

Lightness, Panache and Glistening Sonorities

The Orchestral Music of Rob Keeley and Robert Carl

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Rob Keeley: Orchestral Music. Toccata Classics TOCCo462, 2020. Compact disc.

Robert Carl: White Heron. Boston Modern Orchestra Project; Gil Rose, conductor. BMOP/sound 1076, 2021. Super Audio CD.

THERE ARE A FEW COMPOSERS out there writing exquisite and accessible orchestral music, but they may not necessarily be those who you might have heard of, or who are winning today's prizes. Two of these are Rob Keeley and Robert Carl.

Rob Keeley was born in Bridgend, Wales in 1960. His musical life started with listening to his dad's small record collection and his grandmother's piano playing. Soon, he too was playing piano and oboe, and then singing in the school choir. He studied with Oliver Knussen before he became, well, Oliver Knussen, and composers he fancied early on included late Stravinsky, Carter, Britten, Tippett, Dallapiccola and Messiaen. In the late 80s he studied with Franco Donatoni in Rome and then with Leonard Bernstein and Hans Werner Henze at Tanglewood—the Boston Symphony's summer retreat in the Berkshires, which also includes an important

composers fellowship program. He subsequently taught at King's College London for many years.

Keeley is most known for his well-wrought chamber music. His music follows fairly traditional pathways, displaying an extended tonality within historical forms. It is always finely put together and displays elegant narratives that are full of surprises. This is all to say he is not a firebrand, but rather someone who sees his music fitting comfortably in the history of music.

His Symphony No. 2 dates from 1996, when the composer was thirty-six, and followed by a year from his first. It is in the traditional four movements, in this case Allegro (fast) Scherzo (joking), Adagio (slow), and finally Allegro molto (really fast).

The first movement is spikey and a bit knotty, like chewing on a flavorful piece of flank steak. The language is just a bit dark and intense, but relieved by pointillistic moments which provide air. The harp is used now and then to provide lightness and gentleness. The movement ends with the fading wisps of a solo clarinet, a bit sly and unexpectedly.

The second movement is full of surprise and quick contrasts, as a scherzo should be. It is witty in its alternation of orchestral choirs. It is full of chuckling rhythms, with a dotted eighth/sixteenth note figure pervading.

There a few boozy moments in the strings and relief provided by jaunty solo wind parts. It too ends a little devilishly, with a fading flute figure. The materials are mostly tonal with various known scales and a nice and clear motive that is almost of the vernacular, a 4-3-1 descent played in a swinging figure.

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Adagios can be at a speed from fairly slow to glacial. This one is more at a contemplative tempo that never drags or gets dull, which is to say that while there are not tunes to speak of, its motivic materials are always in motion. I do not hear it as *adagio molto*, but its slower sections with just string chords might almost fit this description. (Incidentally, their harmonies are suave and luscious.) This movement finally does really end, but somewhat offhandedly, with a low bass note in the basses signaling its conclusion.

The *Allegro molto* is just that: fast, syncopated, and humorous. Moments of silence provide real breaks, with clearly delineated phrases. The pacing is sure and contrasts abound. Occasionally the winds come in heckling the others, and the conversation is clear, lean, and to the point. There are moments of delightful repose, with more subdued dynamics; and a clear dimensionality in the orchestration, as it bubbles along, effervescent and light on its toes. This movement has a definitive ending, as it should, since it finishes not just the movement but the entire symphony. This is a delightful piece that goes by much faster than its twenty-three minute duration would suggest.

The Flute Concerto, which dates from 2017, is a work for strings and solo flute and is in three movements with the latter two played without pause. They are *Andantino*, *Adagio*, and then *Allegro molto*. This is the typical format for a concerto, and it is a vehicle where the soloist gets to strut virtuosity and other aspects of great playing, that might include lyricism, spontaneity, and even improvisation.

The first movement is marked *Andantino* which is slightly faster than an *Andante*. If the latter is a walking gait, then the former is perhaps at about a skipping speed. And of course, neither is to be confused with *al dente*, which would refer to slightly undercooked pasta! But I digress. This opening movement starts with a steady pulsation in the strings suggestive of quiet introspection. This then gives way to music that is more speedy and playful. These two attitudes alternate throughout this six-minute movement. It is somewhat neoclassical in its piquant harmonies, syncopated, peppy rhythms, and transparent textures that frequently present a bass pizzicato note to which the upper strings then respond. It has a clear and present harmonic rhythm which is easy to follow, and this movement is perhaps less about virtuosity than a dialogic conversation between the flute and strings. It is playful and perky.

The *Adagio* is all about a dyadic (two-note) figure that is introduced first in a sighing descent, and then in the course of the piece is presented as a leap up. With the first the energy decreases, and with the second there is an increase in energy and tension. At first, both strings and flute present this material. Later in the piece this is varied, with the strings playing the two-note figure as the flute provides commentary thereon with groups of much faster notes. It is a clear and clever variation.

The third and final movement, an *allegro*, is all about speed and pulsation. It opens with

rapid pulsations in high strings against a pedal point in the basses. It is almost like a landscape with flickering light. The middle range is quite empty, so this hollow sound is quite singular in the context of the entire work. The difference might be suggestive of the neo-classic Stravinsky and the Americana of Copland, particularly his Appalachian Spring. There is much fast passage work, with lots of notes per square inch, most of them scalar. At the end a whimsical and almost out of place waltz appears before the final dash. Altogether, it is quite a charming piece.

The triple concerto is for two oboes, an English horn, or the oboe section of an orchestra, and, like the flute concerto, strings. It follows in the footsteps of George Telemann's orchestral suite for three oboes, three violin and basso continuo, which Keeley tells us he admires. You might wish to listen to this fine piece before listening to Keeley's. It is gay and bright and sets you up perfectly for its successor.

The first movement allegro is perky with lovely mixed textures. With the three wind instruments often treated as a group—just like in Telemann's symphony—it presents a sophisticated argument. The second movement scherzo: presto has quicksilver registral shifts and is formed yet again of a dyad either presented as short-short or long-short. The third movement is in three parts: an Andante, quasi-sarabande, and a final presto. The second part, a slow dance in three, is somewhat thick and perhaps a little cumbersome. The final presto is light, delicate and whimsical. In fact this last movement in many respects summarizes the entire journey of the Telemann. It is a fine example of one composer talking to, or commenting on, an earlier colleague and his work, and demonstrative of the continuity of the tradition in this music.

Keeley does something similar with the final piece on the disc, his *Variations for*

Orchestra, in which he communes with Elgar and his *Enigma Variations*, also for orchestra. Variations on a theme are a time-honored tradition. One thinks of the Diabelli Variations of Beethoven, or Brahms's Variations on a Theme by Haydn, or Paganini, or Schuman. Mozart wrote many movements in his various serenades of theme and variations. One might consider the process of development in the sonata-allegro format as types of variation. This process presents the opportunity for the composer to create a very wide swath of emotional states, all related very closely. One might therefore consider it proto-romantic, as that period is known for its restatement or reworking of a motive or tune to present widely disparate emotions.

Keeley's *Variations for Orchestra* was written in 2019 and is perhaps a summarization to date of his orchestral style, as well as the influence in the work of his "beloved Elgar." The theme is his own making, formed of rising 6ths and descending 7ths, and the work is formed of fourteen variations. The textures are in the main chamber-like and vary from one variation to the next. A tricky aspect of this form is not to make it too "stop and go," and to also build a workable larger architecture from the small parts. Keeley does this admirably. He accomplishes this by tempo similarities or differences.

The first six variations are all taken at a pretty good clip and each is about a minute long. The seventh is gracefully slow and almost two minutes in length, and provides pleasant relief from the previous speedy music. The fast music is: scherzando for winds and strings, then featuring the clarinet then oboe, highlighting contrapuntal lines, featuring flutes and high strings, a simple dance featuring flute, and then a rather rude dance featuring trombones. The following slow variation features pairs of oboes and rustling pizzicato strings.

Variations 8 to 11 are again quite quick; the music starts with a faux medieval

dance, the theme then coming as a *cantus firmus* in the strings, followed by a blend of timbres with repeated notes, and another dance that features a hopping rhythmic motive. All these variations are about a minute in length, with the exception of one that is almost twice as long. The twelfth variation is again slow and about two and a half minutes long, and contains the culmination or climax of the work. Variation 13 speeds up, and features scurrying upward driving scales in the strings and winds, broad bands of stalwart

brass, and perhaps yet another climax. This leads into the final variation, a Passacaglia-Finale, and an extended coda at about three and one-half minutes in duration. Keeley says that the fugal pizzicato violins sound like raindrops that gradually fill out into a denser musical landscape. The work comes to a somewhat abrupt close, one without a lot of preparation or signaling of its intent.

Keeley's music is genial and filled with lightness and panache. These works are very much worth getting to know.

White Heron is the title of a new CD of the orchestral music by the American composer Robert Carl. Born in 1954, he is of that generation whose musical development came during the breakdown of modernism and the rise of minimalism and Neo-Romanticism. By his own admission, he started composing somewhat later than most, in his middle college years, and a few of his formative influences were the composer and theorist Jonathan Kramer, and the firebrand Ralph Shapey. His development and transformation has been slow and sure, which has led to these pieces of the 21st-century, as Carl entered maturity. This music, while written in a time of musical totalism and a time of the breakdown between popular and high culture in almost all artistic genres, is still redolent of his studies at Yale and the University of Chicago. That is to say, while Carl's work is post-impressionistic, and about space and time, it utilizes materials in a most sophisticated and, dare one say, classical way. He states that this music is the result of his study and utilization of his personalized harmony, one that is "modeled on the harmonic series." One hears this in many manifestations: Carl creates a hierarchy of intervals from sonorities based on open intervals of the perfect fourth and

fifth, dominant chords, and sonorities of the highest partials including semi-tones. At the same time, he is unafraid to use the densest of chords, including close to or all of the twelve pitches available, which are, however (as in the music of Witold Lutoslawski), spaced to emphasize consonant intervals, giving these dense sonorities a tonal patina. Each of these orchestral works is also a journey, emotional and dramatic, with clear shape and form, and, most importantly, about consequential, and recognizable, musical ideas.

The first work on the disc, *White Heron*, was written in 2012 and is an impressionistic tone poem of nine minutes in duration. It can be described as a soundscape, a term used often in regard to electro-acoustic pieces of the 1970s and 80s that recreated sounds found in nature. Those works took their basis from the night music written by Béla Bartók, who was one of the first to write music of this sort. One also finds allusions in this work to—but who else!—Messiaen, whose compositions almost always included his musical representation, or transliterations, of bird song into the well-tempered scale of twelve pitches that forms the basis of our present musical materials.

Carl's work moves at a pace of slow, meditative time. Pulse is largely absent. The sound of the heron is most frequently found in the trumpets in a descending semi-tonal figure, almost as an *idée fixe*, within a larger sonic world combining fragments of Ives' *The Unanswered Question*, the semi-tonal clouds, brief glissandi of Ligeti, and large sonorities with tonal spacing that is reminiscent of the aforementioned Lutoslawski. The orchestration glistens, with nary a badly judged sound. The work often references back to a floating, one might say, grey-cloudy background of stasis, though it does burst open to luminous chords of open intervals and finally melody, or at least a melodic fragment. It is also dotted with silences that provide both repose and expectancy. A climax occurs at just about the Golden Mean: a melody appears in the strings and then a trumpet that is reminiscent of the Ivesian trumpet's question, formed of a quick large intervallic rise and a longer slower descent, that is repeated a number of times, above an ostinato in the harp. Dynamics, with the exception of the aforementioned climax, are on the soft side. Time has indeed almost stopped, or floats along at a leisurely pace. At the end, the work fades, with string harmonics in a glissando disappearing into the highest range, and finally the bass provides a quick low grounding, as the work gently ends. This is a suave and luscious piece.

What's Underfoot is a curious work. It starts in the very highest registral space and over its 16 minutes of duration gradually works its way to the lowest, as if one begins by hearing the highest partials of an elaborate harmonic series only to move on down to the fundamental. This is not done completely linearly—which would end up sounding quite trivial—but along a somewhat wave-like manner, with curvaceous meanderings possessing a hard-edged graceful quality. Along the way, one hears piquant highs of

piccolo, glockenspiel, piano, and violins, with sensual sweeps and repeated figures that again remind of Messiaen's birds. It begins in a slow, stately tempo and then in its unfolding, gradually increases in speed. One could say the same for the density of the materials themselves, as the sound grows from wispy to menacing at its conclusion. Upon each return of its cyclic harmonic progression, it grows in depth of sound and orchestration. High brass make their appearance somewhere in the middle, and the trombones are saved for the concluding third of the piece. There is frequent use of *klangfarbenmelodien* (a tone color melody) and refined two-part counterpoint. The piece moves in fits and starts, with a bold granitic quality, suggestive of Charles Ruggles' music or the canvasses of Clyfford Still. At its conclusion, low pedals of C-sharp and D-sharp appear along with a bold tonic of an A major chord that is heard with a rumble in the bass drum. This progression is again reminiscent of Messiaen, as he used a similar cadential formula in his early music. This piece's moves are surprising from beginning to end, which is a very good thing.

Rocking Chair Serenade can be parsed into its two components of a rocking chair and a serenade. The former rocks its participant into a ruminative state through its repetitive motion. Daydreaming is often the result. Time is slowed down, as one enters a liminal space between sleeping and consciousness. A serenade might be to woo, or to sweetly accompany. Mozart wrote numerous ones, the most important being that Serenade No. 10, "*Gran Partita*," a long and ambitious work for winds outdoors. Mozart's is a little ungainly in length, and it would seem that it is a combination of movements that don't suggest a clear larger architecture or structure. Or maybe it was meant to amuse, and only to filter into the listener's consciousness episodically during a long summer's dinner. Carl's serenade is about twelve minutes

long, and is a kind of brief meditation. It is mostly gentle, and even when its harmonic gears grind, they do so like two clouds that gently interpenetrate, only to then go their own ways. A rocking motion pertains pretty much for the work's entirety, in a rhythm of short-long, short-long, short-long, repeated endlessly, with a dotted quarter note being the primary beat. This essential motive, in the interval domain, is formed of a leap of an octave, then a return to the low pitch followed by a leap to a major seventh, then a return to the lower octave followed by a leap to the major sixth. One might imagine this as the three stations of one rock of the rocker: starting or stopped position, and then the two apexes of the arcing movement, forward and back. This material never bores, as there is frequently an accompaniment of slower materials that are chromatic and outside of whatever tonic area is present. In Mozartian terms, we might consider them as passing tones, or in Messiaen's terms, passing areas. Or these might be like rain clouds that rough up those bright white ones.

Like *What's Underfoot*, this work starts in the highest register and gradually fills in the lower range. As one might expect, dynamics are generally low, with only a few small rises and falls along the way. The piece moves through various major keys including B-flat, E, D, finally settling at its conclusion on G (with an unresolved major 7th, F-sharp) Which is also to say, it moves from a darker key to brighter ones, as the latter three include the open strings of the violin. There is a short duet of two violins soon joined by a cello. There is often the use of distant highs and lows, with a vacant mid-ground, creating a sense of a Coplandesque wide-open American landscape. Or maybe it just portrays a wandering consciousness at play.

Symphony No. 5, *Land*, might be thought of as a large panoramic view of an immense swath of America, its actual physicality. It might be thought of as a 21st-century

rethinking of Strauss's *An Alpine Symphony*. In that work, Strauss creates a detailed musical piece of landscape that covers the time of one day, from early dawn through to deepest night. In more than twenty episodes, Strauss's music depicts an ascent and descent, and the many encounters with nature during the journey. Carl's work moves from the plains to the mountains and finally to an imaginary land, one perhaps free of strife and discontent. Whereas Strauss's journey is a day's hike, Carl's might be a transatlantic flight. Fittingly, Strauss's takes over fifty minutes to cover its twenty-four-hour period, while Carl's lasts a little over thirty minutes from wheels up to wheels down. Its nine movements cover a wide temporal gamut, from, twenty-nine seconds (!) to twelve minutes and seventeen seconds. (This is somewhat similar to the chapters of *Moby Dick*, where the smallest one is only a brief paragraph and the others usually many, many pages.) There is a certain attractive whimsey in this. The movements are played pretty much continuously, with the occasional bleed-through from one section to another.

Open Prairie, in three large phrases, each containing mounting energy with a crescendo from beginning to end, begins with gentle rustling in the percussion. There is a sensuous melody presented either in unison or octaves and various repetitions of scale fragments in the strings. *High Plains* is characterized by combinations of brass and percussion (with the latter continued from the first movement), with the addition of the bass drum, and melodies in the clarinet and strings. A knotty dense texture, full of rising figures and increased volume, leads to a climax that dissipates with the arrival of the next movement, *Facing Mountains*, which is formed of slow majestic brass chords, string pedals both high and low. *Shimmering Mists* features an oboe solo over hushed tremolos in the strings, with very slowly changing

chords, and other brief fragments. *Wildflower Meadow* presents a gentle undulation, with a gentle weave of winds over sustained horns. Trumpets join in the fun with gliding down gestures. This is interrupted by *Storm Fronts*, the briefest of movements, which presents a massed orchestra all playing long luminescent chords. *Scaling* is also very brief, at only 48 seconds, and is formed of upward surging scale figures, but with out-of-sync rhythms, as if portraying different streams of wind pushing up over the mountains' surfaces. This too is very loud, and cut off with intensity and the only moments of silence in the entire work. In *Above the Tree Line*, the air becomes quite thin and translucent, with a bird-like solo flute and string tremolos very high registrally.

The basses enter, playing very low and slow, with sustained sonorities in the winds that have a gray and pale color (maybe a little fog?). *The Land Beyond* concludes our journey with music reminiscent of Ives' *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*. Strings breathe with gentle swells accompanying ephemeral and sporadic chimes and flute. Cellos and violins soar with punctuations of winds and brass. A flute reappears now with celeste, a softer chime sound if you will. There is a brief reference to the key of C minor, a little reticent and shy, and then without further ado, a quick fade of an adieu.

The music of Robert Carl is well-heard, well-paced, and, well, quite beautiful. It is full of memorable atmosphere, touching moments, and glistening sonorities. ♪