

1 *Aperture II* 39:14  
for amplified string quartet and live electronics, 2012  
The JACK Quartet

2 *Elliptic (Strandlines II)* 27:00  
for amplified string quartet, đàn tranh, đàn bầu and  
guitars (6-string classical and Vietnamese electric), 2014  
The JACK Quartet and the Six Tones

Liner notes by James Pritchett  
Cover art by Paul Berger



NEUMA 450-117

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*Aperture II // Elliptic*  
**RICHARD KARPEN**

*LIVE performances by*  
**JACK Quartet // Six Tones**

Music for Amplified Stringed Instruments and Electronics



## Richard Karpen: Processes Universal and Human

*James Pritchett*

Strandlines are the delicate results of immense forces. The ocean moves back and forth under the influence of the gravitational interaction between the Earth and the Moon. The water creeps up the sandy incline of the shore, whose sand itself is the delicate result of other immense forces that have ground rocks down to tiny grains. The water moves a little further up the sand, then gradually recedes—pressing forward, falling back, over and over again, at the slow pace of the sea. At the point of their furthest reach, the waves leave subtle lines of sand, bits of plants and shells. These are the strandlines we see when we walk along the beach after a high tide. They are ephemeral gestures recording the slow passage of tides and time.

The energy of Richard Karpen's *Elliptic (Strandlines II)* moves in similar waves—pressing forward, falling back. A signal is started and then reinforced by the seven instrumentalists, gathering power and pushing forward, only to reach its furthest extent and then pass away into silence again. As listeners we become keenly aware of the arising and passing away of these musical phenomena. They remind us of the slow pulse of the waves, the slower pulse of the tides, or, at the other extreme, the much tinier pulses of our own breath and blood. By the end, the music comes to a resting point, and we hear it as the waves of some signal that is propagating itself through limitless time and space. It has always been there, but we can barely make it out as it drifts in and out of the range of our sensibility.

We experience a similar intuition of process in *Aperture II*, but with more monumental forces in play. The sense of scale is larger (in part, perhaps, because of the fuller sound provided by the electronics that replicate and expand the live

instruments) and the crests of activity within the piece are more explosive, at times almost overwhelming. But as with *Elliptic (Strandlines II)*, the changes in these sonic masses do not feel like development or even movement. Instead, they seem like actions and events precipitated out of a saturated condition, like the sudden shifts of earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. *Aperture II* is not static, but it presents a force that moves slowly. Towards the middle of the piece the electronics provide a compressed view of this timeline, showing us in a flash where we've been, and then the world of the music changes. It is no longer earthbound; a mysterious tonal world slowly shifts in front of us, pulses, then moves away and disappears.

I have described these pieces in terms of the world of nature and the large, impersonal forces that we encounter there. But one of the beauties of Richard Karpen's work is the play between the scales of the universal and the human: while both of these pieces tell of timeless energies, they were made in exceptionally personal ways. When I took on the job of writing these notes, among the first things I asked for were the scores for the pieces. Richard informed me that these particular compositions had no scores. "I hate writing down music," he told me. This desire to work with sound directly, unmediated by notation, resulted in his early fascination with computer music, and it has led him to experiment, in the works presented on this disc, with a new way of making music for people. He sees compositions like *Aperture II* and *Elliptic (Strandlines II)* as collaborations with minds and bodies, not plans for abstract sonic architectures; here he writes music for string *players*, not stringed *instruments*.

The details are necessarily somewhat mysterious, but put simply, Karpen works with the musicians to discover the piece that they will play. For him, the musicians should fully embody the music, should *be* the music, so that, as he puts it, "the piece is what they play when they play the piece." He points the way, but

it is their bodies and minds that are the basis for what is played. In a way, the piece was always there and the players and Karpen just found it while working together.

As a result, when Karpen works in this way he produces pieces that are written for specific people, are not generic, are not transferable. The first pieces made in this manner were for individual performers. The precursors of both works on



this disc (the original *Strandlines* and *Aperture*) were for soloists (guitar and viola, respectively). Karpen has found that extending this intimate and personal way of composing to ensembles like the Six Tones and JACK Quartet has been a different and interesting experience. Ensembles like these that play so often together become like fam-

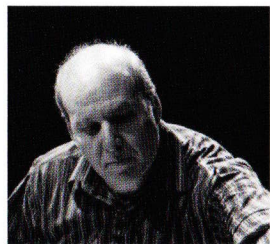
ilies, and composing with them requires an attention to group dynamics as well as individual personalities. Bringing the two "families" together and blending their personalities in *Elliptic (Strandlines II)* brought yet another social dimension to the music.

All of this might make Karpen seem more a coach than a composer, and one might be tempted to think of *Elliptic (Strandlines II)* and *Aperture II* as instructions for group improvisation. But make no mistake about it: Richard Karpen is a composer of pieces that have their own specific identities, clearly visible from performance to performance, and which bear the unmistakable imprint of his vision and style. The result is an unhurried music that arises organically, like a

phenomenon of nature, from the space of Karpen's imagination and through the concentrated musicality of these particular people and their instruments.

By focusing on the deeper meanings of this musical imagery, Karpen has no need for the intermediaries of notation, scores, or even written instructions. Just as with his earlier work for computer-synthesized sound, the work exists in a completely concrete, self-sufficient way. Karpen and the players have made an inner contact with the true nature of the piece, and now they are able to bring it forth without recourse to any kind of outer plan or description. Karpen compares what he's done in this music to the films of Mike Leigh, who focuses on the characters and lets the actors largely improvise the words. As with Leigh, perhaps we should say that the music on this CD was "written and directed by Richard Karpen".

## The Composer



**Richard Karpen** (born 1957, New York, NY) is a composer and researcher in multiple areas of music and the arts. His compositions for traditional and experimental media are widely known, recorded, and performed internationally. Over the past 30 years he has helped pioneer the development and design of computer software for music composition, interactive performance and sonic arts. He recently returned to the stage as a pianist.

Karpen has earned many awards, grants and prizes including those from the National Endowment for the Arts, the ASCAP Foundation, the Bourges Contest in France, and the Luigi Russolo Foundation in Italy. He has been a Fulbright Fel-

low in Italy, a visiting artist at IRCAM in France, and a Leverhulme Visiting Fellow in the United Kingdom. He earned his doctorate in composition from Stanford University in 1989 where he was associated with the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA). He also studied composition with Gheorghe Costinescu and Charles Dodge. He has composed works for many prominent international performers among whom are soprano Judith Bettina, violists Garth Knox and Melia Watras, trombonist Stuart Dempster, flutists Laura Chislett and Jos Zwaanenberg, guitarist Stefan Östersjö, the Seattle Symphony, and the JACK Quartet. Along with frequent concert performances, his works have been set to dance by groups such as the Royal Danish Ballet and the Guandong Dance Company of China. Karpen's compositions have been recorded on a variety of labels including Neuma, Wergo, Centaur, Le Chant du Monde, DIFFUSION i MeDIA, Fleur du Son, Capstone, RareNoise, and Sono Luminus. As a pianist, he performed and recorded with Cuong Vu, Bill Frisell, and Ted Poor.

Currently, Richard Karpen serves as Director of the School of Music at the University of Washington where he is also a Professor of Music Composition. He is the Founding Director of the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media (DXARTS) where he still works as an artist, researcher, and teacher.

## The Performers

The members of the **JACK Quartet** met while attending the Eastman School of Music, where they studied closely with the Arditti Quartet, Kronos Quartet, Muir String Quartet, and members of the Ensemble Intercontemporain. Comprised of violinists Christopher Otto and Ari Streisfeld, violist John Pickford Richards, and cellist Kevin McFarland, the quartet focuses on the commission and performance of new works and disseminating new string quartet music, generally. This has led them to work closely with composers John Luther Adams,

Derek Bermel, Chaya Czernowin, James Dillon, Brian Ferneyhough, Beat Furrer, Georg Friedrich Haas, Vijay Iyer, Richard Karpen, György Kurtág, Helmut Lachenmann, Steve Mackey, Matthias Pintscher, Steve Reich, Roger Reynolds, Wolfgang Rihm, Salvatore Sciarrino and John Zorn. Other premieres include works by Wolfgang von Schweinitz, Toby Twining, Georg Friedrich Haas, Simon Holt, Kevin Ernste, and Simon Bainbridge. The quartet has led workshops with young performers and composers at Princeton University, Yale University, Harvard University, New York University, Columbia University, the Eastman School of Music, Oberlin Conservatory, Manhattan School of Music, June in Buffalo, New Music on the Point, and at the Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik.

Violist **John Pickford Richards** has gained a reputation for performing new and unusual music. Before playing in JACK, he helped found the ensemble Alarm Will Sound, which allowed him to work closely with composers such as John Adams, Meredith Monk, and Steve Reich at venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Holland Festival. Richards has appeared with bands such as the All-American Rejects, Silversun Pickups, and Grizzly Bear and has performed as a soloist with the Pasadena Symphony, Armenian Philharmonic, Wordless Music Orchestra, Ossia New Music, and with the Lucerne Festival Academy Orchestra, where he played the solo part to Luciano Berio's *Chemins II* under the direction of Pierre Boulez. He holds degrees from the Interlochen Arts Academy and Eastman School of Music where his primary teachers were David Holland and John Graham.



Violinist **Ari Streisfeld** is an established leader in contemporary classical music. In

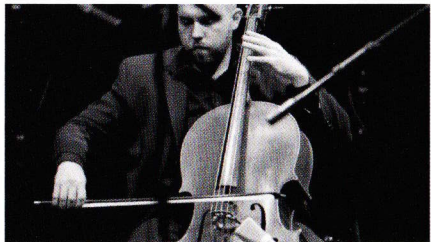
addition to his work with JACK, he frequently performs with today's leading contemporary music ensembles, including Ensemble Signal and Wordless Music Orchestra. Streisfeld is also a member of Shir Ami, an ensemble dedicated to the performance and preservation of Jewish art music. Hailed as "imaginative" by the *Los Angeles Times*, Streisfeld's arrangements of madrigals and motets for string quartet by Machaut and Gesualdo have been performed to acclaim both at home and abroad. A recipient of the Morton Gould Young Composer Award, Streisfeld most recently premiered his arrangements for voice and violin at The Stone (New York, NY) and the Cortona Sessions for New Music (Cortona, Italy) alongside critically acclaimed mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway. A passionate and committed music educator, Streisfeld serves on the faculty of New York's Special Music School, Face the Music, and the Cortona Sessions for New Music. As a soloist, he has performed with the Kennett Symphony Orchestra and the Northwestern Philharmonia. Streisfeld performed the Berg Violin Concerto with the Boston University Symphony Orchestra as winner of the 2006 Boston University Concerto Competition. He attended the Eastman School of Music (Bachelor of Music), Northwestern University (Master of Music), and Boston University (Doctor of Musical Arts). He has recorded for Mode, Albany, Carrier, Innova, Canteloupe, Neuma, and New World Records.



**Christopher Otto** studied composition at the Eastman School of Music with Martin Bresnick, David Liptak and Robert Morris. As a violinist, Otto has premiered many compositions and worked with such composers as Harrison Birtwistle, Pierre Boulez, Helmut Lachenmann, and Steve Reich. Otto has served as composer and performer in contemporary

music festivals like the Lucerne Festival Academy, Internationale Musikinstitut Darmstadt, Karlheinz Stockhausen Courses, Institute and Festival for Contemporary Performance at the Mannes College of Music, June in Buffalo, and Festival Internacional de Música Contemporánea de Michoacán.

**Kevin McFarland** is a member of Ensemble Signal and has made guest appearances with Alarm Will Sound, the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the Wordless Music Orchestra. He also composes and has had performances by



mezzo-soprano Abby Fischer as part of her ABSYNTH project and by Hutchins Consort East, with whom he also plays the tenor violin. He is also active as a solo artist, as an interpreter of both new works for solo cello and in various improvised works. He made his solo cello and electronics debut at The Stone (New York, NY) in 2014. McFarland holds a

bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music, where he studied cello with Steven Doane and composition with David Liptak, Robert Morris, and Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon. His article "Second-Generation Interpretation of Xenakis's String Quartets" can be found in *Performing Xenakis*, published by Pendragon Press.

The **Six Tones** is a platform for an encounter between traditional and experimental cultures in Asia and the West. The core of this practice is, since 2006, an ongoing project of mutual learning between musicians from Vietnam and Sweden. The Six Tones is a group that plays traditional Vietnamese music in hybrid settings for Western stringed and traditional Vietnamese instruments, im-

provises within traditional and experimental Western idioms, and commissions new works in collaboration with artists in Asia as well as in other parts of the world. The Six Tones is comprised of Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (who plays đàn tranh) and Ngô Trà My (who plays đàn bầu), both Vietnamese, and Swedish guitarist Stefan Östersjö.



**Ngô Trà My** received her diploma in 1994 from the Hà Nội National Conservatory of Music, where she teaches the đàn bầu. She has performed at festivals in China, Spain, Korea, Scandinavia and Vietnam. In 2001, she released an album as soloist with orchestra: *Loi ru quê hương* (Lullaby of the Native Land).

She has served as a board member of the ASEAN/Korea Traditional Orchestra since 2008. With The Six Tones, she tours in Europe, Asia and the USA.

**Nguyễn Thanh Thủy** was born into a family extensively involved in theatre and was raised around traditional Vietnamese music from an early age in Hà Nội. She has taught at the Vietnam National Academy of Music since 2000. She has toured in Asia, Europe, and the USA. Among her many distinctions: she won First Prize in Vietnam's Contest of Traditional Instrument Performance on Television and Radio in 1992 and earned First Prize and the Best Traditional Music Performer Prize in Vietnam's National Competition of Zither Talents in 1998. Nguyễn Thanh



Thủy has recorded several albums as both a soloist with orchestras and in unaccompanied settings. She is a scholar of gesture within traditional Vietnamese music, which she has been researching as a doctoral project since 2012 at the Malmö Academy of Music in Sweden.

**Stefan Östersjö** is a prominent classical guitarist who received a Grammis award (Swedish Grammy) in 1998 for his self-titled debut album. Since 1995 he has recorded extensively and toured Europe, the United States and Asia. As a soloist he has collaborated with conductors such as Lothar Zagrosek, Peter Eötvös, Pierre

André Valade, Mario Venzago, Franck Ollu and Andrew Manze. He earned his doctorate in 2008; his dissertation, entitled *SHUT UP 'N' PLAY! Negotiating the Musical Work*, addresses artistic interpretation and contemporary performance practice. Since then, he has engaged in artistic research at the Malmö Academy of Music in Sweden and at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, Belgium.



## **RICHARD KARPEN: *Aperture II // Elliptic***

Produced by **Richard Karpen**

Recorded, mixed and mastered by **Michael McCrea**

All music composed and copyrighted by **Richard Karpen** (ASCAP).

### ***Aperture II***

Recorded at the Jones Playhouse, Seattle (concert recording by the JACK Quartet, May 8, 2012).

Live Electronics realized in SuperCollider 3 by **Richard Karpen** with programming assistance and live performance implementation by **Joshua Parmenter**.

### ***Elliptic (Strandlines II)***

Recorded in the Meany Studio Theater, University of Washington, Seattle (concert recording by the JACK Quartet and the Six Tones, March 15, 2014).

Liner notes by **James Prichett**

Edited by **Jerry Tabor, David Burns** and **Scott McCoy**

Cover art by **Paul Berger**

Graphic Design by **Jerry Tabor**

*Thanks to all at the University of Washington Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media (Juan Pampin, Director), the University of Washington School of Music, and the Meany Center for the Performing Arts.*