



LARRY POLANSKY 3 Pieces for 2 Pianos.¹ *Old Paint.*² *k-toods.*³ *Dismission (pianotood).*⁴ *Dismission (pianotood 2)*⁴ • ¹Joseph Kubera, Marilyn Nonken, ³Tobin Chodos, ³Ittai Rosenbaum, ⁴Amy Beal (pn); ²Rory Cowell (pn, perc, voice) • NEW WORLD 80777-2 (60:01)



Larry Polansky (b. 1954) continues to pursue a course that combines grand and adventurous experiment with a strongly American flavor. This disc, of piano music in various permutations, provides a compelling portrait of the composer and his driving interests.

Polansky is interested in making music that suggests a vast world unto itself, and at the same time pursues rigorous lines of research towards new musical techniques and forms of expression. On the one hand, it's visionary, on the other "scientific." And, mixed in with both, there's a nice dollop of humor that keeps pretension at bay.

The main event is the Three Pieces for Two Pianos (2006–07), a massive piece of over half an hour. The first movement begins gently, almost Satie-esque, but slowly layers of increasingly complex polyrhythmic and polymetric material create a sense of playfulness and suggest some of the grand architecture to emerge. The second movement is a deconstruction of a Stephen Foster song (Polansky has always been drawn to the American folk/popular song tradition), very dreamy and fragmented (there's an interpolated brief interlude right after it that gives us the source tone more clearly). The final movement is a giant canon in four hands that manipulates musical material in domains of not just pitch and rhythm. Its complexities are such that its unfolding was controlled by a computer program to generate the material. In places one feels as though great sonic weather fronts are drifting, mixing, and colliding within its frame.

Old Paint (2010) is a tender arrangement of the eponymous cowboy song, earlier set by Ruth Crawford Seeger, with the performer singing and playing selected percussion instruments. Its "extra" notes are in fact generated by a computer algorithm designed to mimic the sound of American "Ultramodernist" practice of the early 20th century.

The *k-toods* of 2002 are a series of études ("tood" is the composer's whimsical Americanization of the term), in this sense studies in more open aspects of performance practice. They also take inspiration from aspects of childhood, and so they might be thought of as Polansky's *Kinderszenen* (I'm only partly joking). All seem to involve players engaging in a directed task, sometimes via verbal instructions, others in more conventionally notated contexts. They have a more Minimalist surface, and often great rhythmic, jazzy energy. One, "baby pictures," is a game where the pianists must listen to one another so as to keep their individual pitch content different mutually exclusive. That's incredibly hard to do on the fly, and when a mistake is made, the offending party has to curse and start over (I listened first without reading the notes and was taken aback, though I suspected there was such a reason to what I was hearing. In fact it's quite funny and adds to the charm of the piece.)

Finally the two *Dismissions* are highly time-stretched arrangements of shape-note hymns from the early 19th century. They have a pleasingly consonant but less directional quality, a little bit Copland and Feldman in collaboration.

All the performers are completely engaged and on top of this material. I don't think I'm making much of a stretch to say that Polansky is continuing the line of what I'd call the "Ivesian project." By that I mean he writes music that, in its ferocious difficulty, lack of concern for the "idiomatic," and desire to embrace as wide a range of interests and ideas as possible, strives for a "transcendental" state. But it also is always looking for connection with the humble, historical, and populist. I've heard the composer's work over the years, and I feel these tendencies are moving to ever-greater depths (or heights if you wish) of expression and substance. I both admire and enjoy his work and anticipate its coming phases with pleasure. **Robert Carl**