

By now, the early twenty-first century, we've become sufficiently circumspect about what American concert music is, or sounds like, so shell-shocked by its bewildering variety, that we too often stop short of definitive statements. In the case of Donald Crockett's music, though, let's say it, let's see it in print, let's accept it wholeheartedly: this is American music.

What makes it so, other than its birth in this the U.S.? Maybe this quality of American-ness is not so definable but accumulates in the experience of listening. Crockett's works are notable, first of all, for their clarity and their immediate impact on the listener. The music could be described as elemental, on several levels—in its sonic tactility, in its use of readily identifiable, almost object-like musical gestures, and in its frequent connections, through poetic and evocative titles, to the lived, physical world. (Several such titles are represented here.) A sense of durability, of ruggedness, abides, even through a delicacy or sweetness that frequently makes itself felt. There is a sense of transparent and flowing, tonally-centered harmonic motion, not ignoring moments of crunchiness, high-density dissonance. Above all there is energy, constant energy: the energy of dance and American popular music, even without strong reference to those styles, an energy born of intimacy with the physical nature of performance, like improvisation. The precision talents and eclectic energy of the Boston-based Firebird Ensemble, part of a new breed of chamber ensembles as comfortable playing clubs as concert halls, match up well with Crockett's intricate, entertaining, and intimate music. Years of close collaboration have led to this wonderful recording of four significant chamber works, one of which was written for Firebird and its director, violist Kate Vincent.

Donald Crockett has spent most of his life and career in the Los Angeles area, where he was born (in Pasadena in 1951) and where, since 1981, he has been on the faculty of the University of Southern California; he now heads up the Thornton School of Music's composition department and directs the contemporary ensemble. He'd studied at USC, earning undergraduate and graduate degrees, and received his doctoral degree from UC–Santa Barbara, a couple of hours up the coast. In his early professional life, he performed as a singer in madrigal and folk music contexts and was an accomplished classical guitarist. Teaching and coaching music have long been a major part of his activity as a musician, as has advocacy of his colleagues' music. For more than two decades he has worked with the mutable L.A.-based Xtet ensemble as its conductor, leading a wide swath of recent and brand-new scores, including many of his own. He has collaborated extensively with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra as composer and conductor, and has also been commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. USC commissioned Crockett's *Capriccio* for piano and orchestra in celebration of the university's 125th anniversary.

Beyond Southern California, Crockett's reputation on the East Coast is firmly established, not only in performances by the Firebird Ensemble but also by Boston's Collage New Music. He has also spent many years as senior composer-in-residence of the Composer's Forum of the East in Bennington, Vermont, and his music has been performed at Tanglewood. Commissions have come from the Kronos and Stanford string quartets, the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble (which he has also conducted), the Charlotte Symphony, and the Hilliard Ensemble; and other groups—including eighth blackbird, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Arditti Quartet—have added his music to their repertoires. His catalog includes more than a dozen orchestral pieces over the course of his career, including concerted works and *Vox in Rama*, with double chorus; pieces for wind ensemble, for voices, and much chamber music for mixed and standard ensembles. He has also written two large cycles for solo guitar, the forty-minute *Falcon's Eye* and the twenty-minute *Winter Variations*, both for Brian Head.

The working composer knows that musical effects, tempos, textures, are refineable through experience—just ask Joseph Haydn—and the connection between the abstractions of notation and the acoustic result can be made ever more direct. In that spirit, collaborating closely with musicians has by far been the deepest influence on Donald Crockett’s musical style, allowing him to home in on the technical potential of instruments as well as to bring out the artistic sensibilities of individual players. In working with the Firebird Ensemble, Crockett witnessed first-hand the effects of distinct personalities on both new and older scores. The viola pocket concerto *to airy thinness beat* and this recorded set of pieces are a culmination, but not an ending, to the relationship, which continues in other projects, including the 2011 workshop for his chamber opera *The Face*, with fully staged performances in 2012. *The Face* was completed in 2009, based on poetry by the composer’s USC colleague David St. John (whose poetry Crockett had set for his Hilliard piece, *The Village*).

Of the four pieces on this disc, three were written within about a year of one another, in 2008–09; the earlier work, *Scree*, dates from 1997. *Scree* is for cello, percussion, and piano. *Night Scenes* (2009) is for the standard piano trio of violin, cello, and piano; *Wet Ink* (2008) is for violin and piano, and the largest of the four, *to airy thinness beat* (2009), is a chamber concerto for solo viola with an ensemble of clarinet, percussion, violin, cello, double bass, and piano.

The piano trio is a venerable genre—Haydn wrote dozens—but Crockett’s *Night Scenes* has a modern extramusical underpinning. Commissioned by the Laguna Beach Live! 2010 festival for the Claremont Trio, the piece is “a look at the cinema in four vignettes,” according to the composer. Each of the four movements takes a suggestive title from an imaginary movie. “Scatter the Barbarians,” the first movement, opposes short, sharp chords against linear figures in unpredictable groupings and accents. “The Blue Guitar”—the title recalls Picasso’s “The Old Guitarist” as much as any potential film—has piano arpeggios mimicking the guitar’s strum. Cello, then violin, float in written-out rubato against the keyboard. The second half of the movement brings piano bell-like chords into the picture. Crockett suggests “Perhaps several guitarists showed up and it’s too dark or too late to play together.” They’re also melancholy and sweetly languid in the still atmosphere of some exotic urban night.

“Midnight Train” has an almost passacaglia aspect, relying on an ostinato and a series of figures, passed back and forth between strings and piano, echoing the train’s motion and the American fiddle music of past times. The fundamental chord progression taps into the major/minor character of the blues. This sophisticated movement is trickier than its first impression lets on, not least in its contrapuntal flipping of figures from strings to piano.

“Night Hawks” references another painting, Hopper’s iconic “Night Hawks at the Diner.” Violin and cello sing a line two octaves apart while the piano plays a much quicker version of the same contour. In a work that reveals several sonic connections to Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*, this beginning passage is perhaps the most telling, although the piano chords have a dusky jazz to them as well. Tolling bells in both piano and strings interrupt this introspection. The night hawks scatter for a time with a return to the music of the opening movement’s lively syncopation, but settle back into pre-dawn thoughts to conclude the piece.

Crockett composed *to airy thinness beat* as a solo vehicle for violist and Firebird founder and director Kate Vincent, whose new-music pedigree is celebrated well beyond Boston. The title comes from John Donne’s poem “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” in which the poet likens his parting from his lover to the almost magical ability of gold to change form without losing integrity: “Our two souls therefore/which are one,/Though I must go, endure not yet/A breach,

but an expansion/Like gold to airy thinness beat.” The pocket or chamber concerto idea is one that has strongly taken hold since the latter half of the twentieth century, to the point of becoming a well-established genre aimed squarely at such groups as the Firebird Ensemble. This piece is in three movements, exploiting aspects of Firebird’s close-playing capability along with characteristics of Vincent’s natural styles. Even the title was a collaborative decision stemming from the sympathetic relationship between composer and soloist and a discovered shared fondness for poetry, and Donne in particular. (Vincent wrote the words for another Crockett piece, *Daglarym/My Mountains*.)

There are some sonic marvels in this work, aggregate sounds that only an alchemist sure of his materials can achieve. The opening sonority, grace-note arpeggios to gossamer harmonies, provides a mysterious atmosphere for the viola solo, which alternates high tremolo gestures with open strings. As the movement continues, the soloist takes on a long, singing melody, echoed in places by the ensemble. The music of the opening returns to form an ABA, arch-like structure.

The second movement is in stark contrast, heavy, syncopated percussion alternating with the viola’s energetic phrases. The effect is that of a rustic dance, an off-kilter *ländler* with call-and-response. The central section, bracketed by brief viola cadenzas, sends quick triplet figures rising in the solo part, in turn affecting the ensemble. A third section is a blending of the first two, returning to the stomping rhythm of the beginning of the movement, a dense passage temporarily submerging the soloist.

The third movement’s quick juxtaposition of quick scraping figures against the height of lyrical melody is an escalation of the briefer contrasting gestures for the soloist at the start of the piece. Halfway through the movement, Crockett underlines the connection by revisiting the ephemeral music of the opening. In another remarkable stroke, we also return to the rough dance of the middle movement, a cross-pollination of thematic materials worthy of Schumann. Although toward the conclusion the concerto again turns ensemble, hiding the soloist, the viola (with equally atmospheric cymbal) has the last word in a quiet, questioning coda.

to airy thinness beat was commissioned by the Firebird Ensemble and the Harvard Musical Association; Kate Vincent was soloist in Firebird’s premiere performance, which took place in Boston in October 2009.

Donald Crockett writes of the violin-piano duo *Wet Ink*, “Of course the title is a play on Composers, Inc., but it also takes note of this intrepid organization’s articles of incorporation, a celebration of ink-not-yet-dry music, freshly made works launched each season for a quarter of a century and counting. *Wet Ink* lasts just a bit under six minutes and is cast in a back-for-another-year ritornello form.” Composers, Inc., is a San Francisco-based, composer-run new-music group, which commissioned Crockett’s piece in celebration of its 25th anniversary. (There is also a version of the piece for nine instruments.) The mood is jovial, occasionally virtuosic, and creates a marvelous interplay between the two disparate instruments such that they frequently seem parts of a single voice. The ritornello form was common in the Baroque era, especially used to contrast ensemble episodes with solo ones; here, in what is fundamentally an equal duo, the idea allows the composer to lay out contrasting sections. The secondary episodes—those set against the jaunty recurring idea—progress toward lyricism and the long, highly melodic, violin-dominant central passage.

Scree, for cello, percussion, and piano, is the oldest piece here. The composer writes, “The title ‘*Scree*’ came to me when I was backpacking in the Matterhorn Peak area of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. Scree is a type of rock (in addition to boulders and talus) well-known to climbers: the small, broken stones that tend to accumulate toward the bottom of a steep slope. . . .” The title suggests variety, even a certain randomness of detail among what might normally be viewed as a homogeneous collection of pebbles. This is perhaps manifest in the big range of percussion sounds, including a coil spring, brake drums, and other metals, marimba, vibes, congas, bongos, and a log drum. It also suggests the thrilling physical joy of the outdoors, the solitary, satisfying effort of the hiker (even if accompanied) in the cello’s long melodic lines.

The first of four movements proceeds in recitative-like phrases with the cello and marimba in unison. Some of the sounds have an Asian tinge. The second movement, marked “Vivo” (“lively”), is a complex and very energetic dash through combining and recombining rhythmic patterns, with a jazz groove. The third movement is the slow movement of what turns out to be a fairly traditional big structure. Piano and pitched percussion pulse in even chords under the cello’s extended melody, which sounds almost improvised but is carefully notated. The dance-like finale keeps the listener continually off-balance in its shifting meters, and the combination of instrumental timbres, too, seems to change from bar to bar, often combining two or more of the melody instruments in unison for a gorgeous new sound. The movement ends in an extended, sustained passage for piano and cello.

Crockett composed *Scree* in July 1997; it was premiered the following October by the Core Ensemble at Bowling Green State University in Ohio during the MidAmerican Festival of Contemporary Music. It was commissioned by Meet the Composer Commissioning Music/USA.

—Robert Kirzinger

Robert Kirzinger is a composer and writer based in Boston. He is on the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as a writer, editor, and lecturer.

Donald Crockett has received commissions from the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (Composer-in-Residence, 1991–97), Kronos Quartet, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Hilliard Ensemble, Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, and the California EAR Unit, among many others. Recent projects include commissions from the Harvard Musical Association for violist Kate Vincent and Firebird Ensemble, the Claremont Trio, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and a chamber opera, *The Face*, based on a novella in verse by the poet David St. John. Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2006, Donald Crockett has also received grants and prizes from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Barlow Endowment, Copland Fund, Kennedy Center Friedheim Awards, Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, and many others. His music is published by Keiser Classical and Doberman/Yppan and recorded on the Albany, CRI, ECM, Laurel, New World, and Pro Arte/Fanfare labels. A frequent guest conductor with new-music ensembles nationally, Donald Crockett has been very active over the years as a composer and conductor with the venerable and famed Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles. His recordings as a conductor can be found on the Albany, ECM, New World, and CRI labels. Donald Crockett is currently Chair of the Composition Department and Director of the

Contemporary Music Ensemble at the USC Thornton School of Music, and Senior Composer-in-Residence with the Chamber Music Conference and Composers' Forum of the East.
www.donaldcrockett.com

Founded in 2001 and directed by violist Kate Vincent, **Firebird Ensemble** 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 more than 180 works and commissioned and/or premiered almost 50 works, including compositions by Luciano Berio, Lisa Bielawa, Donald Crockett, John Eaton, Eliot 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, Harvard Musical Association, Massachusetts Cultural Council, and Meet the Composer, among others. Firebird Ensemble has performed throughout the United States including at the MATA Festival, Symphony Space, Jordan Hall, Stanford University, and the Apple Hill Festival of Chamber Music. Firebird Ensemble is the recipient of the 2011 Chamber Music America CMAcclaim award recognizing an exceptional contribution to the field of chamber music.
www.firebirdensemble.com

Firebird Ensemble:

Kate Vincent, director and viola; Aaron Trant, assistant director and percussion; Sarah Bob, piano; Gabriela Diaz, violin; Scot Fitzsimmons, double bass; Jeffrey Means, conductor and percussion; Rane Moore, clarinet; David Russell, cello; Cory Smythe, piano

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Pilgrimage. Vicki Ray, piano. New World Records/CRI NWCR 830.

Celestial Mechanics. Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Donald Crockett, conductor. New World Records/CRI NWCR 669.

Tracking Inland and other works. Xtet, Donald Crockett, conductor. Albany TROY 1270.

Horn Quintet "La Barca," The Ceiling of Heaven. Chamber Music Conference and Composers' Forum of the East. Albany TROY 777.

The Falcon's Eye, Winter Variations. Brian Head, guitar. Doberman-Yppan Records DO 725.

to be sung on the water, Mickey Finn. Michelle Makarski, violin; Ronald Copes, viola. ECM New Series 1871.

String Quartets Nos. 1 & 2, *to be sung on the water*. Stanford String Quartet. Laurel LR 858-CD.

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Schwartz, Elliott. Review of *Celestial Mechanics*. *American Music*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1999): pp. 118–19.

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DONALD CROCKETT (b. 1951)

NIGHT SCENES

Firebird Ensemble

80718-2

Night Scenes (2009) 17:13

1. I. Scatter the Barbarians 2:46

2. II. The Blue Guitar 5:15

3. III. Midnight Train 3:25

4. IV. Night Hawks 5:36

Gabriela Diaz, violin; David Russell, cello; Cory Smythe, piano

to airy thinness beat (2009) 18:38

Chamber Concerto for Viola and Six Instruments

5. I. Suspended 6:40

6. II. Heavy and energetic 6:10

7. III. Fast and furious, suddenly slow and elegiac 5:42

Kate Vincent, solo viola; Gabriela Diaz, violin; David Russell, cello; Rane Moore, clarinets; Scot Fitzsimmons, double bass; Sarah Bob, piano; Aaron Trant, percussion; Jeffrey Means, conductor

8. *Wet Ink* (2008) 6:44

Gabriela Diaz, violin; Cory Smythe, piano

Scree (1997) 15:31

9. I. Adagio, appassionato, flessibile 3:32

10. II. Vivo 3:37

11. III. Molto moderato, cantando 3:31

12. IV. Disperato 4:44

David Russell, cello; Cory Smythe, piano; Jeffrey Means, percussion

TT: 58:16

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