

“Fred Lerdahl, Vol. 4”

If you want to acquaint yourself with the music of contemporary composer Fred Lerdahl, this is a good place to start.

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“FRED LERDAHL, Vol. 4” = Spirals; Three Diatonic Studies; Imbrications; Wake; Fantasy Etudes – Mirka Viitala, piano/ Odense Sym. Orch. /Scott Yoo /Argento Ch. Ens. /Michel Galante /Boston Sym. Ch. Players / David Epstein/ eighth blackbird – Bridge 9391, 59:33 [Distr. by Albany] **:**



Small World Department: Last year I reviewed Volume 3 in this series, devoted to Fred Lerdahl’s three string quartets. I found the music and the performances engaging though Lerdahl was a new name to me. I’ve

since learned that he edited *Collected Essays on Modern and Classical Music* by George Edwards, the late husband of my mentor and friend, poet Rachel Hadas. That’s on my reading list; I think if Fred Lerdahl was involved in the project, it should be intelligent and informative, which I’ve heard it is. Certainly, this fourth volume of Lerdahl’s music, including works that span over forty years, speaks to the composer’s capacity to expand creatively and adapt to new musical audiences while retaining an individual voice.

It’s not surprising that the least effective piece on the program is the earliest, written when Lerdahl was a Princeton grad student and, for the summer of 1968, resident composer at Tanglewood. *Wake* was written for Bethany Beardsley, a soprano dedicated to the championing of modern composers from Schoenberg and Berg to Milton Babbitt and Peter Maxwell Davies. The piece is based on excerpts from James Joyce’s experimental novel *Finnegan’s Wake*, selected by the composer himself. Lerdahl writes that it “was the culmination of my early, post-Schoenbergian style. . .,” and it sounds like standard-issue ‘60s atonality, the vocal writing histrionic, much ado about nothing, which is pretty much what you’ll get out of the text if you happen to pore over it. (My two cents’ worth: Joyce went one experiment too far in *Finnegan’s Wake*.) Lerdahl is honest enough to suggest that the work has melodic contours typical of his style (what there is of melody) “but does not yet show the characteristic formal procedures and harmonic syntax that gradually emerged in the 1970s.”

For an insight into those procedures and syntax, you have to turn to *Spirals* (2006), composed for the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. This piece employs a technique that Lerdahl himself formulated and which he calls variously spirals or expanding variations. The idea is to expand on a simple melodic idea with a set of ever-more-complex variations expanding outward like one of the

spirals found in nature (chambered nautilus shell, for example). The technique informs Lerdahl’s aforementioned string quartets, in which the variations expand from one quartet to the next, through the whole series of three. The orchestral *Spirals* is a lot easier to follow for the casual listener and more immediately appealing, an attractively scored work in two contrasting sections (“fast and brilliant” and “slow and lyrical”).

Lighter in character are *Three Diatonic Studies* and *Imbrications* *Studies* started life as a commission from the Irving S. Gilmore International Keyboard Festival for a variation based on the *Aria* from Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. Feeling that the resulting piece, “*Chasing Goldberg*,” “needed companions,” Lerdahl added “*Cyclic Descent*” and “*Scalar Rhythms*.” The composer’s description of the pieces, with their complex interrelationship between diatonic and pentatonic scales and between scales and rhythms, is dauntingly erudite. But the music, especially the first piece, is refreshingly forthright and uncomplicated as a listening experience.

The brief *Imbrications* is even less challenging for those phobic to contemporary music. It’s a scurrying piece of counterpoint (since its dedicatee, the composer Andrew Imbrie, “was impatient with music that is slow, bombastic, and bereft of counterpoint”). Composed in honor of Imbrie’s eightieth birthday, *Imbrications* is based on “*Happy Birthday*” (did Lerdahl pay the expected royalty on that song?) and “*Auld Lang Syne*.” You don’t recognize them? Listen again. And again. They’re needles in an atonal and polyphonic haystack. [Well then, the copyright holder probably can’t recognize “*Happy Birthday*” either...Ed.]

Fantasy Etudes is again composed to the expanding-variations model. In this case, the variations develop within each of twelve interlocking etudes that have the nature of musical fantasies. “As the material of an etude begins to collapse under the weight of its elaboration, a new etude enters.” These overlaps accelerate, giving the work a feeling of constant progression until a climax is reached. Scored for the classic combination (made famous by Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*) of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, plus percussion, it’s a typical eighth blackbird piece though it wasn’t written for them; the group came into existence more than a decade after the premiere. However, *Fantasy Etudes* has become one of their signature pieces, and they sound like they own it.

The performances, coming from a number of sources and places, are all creditable. And even the most venerable recording—of *Wake*, performed by the commissioning artist plus the excellent Boston Chamber Players—is very good in Bridge’s remastering. Given the variety of musical experience on display here, this may be the place to start an acquaintanceship with Fred Lerdahl.

—Lee Passarella