

**Review of James Erber's *Traces* Cycle for Solo flute
Convivium Records CR020**

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On this CD, Matteo Cesari and James Erber present a solo flute program of great significance; the breadth of this undertaking is immense and the accomplishment of flautist Matteo Cesari is impressive. The centerpiece of the CD is the *Traces* cycle, an hour-long triptych for solo flute that is highly virtuosic, demanding mastery of technique and control. Cesari delivers a breathtaking performance.

The disc opens with *Flourish*, whose two main gesture types, flourishes and sustained material, convey agitation and stillness. Characterized by sharp dynamic and register contrasts, the piece spends most of its time in the higher register. According to the liner notes (written by John Fallas), it acts as a summary of the *Traces* cycle that follows. The source of Erber's inspiration was an old Roman road the composer came across while hiking, representing the modern world co-existing with the ancient. This concern is characteristic of much of Erber's music, which often attempts to convey the multiple levels of existence as one culture develops on the remains of another.

A Small Revelation was written as a birthday gift to Brian Ferneyhough. This short, charming piece is in four sections, with each section characterized by dramatic dynamic shifts and microtones. The liner notes describe the four sections as a peeling away of one processual layer at a time until only one layer of "overwriting" exists. This is clearly conveyed in the form of the piece, as one perceives a gradual clearing of the texture as the piece progresses.

Ein Andrer Hauch is for piccolo. Two textures alternate; the first presents multiple layers of pitch and rhythmic material and is dynamic and mutating, whereas the second features harmonics and is more static. The harmonic interjections create a hollowing-out of the melodic line, as indicated in the liner notes. The use of harmonics and microtones give the lyricism a liquid quality as the pitches slide around. This is a difficult work for piccolo, requiring great tonal control. Cesari's playing is masterful.

The *Traces* cycle is an epic work that explores many aspects of solo flute playing from implied counterpoint to extensive use of contemporary techniques. The liner notes discuss a rhythmic structure that unifies the three works in the *Traces* cycle, but this is not readily apparent to the listener owing to the layering of Erber's materials. There is, however, a sense of cohesiveness conveyed to this listener. At the end of this three-movement piece, one has the sense of a long journey into the psyche, full of memories, twists, turns, reiterations, obsessive thoughts, and intangible emotions of a journey through life.

Traces A seems youthful—constantly in the uppermost register, insistent, athletic, and unrelenting until its strangely beautiful ending. In terms of technique, *Traces* is extremely challenging, with dense rhythmic material and extreme dynamic demands. Within the high-register material, a set of gestures (staccato material, trills, and grace-note patterns) is introduced; these are manipulated both rhythmically and tonally.

Although impressive from beginning to end, the reviewer found several moments in particular to be astonishing. Measure 112 (at 5:59) begins a section employing harmonics, an abrupt textural shift that sounds like a haunting shell of the previous

material. The use of flutter tongue gradually increases as the section progresses, creating an effect of ever shifting instability and ended in an extended flourish sections.

Measure 217 (12:41) begins a slow section with repeated low notes that foreshadows the end of the piece. The use of quartertones creates the impression of a slowed-down glissando, with the low notes muted, as if crossing a great distance. The sudden stasis of the material serves to stabilize the harmonic section that came before it. Gradually, the flourish material asserts itself, creating a contrapuntal effect until it finally dominates the texture. The repeated notes shift to the high register, reminiscent of the opening of the movement. Next, the noise components (breath sounds, key clicks, and multiphonics) assert themselves, until finally tongue pizzicatos appear. This produces another dramatic tonal shift and serves to dispel the energy accrued as the music moves into the final section (17:19). Again, the low notes are muted and the percussive effects of key clicks and tongue pizzicatos seem to be an echo of the entire movement. The end reminds the reviewer of the comment in the liner notes about ruins unfolded and ruins unfolding as the youthful energy continues to exert itself, not knowing that it is a ruin in the act of unfolding.

Traces B is faster-paced, with both extreme technical demands, both dynamic and registral, and extreme lyricism. Most of the playing is in the third and fourth octave. There are abundant detailed performative indications on each page, with complex rhythms, rapid dynamic shifts, and extended techniques; Cesari accomplishes all of these demands effortlessly.

It seems as though each texture gains its own voice as the music moves from a section of tongue pizzicati (11:19) to a multiphonic section with glissandi. Toward the end, the tempo slows, and within this slower tempo the glissandi also slow down, creating a plaintive and pleading melodic line (12:49). This near-stasis sets up a final flight of passion—staccato, aggressive, high, and unrelenting. All the previous material seems to suggest a forceful close, but the listener is surprised by a sudden soft ending (16:14), like an echo of the previous aggressive material. The effect is haunting and lovely.

Traces C has a sense of clarity and maturity. The masterful use of extended techniques creates a complicated sound world that is, at the same time, melodic. The glissandi return and are extended, giving the piece a strange and beautiful sense of motion. Erber uses extended multiphonic sections (for example, at 6:45) to contrast starkly with the lyricism of the opening material and to act as a catalyst into the movement's self-exploration, finally goading the piece to reveal its harmonic underpinnings in a way that is painfully honest and vulnerable (11:38). This exposed section, with its impossibly long non-vibrato notes adorned only by a few grace notes, is brilliantly achieved thanks to Cesari's stamina and endurance. The end of *Traces C* is surprising; after all this passionate and intense playing of nearly an hour, the soft and fragile end slips away into intangibility.

This disc is a remarkable document, containing significant contributions to the flute literature. Cesari negotiates the technical difficulties brilliantly; but more importantly, he masters the tremendous challenge of making emotional sense of dense and difficult music over the course of an hour. The *Traces* cycle clearly shows Erber's development and mastery of the extended language of the flute over the course of twenty years.