

## Liner notes for Christopher Fox *Works for Piano* (Hat[now]ART 192)

What can be written that is not immediately obvious and clear when these piano pieces by Christopher Fox are heard, even for the first time? At the same time, how can (and why should) words begin to hint at the mysterious and elusive qualities that underlie the surface of these pieces?

Perhaps better would be to describe why I have chosen to play and commission music by Christopher over the past twelve years; and the reasons, I realise, are some of the very best reasons for listening to and championing any music. Firstly there is a compelling directness about his music – the material is strong and clear, well-defined, transparent, immediately lending each piece a distinct character. This is true no matter the musical material, whether concerned with microtones and harmonic spectra (as in *at the edge of time*), dense chromatics (as in the cluster chords of *Thermogenesis*) or tonally-infused material (*Republican Bagatelles*). The material is always imagined and conceived within the context of a clear and straightforward sense of structure, which not only frames the sounding content but could be said to shape and define it. Fox's music favours structural 'blocks' - not an unreasonable way to describe variation form (*Republican Bagatelles*) – even if sometimes reduced to single blocks (such as *L'ascenseur* and *at the edge of time*, which contrast with the three succinct 'panels' of *Thermogenesis*). This clarity of form and content characterises all of Fox's music, contributing to it being some of the most bold and immediately accessible of our day.

However, working within and around these features are less definable qualities, aspects of his music which are more puzzling, obscure, curious. Usually the structure of a piece is worked through in conjunction with some form of process. Examples from the works on this disc are the process of moving from the lower end of the piano keyboard to the uppermost notes in *L'ascenseur*, or the process of revealing more and higher harmonic partials of the same pitch in *at the edge of time*, or the bringing into greater focus collections of notes from dense clusters to more defined pitch collections in *Thermogenesis*. But whilst the large-scale process itself might be as clear, if not more clear, than the structure, the means of acting out that process are less readily perceived. Strange things happen in Christopher Fox's music, some intentional but others one suspects as much the result of unpredictabilities arising from two or more processes, or rules within a process, colliding. In this, the influence of two of Fox's composer heroes – John Cage and Christian Wolff – may be detected. But whereas in the Americans' music very often the process is unclear, or shrouded by abstract and complicated rules, Fox's music seems to thrive on the tension between a large-scale process which is more or less explicit and rules governing that process that yield surprising and curious results along the way. Examples of this might be the odd juxtapositions between chromatic and diatonic material in *L'ascenseur*, or peculiar rhythmic relationships leading to more straightforward relationships in the same piece, and how these same rhythmic relationships might be understood entirely differently dependent upon the register of the piano. Or the ways in which, if you listen into the sounds, harmonics combine to forge strange microtonal melodies in *at the edge of time*, or how the after-resonance of notes in the same piece seem to follow surprising waveform patterns.

What is clear from the pieces on this disc, and from listening to so many other works by Christopher Fox is that he is also a composer who is concerned with drama. Not in the sense of projecting narrative, necessarily, but in the dramatic potential of material, of

structure, and of process. This sense of the dramatic is combined with a natural playfulness, a curiosity and delight for what musical material can do and has the potential to do. One feels the composer in all of these pieces thinking 'What would happen if...?'

Applied to the works featured on this disc, these questions and investigations are highly original and distinct. But rather than being the hidden preserve of the composer's private methods and workings, they invite the listener to join the investigation. *L'ascenseur* is a bold statement, whereby the title itself 'gives the game away', requiring the listener to thus attend to the acoustic idiosyncrasies of the instrument as the pianist maintains an equilibrium of touch and dynamic across the register of the piano. Having performed the piece many times on a number of different pianos and in different spaces, it is as if the piece articulates and probes both – this is what *this* piano sounds like and how it responds to *this* space.

*at the edge of time* is one of four solo works with the same title (the others are for guitar, bowed string instrument and bass drum, and are in turn part of a larger group of pieces entitled *hearing not thinking*, in which pieces may be played simultaneously or in different combinations including solo) and it presents multiple reiterations of the same pitch. A scale of lower register notes is prepared with small pieces of rubber to produce harmonics, so that each iteration of the 'same' pitch has its own harmonic properties. The music seems static (development is limited to the addition of new harmonics) but one's ears are drawn to the piano's (after-)resonance and the peculiar interactions of harmonics.

The most obviously playful of the works on this disc is *Thermogenesis*, the central section of the ensemble triptych, *Terra incognita*. The pianist is required to play at first with large mittens, which are then removed to reveal gloved hands; finally, as the pianist 'warms up', the third section is played with un-gloved hands. The composer says that 'the central preoccupation of *Terra incognita* is coldness: mythical, metaphorical and physical. *Thermogenesis* was conceived as a demonstration of how a pianist might attempt to get warm in a very cold climate.' As in *L'ascenseur*, it is incumbent upon the pianist to maintain evenness of tone and action throughout and to play all the notes as accurately as possible even though the heavily wrapped hands will make the blurring of pitches almost unavoidable. As a result, the third and final section reveals the pitches with greater precision.

Playfulness is also hinted at by the second word of the title *Republican Bagatelles*. In this work the question being posed is something along the lines of 'What would happen if I create a set of variations upon variations by Beethoven and Ives, combining them and reimagining them... and then additionally transforming one theme into another', specifically the melodies of the British National Anthem (the focus of sets of variations by both composers, though a tune known by Ives as 'God Bless America') and 'The Red Flag Prelude'. The composer takes features of both composers' treatments of the themes and toys with them in ways which work through an idea rigorously and determinedly. After the transformation from one theme to another is revealed, the composer begins a process of 'flattening out' the melody, resulting in an alarming and extraordinary pummelling of the final few notes at the end of this process.

The questions and conceits that propel each of the works might at first seem naïve, simple, but what marks each work out is the compositional nerve, technique, confidence and rigour of the composer to both surrender to these questions and pursue them with such imagination and vivacity.