

Mp3 John Fitz Rogers / Michael Nicolella - Transit



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John Fitz Rogers' epic genre bending work scored for electric guitar and computer driven virtual ensemble, featuring guitarist Michael Nicolella. 11 MP3 Songs CLASSICAL: Contemporary, ROCK: Progressive Rock Details: Editorial reviews New York Times, April 11, 2002 "an impassioned, intense manifesto...expertly played by Michael Nicolella...[a] heartfelt journey." Seattle Weekly, June 27, 2002 "Some will groove to this music's unapologetic juxtapositions; others will run for cover...either way, or both Transit must be heard" ProgressoR.net, May 21, 2002 Six out of six stars "masterpiece" Bay Area Reporter , June 27, 2002 "One thing is for certain: this recording will engender strong reactions...astounding musicianship...Nicolella is a virtuosic wonder" Below are the program notes for the CD: "Trans-it (tran'sit, -zit), n., v., -it-ed, -it-ing. -n. 1. Act or fact of passing across or through; passage from one place to another. 2. Conveyance or transportation from one to another, as of persons or goods. 3. A transition or change. 4. Astron. The passage of a heavenly body across the meridian of a given location. -v.t. 5. To pass across or through. 6. To pass over or through something; make a transit. From the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1966 "Living art draws its life from the surrounding environment...we must breathe in the tangible miracles of contemporary life - the iron network of speedy communication which envelops the earth...the spasmodic struggle to conquer the unknown. " "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters," Umberto Boccioni et al., 1910 "Speed and synthesis are characteristics of our epoch." Edgard Varse, 1922 The definition and quotations above are offered as a preface to the score of John Fitz Rogers's Transit. Taken together, they aptly preview the ambitious music that follows; they sketch its dizzying combination of acoustic traditions and electronic transformations, of popular colors and classical architecture, of worldly grit and celestial grandeur. The score's complexities include different strands of music occurring simultaneously at contrasting speeds, triplets within triplets

and quintuplets within quintuplets, computer-driven chords pulsing up and down a keyboard faster than any human hand could execute. What the printed page can't convey is the way Rogers has joined these seemingly complicated elements into an organic, conversational music that not only breathes, but grooves; likewise, there's no way to capture on paper the intensity of soloist Michael Nicoella's guitar work, variously fluid and flamboyant, searing and soaring as he carries us along the music's emotional odyssey. As the full dictionary definition indicates, the title *Transit* suggests many different ways of crossing over. One of the most obvious is the manner in which the music straddles rock and classical genres, recalling Varse's "synthesis" in a broad, cultural sense. The guitarist Robert Fripp once summarized the origin of his band King Crimson as a means to explore the question, "What would Hendrix sound like playing Bartk?" On first hearing, *Transit* inspires similar questions, such as: "What would Emerson, Lake, and Palmer sound like playing Nancarrow?" or, "What would Yes sound like playing Andriessen?" Such juxtapositions are understandable, but they turn out to be somewhat off the mark. Although classical borrowings and breathtaking instrumental virtuosity were hallmarks of so-called "progressive rock" in the 1970s, this particular genre was not a primary influence on Rogers. Instead, he lists Led Zeppelin, the Steve Miller Band, and Jimi Hendrix as prominent figures whose music was in the air (and on the air) during his teenage years, the figures he and his friends would strive to emulate in afterschool jam sessions. Prog-rock was something he didn't encounter until his early 20s, and it didn't hold his interest; hence, any resemblance between *Transit*'s rock-classical synthesis and those of the classic prog bands is largely coincidental. *Transit*'s origins may be traced more accurately to Rogers's piece *Push* (1997) for solo electric guitar, a stunning five-and-a-half minute burst of highly chromatic, rapid-fire pyrotechnics in buzzsaw distortion ("What would Steve Vai sound like playing Ligeti?"). Rogers found in Michael Nicoella an immensely talented and inventive performer, and he wanted to write another piece for him - one that would draw more fully on the electric guitar's extensive palette of sounds, and that would show off Nicoella's lyrical strengths and improvisational gifts as well as his killer chops. Rogers knew he wanted to write a piece of symphonic scope, but he didn't want to tack the sounds of the electric guitar onto those of a symphony orchestra. Instead, he chose to explore the rhythmic and textural possibilities of a virtual ensemble, to see what he could do with computer-driven synthesizers. Some of his musical choices were shaped by what these synthesizers do best; thus, his ensemble features not orchestral strings, brass, and woodwinds, but electric organs, pianos, and drums instead. Even so,

Rogers knew that these computer-generated facsimiles inevitably sound less rich and varied than their real-life acoustic models, so he assigned much of the expressive work of timbral subtlety to the electric guitar. In addition to its distinctive alchemy of sounds, *Transit* straddles genres in its approach to using the recording studio as a compositional medium. In contemporary classical music, a studio recording typically represents an attempt to recreate the experience of a live performance, while in much popular music, the reverse is true. *Transit* was conceived in the uncharted territory between these two domains; Rogers and Nicolella wanted to create a musical work that would equally inhabit both worlds, the live performance and the recorded version, embracing not only the mechanics of early twenty-first-century technology but also its aesthetics. This attitude may represent *Transit*'s most direct links to both the Futurists and Varse. The computer-generated sounds, recalling Varse's "synthesis" in a narrow, technical sense, lead to another kind of crossing over, that of the human mind using technology to surpass human physical limitations. The computer offers Rogers possibilities of rhythm and texture that no human performers could reliably execute. As in the player-piano studies of Conlon Nancarrow, the sheer velocity and precision of which machines are capable lead to a strange but exhilarating kind of beauty that can't be created any other way. Many portions of *Transit* feature the simultaneous combination of two or more tempi, giving the music a loopy, swinging quality that dances along the border between classical and jazz rhythms. Nonetheless, as so often happens in Nancarrow's music, these complex rhythmic relationships are balanced by harmonic simplicity; clear tonal centers allow the ear to distinguish the multiple layers and enjoy the interplay among them. Ultimately, these cultural and technical syntheses are put to the service of a third kind of "transit": the sense of being psychologically transported, of making a heavenly passage to an otherworldly place of joy. At first, the music is serene and intimate; the opening synth-flute melody might seem self-contained in its meditations. But another such flute eventually joins in, and by the time we hear a third, and then a fourth, we begin to apprehend the work's epic scale. Nearly five minutes go by before the solo guitar makes its entrance, and when it does, we discover that the opening tune is going to serve as the theme for a dazzling array of variations, encompassing darkness and light, brooding and exaltation, high-toned pomp and deep-fried funk. The music's intricacies of rhythm, speed, and texture therefore occur not in isolation, but as part of a carefully planned formal trajectory. They steadily build over the course of the piece, pulling the listener along toward the triumphant ending, creating an almost religious sense of mounting anticipation and ecstatic release. So, contrary to the Futurist

manifesto, the struggle to conquer the unknown needn't be spasmodic. This collaboration between Rogers and Nicolella provides an alternative passageway: an electrifying sonic network of speed and synthesis, a forty-four minute panorama of intangible miracles. - Brian Robison

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