany TROY597.

Siren Songs. Elizabeth Farnum, soprano; Eric Moe, piano; et al. Albany TROY 953.

Strange Exclaiming Music. Curtis Macomber, violin; Stephen Gosling, piano; et al. Naxos 8.559612.

Tri-Stan. Mary Nessinger, mezzo-soprano; Sequitur, Paul Hostetter conducting. Koch International Classics KCH7736.

Producers: Eric Moe, Kate Vincent, and Joel Gordon
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Assistant engineer: Maizie Doorg
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ERIC MOE (b. 1954)

MEANWHILE BACK AT THE RANCH

Firebird Ensemble

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1. *Frozen Hours Melt Melodiously Into The Past* (2009) 17:00

Sarah Brady, flute; Rane Moore, clarinet; Gabriela Diaz, violin; Kate Vincent, viola, David Russell, cello; Sarah Bob, piano; Jeffrey Means, conductor.

2. *riprap* (1989) 8:18

Sarah Brady, flute; David Russell, cello; Jeffrey Means, percussion; Cory Smythe, piano

3. *Preamble and Dreamsong from the 4-5 a.m. REM Stage* (2003) 8:12

Gabriela Diaz, violin; Eric Moe, piano

4. *Mud Wrestling at the O.K. Corral* (2007) 9:02

David Russell, cello; Eric Moe, piano

5. *Meanwhile Back At The Ranch* (2011) 18:45

Sarah Brady, flute; Rane Moore, clarinet; Gabriela Diaz, violin; Kate Vincent, viola; David Russell, cello; Sarah Bob, piano; Aaron Trant, percussion; Jeffrey Means, conductor.

TT: 61:45