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# ONE CHAMBER MUSIC OF KURT ROHDE

## ALL OF THE NOTHING ONE SEES BY DAVID HUMPHREY

When Kurt Rohde trained as a composer, contemporary music had dilated into a state of extreme pluralism: Serialists, Minimalists, neo-Romantics, John Cage-inspired rockers, multi-culturalists, third streamers and self-taught hybridizers were making and recording music being taken seriously by critics and audiences. Popular music was established as part of the habitat of growing up in the US. While many artists labored to establish a relation to that context, Rohde found a space for himself within this disorientingly open-ended field. But what is the space he has so emphatically inhabited? Rohde neither adapts traditional forms as though they are timeless nor pretends that tradition doesn't exist. Rather, he engages innovation and tradition for their unstable capacity to purvey vitality, to create force-fields of memory and feeling in which thought-rhythms and musical narrative can tell us what it feels like to be a person today.

## CONCERTINO FOR VIOLIN AND SMALL ENSEMBLE

The *Concertino* is a *tour de force* of virtuosic display and storm-tossed lyricism. From the ramping up of its call-and-response beginning, to the angled turns and intensifying exhortations of the finale, Rohde develops a piece with the range and scope associated with an epic novel. The first movement spans an event-packed musical narrative with abrupt conclusions and false endings that turn into restless beginnings, until a final high-speed musical chase. The second movement begins as aftermath. The pulling restraint against an ache to go forward unfolds, interrupted by flashes of possible release, until a final lament hesitantly establishes itself. The athletic third movement lunges from the start as a light-footed run, flaunting unpredictable fleetness and excited agility. Form struggles against the inchoate while the pulse of the violin's challenged vitality finally emerges triumphant.



**ONCE IN A WHILE  
BY ERIC BIANCHI**

The *Concertino* shows off Rohde's subversive mastery of the Classical repertoire. The work is loosely fashioned after the Baroque *concerto grosso*, where a small group of soloists alternate with a full ensemble. Although all the instruments become virtuosos in *Concertino*, solo passages and sequential writing recall the tropes of Baroque music. *Moto* (motion) also recalls Brahms in the intensity of the thematic working-out and in the large-scale implications of local harmonic events. The opening gestures set up the central conflict: The violin soloist arpeggiates a simple perfect fourth (A–D), but the music quickly sags as the ensemble pulls it down a half-step (G<sup>#</sup>–C<sup>#</sup>). The soloist struggles against the ensemble with increasing rhetorical force and the courtly dialogue of the *concerto grosso* takes on a ferocious antagonism. The movement achieves closure on D, and there are even moments of pure D major sonority (with the violinist singing a bright F<sup>#</sup> high above the ensemble). Despite Rohde's characteristic tonal clarity, the old harmonic language has been shattered and reconstituted: Any sense of "key" is at once hollowed out, modally enriched, and chromatically compromised.

*Soffo* (under) takes its cue from the Adagio of Bach's C major Solo Violin Sonata. Rohde begins by expanding a middle C into a major second and pursues these expansions throughout the movement, lingering in the sensuous quality of individual intervals.

*Rotto* (broken), one of Rohde's great perpetual motion machines, bears a sonic and strategic resemblance to Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8. Singular events like a sudden ensemble blast of C-major fracture the forward dash. As the violin races to a breathless conclusion, Bach's E major Partita for Solo Violin gradually emerges and, for an instant, snaps into focus. Here Rohde one-ups the master of fugue and turns the solo melody into a brief moment of imitative counterpoint. That soon devolves into a phrase that the violinist is directed to repeat "almost too many times." The piece pushes again toward closure, but instead slams to a violent stop on the destabilizing interval (C<sup>#</sup>–G<sup>#</sup>) that set the music tumbling along at the outset of the first movement. *Concertino* is strewn with recognizable relics of the past, with masterworks mislaid and misused; Rohde's voice emerges through the cracks and fissures of his carefully engineered breakages.

**ONE FOR SPEAKING PIANIST ON TEXTS OF JAKOB STEIN**

The "ONE," constituting the title of this album, is a singularity that subdivides, multiplies and agglomerates; wholes come apart in the turbulent flow of music as roiling clouds of heterogeneous material coalesce into clear emphatic statements before breaking apart again. *ONE* has three distinct roles for the performer; speaker, pianist and percussionist. The

**KURT ROHDE** is a recipient of the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Lydian String Quartet Commission Prize, and commission awards from the NEA, Meet the Composer, the Barlow, Fromm, Hanson, and Koussevitzky Foundations. He is Professor of Music Composition at UC Davis, is a founding member and former Artistic Director of the Left Coast Chamber Ensemble, and is a member of the New Century Chamber Orchestra. • Violinist **AXEL STRAUSS**, winner of the 1998 Naumburg Award, served as Professor of Violin and Chamber Music at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and is presently Professor of Violin at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University, Montreal. He has also served as guest concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic and the Montreal Symphony. • **MATILDA HOFMAN** works regularly with Empyrean Ensemble and is Music Director of the Diablo Symphony Orchestra. She has conducted at the Salzburg Festival, Berliner Festspiele, Kammerakademie Potsdam and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. • A versatile performer of music spanning five centuries, **GENEVIEVE FEJWEN LEE** (Everett S. Olive Professor of Music at Pomona College) has dazzled audiences on the piano, harpsichord, toy piano, and keyboard with electronics. In solo and ensemble work, she has performed throughout the US, China, Europe, and South America, and can be heard on Albany Records. • **JAKOB STEIN** studied Talmud at Yeshivas Bircas HaTorah in Jerusalem's Old City. The poems used here are from a five-volume series entitled Ein Sof (Endless) one of the many names of God. • **ELLEN RUTH ROSE** has been a champion of contemporary music in the US and abroad. A former member of Germany's MusikFabrik, she is currently violist of Empyrean Ensemble, Ecoensemble, and Earplay, where she continues to premiere numerous works. • **MARY CHUN** has worked with many composers to help shape the new classical chamber music repertoire of the 21st century. She is Principal Conductor of Earplay and Music Director/Conductor for the Cinnabar Opera Theater. • **ERIC BIANCHI** is a musicologist who specializes in the Renaissance and Baroque. He is a member of the Department of Art History and Music at Fordham University and, in 2008-2009, he was a Rome Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. • **DAVID HUMPHREY** is a New York artist who is represented by the Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, NY. He is a senior critic at the Yale School of Art. An anthology of his art writing, *Blind Handshake*, was published by Periscope Publishing and is distributed by Prestel. • For more than twenty years, the **LEFT COAST CHAMBER ENSEMBLE** has communicated with audiences through inspiring performances of new and old chamber music. By embracing both musics, LCCE enriches the audience's experience by reawakening a feeling of immediacy in performances of familiar masterpieces and revealing the powerful expressive intentions in the music of our time. • New music ensemble-in-residence at UC Davis, the **EMPYREAN ENSEMBLE** is dedicated to performing the music of our time, has premiered approximately 200 new works and has performed throughout California, including appearances at many prominent music festivals and concert series.

## TEXTS

One grain of sand on my tongue  
all the feasts of Edom

—  
Such history, ungone  
their founder went under  
to after-war's after realm

articulate shadows, Daphnis  
Tityrus Meliboeus  
bloodless in Erebus

a whole crowd came streaming  
but she  
turned away

—  
O three times he tried to embrace  
his father  
three times his arms slipped thru

—  
War now & every war  
ends in more war

bloody Edom, Bellum  
Judaicum

Rome monumental  
sent seven hills against one  
stunted mountain

cast in their eyes as  
destroyers of shrines

blood-milkers of children  
& thieves of all value

now even in our eyes our  
violent error

in what other order is this  
chaos order

show us, & end

—  
Here I stand on one foot

on a pillar of dust  
facing the wind

casting no shadow  
on a plane of shadows

at the X of two errors

one road to Edom the other road  
back to Edom

—  
Stones blossom

slow blooming of stone in stone-rain  
throughout the sand garden

of all our long wandering

after such error even  
the desert a river of riches

all one can imagine

until the black plume  
the bottomless chasm

the blazing gate

—  
Commanded to joy  
such discipline escapes me

what joy in Edom where all joy  
is monstrous all laughter hollow

—  
Held in Your hands I make them  
what holds

I am the hollow that shapes them

—  
Down the throat of the desert  
that ladder descends

only one rung of it visible  
nor can this stump of a man reach up

so croaks instead every tale of ascent  
but one

—  
The cave-mouth opens, the urns turn East  
& beckon

a lost boy  
so too this Qumran calls

so too soul's Qumran calls  
to no answer

turns toward the hidden  
& the cave mouth is sealed

—  
Or the cave-mouth speaks

from the pocked cliffs, the forty  
year feast

is ended, the gates  
of the Wars of the Lord burst open

dark camps of the kittim  
who pass unseen among us, thru us

as us

now the first horn, the rope  
of our wailing binds them

the feast of moshiach begins

—  
The walled kehillah, the caves  
where the little light left

is held fast for millennia  
held captive & held against  
all other light

beckon

—  
Ownless

stripped so far even  
nightless, fogless

even lossless

—  
Two stones ground to dust

wind-sown to all the earth's edges  
& mixed with all other dust

mortared with straw in the cracks

dust of this dust

mote lodged in the eye, all or  
the nothing one sees

heat-pressed by heart  
to this altar

—  
Dust culled from death's west, from all  
the dark corners

ingather, mold

not crystal but coal  
not glass-flower: furnace  
& press

to heat-seed

after-ember, gem memory  
of light

buried sun

one stone & the one  
stone within it

—  
Thru the two doors

thru paroches & the sealed gate  
all thru to the sealed ear

how sing You in Edom  
how sing

what song I am given  
poverty's song

one true song of Edom

—Poems selected from *Endless*,  
by Jakob Stein. Used by permission.

piece uses Rohde's selection of short poems by Jakob Stein in which the piano variously accompanies or challenges the intimately scaled, sometimes urgent voice. Oracular utterances, relating to a depleted time after the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, swell from ever-evolving harmonic or rhythmic contexts. "I," "you" and "we" shift and break apart along with the unfolding motifs and shifting moods. "The rope of our wailing binds them" are Stein's words intoned to conjure power for the vanquished, but also to speak about the power of music. Body images in the text transform into details of the landscape (cave as mouth) while the speaker's breath becomes musically associated with the interior of the piano. The image of dust is invoked in a way that could describe the mutability of Rohde's music. Dust is "wind-sown"—it settles into mortar, drifts into eyes as notes and somehow retains the memory of its past as stone, and, as the text more metaphysically suggests, as light.

**ONE exploits tensions between unity and plurality, contradiction and cohesion without fully resolving them: Rohde manipulates the sonic capabilities of piano and pianist, and fuses ensemble, musician and poet into a single soloist. The music gradually emerges from a lone middle C, and the text accumulates haltingly from the syllable "one;" the opening poem is as much a point of arrival as a point of departure. The final section reverses (or completes) a thematic arch. "Two stones ground to dust . . . one stone & the one/stone within it": two distinct harmonic fields rub uneasily against each other, then blur and coalesce into the unitary gesture from the work's opening moments.**

## DOUBLE TROUBLE FOR TWO VIOLAS AND SMALL ENSEMBLE

The notion of "ONE" is differently vexed in *Double Trouble* by using the two solo violas as a complicated, mirrored, singularity. Rohde is a violist, so it makes sense to see the piece as a story of a braided self-raveling and unraveling in a variety of contexts. Wholeness is occasionally obtained while a drama between self and other (violas and ensemble) tumbles through an order crafted to include its own capacity for collapse. The ensemble oscillates between cooperative action and solo imperatives developed by the individual instruments. Musical thoughts are sometimes relayed like a racer's baton from one player to the other. At other times the instruments gather into a brooding huddle before collectively springing forward in a rush. Rohde is a genius of the anticipatory mood; harmonic and rhythmic tensions build a sense of the impending as expectation is stoked with ingenious subtlety and exquisite cruelty.

**The first movement is "obsessive-compulsive" in its pounding rhythm, frantic detail, especially in chewing over and spinning out a motif developed from a descending half-step. The opening**

bars feature it—simultaneously—in the mad contrapuntal play between violas and flute, in the piano's hammered tone clusters, and in the violin's harmonics. Later, it is cloaked in the ghostly harmonies—consonant but disjunct—that flit through the texture, and is set loose to a maniacal walking bass that propels the movement to an abrupt stop.

With a deft change of pronunciation, *Double* provides the conceit of the second movement, a variation loosely based on the Baroque *double*. The thematic material again emerges from the violas' conversation, a conversation punctuated by memories of the first movement's ghostly sonorities. The rich harmonies of the violas' final lyrical duet, however, are interrupted by bare open fifths "as if a premonition."

In *Spazoid*, melodic development takes a backseat to rhythmic urgency and sheer virtuosity. The perfect fifths that interrupted the slow movement, now fitted to an insistent syncopated rhythm, provide a recurring signpost in the spastic rush of music. They also lie at the heart of the movement's central solo episode, a space of sonorous play and lyricism that takes advantage of the technique of double-stopping and the viola's capacity for dark, full-bodied tones. In the final moments, the headlong rush is arrested when the strings suddenly return to a compressed exploration (marked "Brutal!!!") of the half-step with which *Double Trouble* opened; the violas enact a final *doppelgänger* reaching out a half-step on either side of a shared pitch.

#### FOUR REMIXES FOR PIANO TRIO

The radio in Rohde's family car and his mom and dad's records helped him not only to imagine "I can do that!" but also "I can show how I'm different from all that!" Rohde's *Four Remixes* are variations after the pop music of his youth: The B52s, The Beatles, Elton John and Joni Mitchell. His treatments convert the simple harmonic source material into music of emotive seriousness and Ivesian grandeur. The *Remixes* seem to climb into a space of memory and loss to find something meaningful and abiding on new terms.

In fact, Rohde stages an act of memory, forcing listeners to hear unsung and half-remembered words against the grain of his untexted remixes. Although the original tunes are cast in verse-chorus format, Rohde seizes on the latent potential in the lyrics—meditative, dissonant, discontented—and allows it to spill across his music with disruptive force.

Joni Mitchell's *Night Ride Home* is a gentle tribute to the America of deep Fourth-of-July nights. *Slowest Night* inhabits a nocturnal vision "like some surrealist invented." Mitchell's melody is barely recognizable, transformed from a tune into a dream, distended fragments set into a languid harmonic haze. The phrase "once in a while" surfaces repeatedly in an atmosphere of nostalgia and desire. The music evaporates rather than ends, as Mitchell's "I love the man

beside me" fuses into a fragment of Gershwin's *The Man I Love*.

The B-52s' *Funplex* takes up another icon of Americana: the mall. At first, *After 59pm* sounds like a fairly straight remix with power chords, distortion, and a metal chain on the piano strings for the "electric" effect: Rohde bops along with the B-52s' kitsch-laden tune to a steady dance beat. But everything comes unhitched at the line "O Honey, was it all about the money?" As the lyrics probe the darker side of consumer capitalism, the music struggles to get back on track, and the movement achieves tonal closure having lost its teenage exuberance.

*Looped Trip* preserves the original key and memorable melodies of Elton John's *Rocket Man*. John's upper-atmosphere escapes into falsetto ("high," "rocket man") launch Rohde onto distortions spanning three octaves. The remix loops the original melodies into dense out-of-phase counterpoint. Unhitched from the straight-ahead pop-song drive, John's tune achieves a kind of floating stasis: a meditation on deep-space weightlessness and middle-class melancholy.

Lennon and McCartney's ballad of serial murder, *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*, recounts gruesome deeds to a sweet and predictable ragtime soft-shoe. But the unbalanced energy of *Maxed Out* overwhelms the neat succession of verse and chorus. Rohde deforms and deletes lines and stanzas, and sets the syncopated tune lurching awkwardly against the triple meter. When the chorus finally appears, the music briefly swings into a regular 4/4, only to be derailed by murderous obsession ("Maxwell's silver hammer made SURE, made sure that she was DEAD"). The memory of the winsome original makes *Maxed Out* even more lurid and grotesque; when Rohde remixes, he rereads and reimagines.

—E.B.

Is the training of a contemporary composer/performer at all like the training to be a studio artist? Many art school freshman begin with a dedicated study of the techniques of late nineteenth century French painting in order to discard them and grow into the anti-traditions of modern art and the avant-garde. Learning to be a radical artist seems like the opposite of mastering an instrument (in order to play someone else's music no matter how great), but perhaps the sense of being part of a highly specialized and disciplined discourse that is both outside and, perversely, an important part of the culture is metabolically similar. I'm reminded of Theodor Adorno's statement, appealing and perplexing to a young artist, "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime."

Rohde might be a traditional innovator, but he is surely writing new music for concert halls that obtains a stirring and synthetic grandeur.

—D.H.