

ROLNICK *Oceans Eat Cities*.¹ *Mirages*.² *Deal with the Devil*³ • Neil Rolnick (2^{pn}, computer); ³Jennifer Choi (vn); ³Kathleen Supové (vc); ¹VOXARE Str Qrt • ALBANY 1857 (56:21)

Interaction between man and environment, and between man and technology, inform this disc. This appears to have been a long-term interest of Neil Rolnick's: his early 1990s disc *Macedonian AirDrumming* on Bridge included the use of a Macintosh and a MIDI-based system. Born in 1947 in Dallas, Rolnick initiated the U.S.'s first Master's degree in "Integrated Electronic Arts." He studied with Darius Milhaud, Richard Felciano, and John Adams, plus studying computer music at Stanford; a stint at IRCAM in Paris in 1977–79 was also part of his formative experiences as a composer.

Using two of the more extreme results from a climate modeling by Climate Central, Princeton, *Oceans Eat Cities* (2015) explores how we would be impacted by climate change. The first movement, "No Change in Carbon Emissions, RCP 8.5" reflects population decrease by subtracting musical material at marked points; roughly, five years = five seconds of music. This is what happens if nothing changes as to humankind's present emissions. As the music progresses, then, it gets more rarefied until there is almost nothing left. A pulsing, nervous repeated note implies unrest while computer sounds seem to unsettle the traditional string quartet model (VOXARE is a string quartet to which Rolnick himself adds the computer component). The second movement/modelling, "Maximum Change in Carbon Emissions, RCP 2.6," demonstrates an alternative outcome; as a result of care in emissions, the level of textural change (musical subtraction from a surface) is nowhere near as marked. Also, the interaction between the processed sound of the quartet and the quartet itself reflects these proportions, so at some points the processing "covers" the music, just as the ocean will cover some parts of cities. The result is musically gripping: the use of mathematics, computers, and acoustic instruments is magisterially managed.

The 2017 piece *Mirages* is scored for piano and laptop computer. The composer plays both, simultaneously in a piece inspired by the idea of perspectives, and how "sometimes you see things which aren't there." The quiet pulsings of the bass in the central "On the Water" are particularly fascinating; the music seems to be tri-layered for much of this piece. There is also high sonic beauty here, before the final ("On the Highway"), where Rolnick seems to be fixated on a set of pitches that repeat and overlap (a nod to his Minimalist brush with Adams, perhaps?). The dialogue between piano and computer in this finale is remarkably fruitful—less an exchange, more of a sparring, often with delightful results (examples of this are found, perhaps with less of a light touch, in the first movement, "In the Desert"). There is a most engaging energy to this finale, too, what might be described as "jittery Minimalism."

Written in the same year as *Mirages*, *Deal with the Devil* for violin, piano, and laptop computer emerged from a residency at the Bogliasco Foundation near Genoa in Italy. Being Genoa, Paganini was much in Rolnick's mind in this piece, which begins with solo violin. Paganini's influence on Liszt is honored in the scoring (violin and piano), with that characteristic computer layered on top. Of course, both Paganini and Liszt were associated with the Devil for their prodigious talents (hence the title). There is wit here, in how the laptop "shadows" the violin in

the second section (the sections are separately tracked) with the piano interspersing jazzy commentaries. While Alfred Brendel might have something to say about Rolnick's impression of Liszt's virtuosity after immersing himself in the scores ("Rather than saying, 'listen to the music,' it often is saying 'look at me!'", it was a thought stream that impacted the end result, which mixes excitement with lyricism and, at one point, a decidedly nostalgic impression (the third section). Hints of popular musics lighten the mood; and some of the effects are just intriguing (the third section where one wonders whether the sounds are electronic or from the violin, just colored by electronica). And we certainly get Lisztian virtuosity (in a very different vocabulary, though) in the piano's contribution to the second "Transition." (Rolnick is clearly an exceptional pianist as well as an exceptional composer). Kathleen Supové, the pianist, is imbued herself with Lisztian *diablerie*; Jennifer Choi fiddles as if possessed (quite fitting, really). This is a great piece, very varied, superbly written and performed with real inspiration.

A whole new world of sounds is present here, beautifully realized in both execution and recording. Rolnick is a fabulous musician and his own best advocate. A very rewarding disc indeed. **Colin Clarke**

This article originally appeared in Issue 45:1 (Sept/Oct 2021) of *Fanfare Magazine*.