Complicated
Optimism

Music of
Rodney Rogers
Riffing in Tandem

When I began this piece, two challenges were central to the project: creating a sense of dialogue between the two pianos—there are two players but only one instrument type—and incorporating contrasting styles into a three-movement plan. Spinning Out took as its point of departure the idea of spontaneous music that does not rely on traditional structural types. I selected improvised fragments, tossing them around in a toccata-like framework. These loosely organized motives were sporadically 'worked out,' what German writers often refer to as Fortspinnung (literally 'spinning forth'). But the term often implies a methodical approach to composition, and that was definitely not what I had in mind. So the title also hints at the possibility of spinning out of control.

The inner movement is a simple set of variations on the first music I learned at the piano—a children's hymn built on a pentatonic scale (using only the black notes on the piano keyboard). The movement pays homage to Rose, who introduced me to the piano at age three. An image of Rose Samstad's enormous upright piano with its dark-stained wood is one of the few vivid memories I hold from early childhood. I would sit before that piano, on Rose's lap, and try my luck at making sounds. With the help of Rose, I also learned to play the melody used for this movement. (As an adult, a mirage-like pattern would occasionally appear before me when tired or fatigued. For years, I could not quite define the image. Shortly after beginning work on Riffing, I awoke suddenly one morning and realized that the image was in fact the outline of the black notes of the piano and that the children's song was responsible for my early childhood memorization of this visual pattern. Since the day I awoke from that dream, I have never seen the image.)

The final movement, Curves and Hopes, is perpetual-motion music with a few chromatic diversions throwing in the curves suggested by the title. The energy subsides during a chromatic descent near the end of Curves, followed by echoes of the chromatic turns—riffs—of the first movement (including a light-hearted rendering of the BACH exotic). Riffing in Tandem received its national premiere at the MTNA convention in...
Crossing the Bar

This song was written at the request of a dear friend, Barbara Peterson. In a letter, she discussed symbolic elements of the poem. The song contains musical symbolism intended to acknowledge and complement this component of the poetry. For example, 'home' is represented by the pitch B, while words in first person ('I' and 'me') are given to Bb—the pitch that most closely connects to Barbara's name through the repetition of the letter B and b. While this symbolism is not apparent to the listener, it did give direction to the process of writing the song. I am particularly glad that this recording is included on the CD since both Barbara and the pianist, Marsha Johnson, have passed away. The performance reflects the musicality of Marsha and the soprano, Carol Meyer—containing no splices, the recording stands as a tribute to their artistry.

Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call from me!  
And may there be no meaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark:

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far;  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.
Alleluia Sing the Stars

Alleluia was written while in residence at MacDowell Colony in the winter of 1981. I was there to compose Endsong (a large-scale composition for soprano and chamber ensemble), but needed a break from the intricate planning devised for that music. As a diversion, I decided to write a simple carol for voice and guitar. Over time it became the choral work recorded here. My music has always featured modal and diatonic scales, but has never incorporated the direct use of traditional tonality or one of its chief components, modulation. In this piece, I found a way to integrate modulation into my compositional style. The verses of the song follow a transpositional plan that is related to the pitches of the melody—for this idea I am indebted to Stravinsky and his Septet. The melody itself, though intentionally simple, contains an encryption that relates to the text, which I wrote.

The circumstances surrounding this recording are quite unusual. A high school choir had just arrived on campus after an eight-hour bus ride. Our choir director thought it might be nice for them to sit in on the recording session—I was not so sure. The performance turned out to be the choir’s finest. (And the guest choir remained virtually silent throughout.)
Riffing in Tandem 13:18
Robert Hamilton, Mark Fuller, pianos
1. Spinning Out 3:29
2. Music for Rose 4:02
3. Curves and hopes 5:47

Two Views 12:06
Lawrence University Chamber Ensemble*
Steven Jordheim, conductor
4. an unfolding quiet 6:15
5. complicated optimism 5:51

Voices Rising 7:59
Robert Spring, clarinet

Crossing the Bar 6:37
Carol Meyer, soprano
Marsha Johnson, piano

Numbering the Stars 4:07
Palo Verde Brass**

Prevailing Winds 17:29
Lawrence University Wind Ensemble
Robert Levy, conductor
9. Summer Fanfares 8:29
10. Midsummer Moon 2:37