

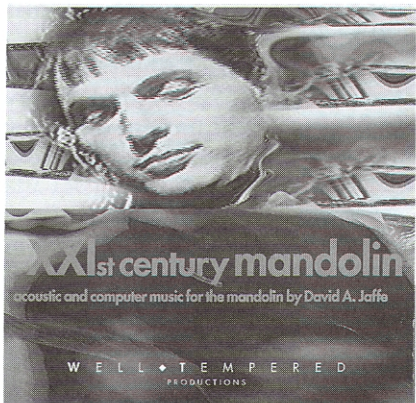
David A. Jaffe: XXIst Century Mandolin: Acoustic and Computer Music for the Mandolin

CD, available from Well-Tempered Productions, 1678 Shattuck Avenue, Suite 156, Berkeley, California 94709, USA; telephone (510) 526-5608

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The mandolin occupies a unique musical space—from Vivaldi to Stravinsky, its sparkling soprano timbre has colored many “classical” compositions. To most contemporary listeners, however, the sound of a mandolin evokes images of a Dublin pub or a bluegrass festival in southern Indiana. For me, the mandolin seems to exist in all of these worlds simultaneously, evoking an interpenetrated, pan-stylistic musical universe. David Jaffe shares this multi-dimensional conception of the mandolin, stating that his early experience of his father’s mandolin playing gave him “a taste for permeating the boundaries that separate musical styles.” Mr. Jaffe discovered that “by combining diverse, seemingly irreconcilable stylistic elements, [he] was able to uncover a rich dynamic source of musical expression.”

XXIst Century Mandolin is a tour de force demonstration of that “dynamic source of musical expression.” The CD contains four large works:



two for acoustic instruments (mandolins, of course) and two computer-generated pieces (with decidedly mandolin-like timbres, primarily using the Karplus-Strong algorithm and digitized mandolin fragments). Each of these works is a coherent melding of a range of compositional and performance styles, with results that are truly unique.

If I were asked to summarize David Jaffe's music in a single word, it would have to be, "different." I don't mean this as a dismissal of his music (in the way that many use the adjective "interesting"), for his compositions display a musical virtuosity that is highly original—there's the "difference"—and often quite moving.

I must confess that my description of David Jaffe's music as "different" has a particular personal focus for me. As he and I have often discussed, we share similar research interests and ostensibly similar musical preferences. Beyond a commonality of intent and technical realization in our composing, however, I think our musical output sounds fundamentally distinct. But I don't feel alone in this distinction, because David Jaffe's music sounds different from nearly every other composer I know. He has an artistic sensibility that is entirely

his own. His talent lies in his ability to coerce us to his artistic vantage point, where we can share in his stylistically variegated musical perspective.

Probably the most direct compositional influence I can hear in his music is a Bartok-like predilection for close/open harmonies, coupled with dramatic shifts in texture. The insertion of an occasional folkish-sounding tune reinforces this connection. The construction of his music, however, sounds much less concerned with formal structure, reminding me more of the unfolding of a good story than adhering to a relatively abstract compositional scheme.

A case in point is the first piece on the CD, *Grass Valley Fire, 1988*. I suppose that I could make some analytical points about the repeated C-sharp that dominates the opening and closing of the piece, or that I could trace the use of a rhythmically converging strummed chords motif as a structural marker, but the music didn't *sound* that way to me. Instead, the robust chords from the beginning of the piece trace a narrative route through a jagged middle section to a quiet, peaceful conclusion (with some nice, swinging mandolin diversions along the way). At the end of the piece, I feel more that I've been taken on a journey instead of shown an artistically circumscribed object. I'm not mapping the internal logic of this music—I'm "going with the flow" and enjoying the trip. This was the only piece I hadn't heard before, and I listened to it prior to reading the CD liner notes. My impression of the work as having a strong narrative element was correct in this instance: *Grass Valley Fire, 1988* depicts a fire that burned a large area in California, destroying the home of the composer's sister. The piece was written for the Modern Mandolin

Quartet (the first written exclusively for their instrumentation), and the performance recorded on the CD ranks among the best I have heard from the Quartet.

American Miniatures is more fragmented as a narrative. This work consists of five short movements, and was originally commissioned by the filmmaker Lynn Kirby as a soundtrack for a film about the American identity. Although I can certainly imagine the intended story, especially with movement titles such as *Roads West* and *The Dust Bowl*, the real tale for me is that of the disintegration of the term "computer music" as a meaningful conceptual category. In contrast with the first piece on the CD (an instrumental piece) this music is purely computer music—samples of mandolin notes, banjo notes, drums, fiddle-playing, and voices were processed and organized on a NeXT computer (using David Jaffe's MusicKit, of course!). The plot of this story grows from the seamless dialogue established between the "computer music" of the *Miniatures* and the acoustic first piece. Many of us working in computer music have internalized the notion that computer-generated and electronic sounds have some ill-defined quality that marks them as synthetic. *American Miniatures* sounds almost too good to be a *real* piece of computer music. The opening mandolin gesture in the first movement, although clearly not possible by human performers, certainly exists in the same sonic realm as the ending of *Grass Valley Fire*, 1988. The voice manipulations performed by David Jaffe in several of the other *Miniatures* are often so subtle that they sound as if some highly trained choir were performing hyper-Ligeti music with an incredible degree of precision—but a precision that doesn't sound artificial. Mr. Jaffe al-

most explicitly plays with the computer/human music borderline in parts of this piece. Clusters of obviously synthetic computer tones in *After the Battle of Bull Run* mutate almost imperceptibly into a rousing canon of fiddle music at the end of the piece. The mega mandolin chords at the conclusion of the final movement seem to echo and parody the stacked mandolin quartet chords sprinkled throughout *Grass Valley*.

These huge, synthetic mandolin chords create a wonderful context for the poignant entrance of the solo mandolin in *Ellis Island Sonata*. This four-movement work is the longest on the CD, and is probably my favorite music written by the composer. It is this piece that is the most obviously "Bartokian" in character, although my perception of it as such is probably colored by the title and my own concept of cultural movement in the USA. But those beautiful open fifth/fourth chords are in abundance, and the major- and minor-second tuning of several of the mandolin-string pairs in the second and third movements leads to some wonderfully dense harmonies.

Ellis Island Sonata is a virtuosic piece, both in the amazing performance ability demonstrated by David Jaffe, and also in his compositional ability to weave a panoply of musical influences together into a compelling work. Throughout this review I have mentioned the diverse stylistic elements present in David Jaffe's music, but I should make it clear that these pieces are not the typical "postmodern *pastiche*" that might be expected. Mr. Jaffe's music sounds more like he has internalized a wide variety of musics, and the combination that results is something totally new—a compound, rather than a mixture.

This stylistic synthesis is at its best in the final movement of the so-

nata *Who Are My People?* Fragments of folk melodies, infrequent jagged chords, and a wandering solo mandolin line give this music a haunted, disembodied quality that captures a real slice of the American identity. I found this piece to be thought provoking and emotionally stirring. The question posed by the title (and well represented by the music) certainly resonates with me, a Hoosier farm kid now living and working in the East Coast megalopolis.

Speaking of virtuosic performance, the last (and oldest) piece on the CD is the work of a true computer music virtuoso. *Silicon Valley Breakdown* stands as one of the landmarks of our field, and I still use it as the best demonstration of the range of the Karplus-Strong algorithm. Any musician working seriously in computer music should have this piece in their collection. Although I don't hear much substantive difference between this version and the previous release I have on the Wergo *Dinosaur Music* CD (WER 2016-50), it is nice to hear this piece in the context of David Jaffe's other music. Many of the techniques explored in *Silicon Valley Breakdown*, for example, the converging timing maps, the sharp shifts of musical density, etc., have been refined in Mr. Jaffe's later work.

It is possibly this exploration of techniques that underlies the "differentness" I hear in Mr. Jaffe's music. I think that at heart David Jaffe is a bit of a tinkerer, and the strength of his art lies in the fact that he can turn his technical musings into serious and engaging music. Perhaps "performer" is a better word than tinkerer, but by performer I mean someone who explores the outer limits of his instrument (with composition itself being construed as an instrument). Whatever it is, I find it absolutely congenial to my own view of music and composition. I'm really

happy this CD was released. It is a wonderful collection of music by an innovative and thoughtful composer.