

Richard Karpen

Stefan Östersjö  
The Six Tones  
Seattle Symphony



Nam Máí (2014-15)	34:14
Strandlines (2006-07)	27:44

Total: 62:03

NEUMA 450-119  
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## Richard Karpen's *Nam Máí* and *Strandlines*

By Stefan Östersjö

*Nam Máí* and *Strandlines* are cornerstones of the most recent work of American composer Richard Karpen. They share a radical approach to musical composition, which has brought Karpen into intense collaborations with a number of musicians from very different traditions over the past fifteen years. With a wish to explore forms of musical creation emerging from the very fabric of the sounding material – rather than from the abstraction of the written score – this music is largely conceived through joint exploration, and through the kind of responsive listening often associated with the processes of composing electronic music.

*Strandlines*, a large-scale piece for 6-string guitar and computer, was vital in this development. The piece was created in 2006 and 2007 through an extensive collaborative process involving Richard Karpen and the guitarist Stefan Östersjö. There is no musical score for *Strandlines*. Instead, the composition is defined through its performed materials and a shared understanding of how these are developed in interaction with live processing, programmed in Supercollider. Two previous works, *Anterior View of an Interior with Reclining Trombonist* (2002, for trombone and live electronics with Stuart Dempster) and *Aperture* (2006, for viola and live electronics with Melia Watras) explored these modes of creation. But in *Strandlines* the collaborative processes were considerably broadened and with more mindful intention. This is how Karpen describes the working process:

While this kind of experientially developed music has existed in many cultures, I am equally interested in developing the role of the composer/author. I'm drawn to the kinds of techniques that film director Mike Leigh uses for character and plot development in his films. Leigh works with his actors to create their characters through an organic and rigorous series of directed improvisations and reiteration until the actors

fully embody their characters, their utterances, and the relationships between all of the interacting characters and situations within the environment of the work. Through this process the film becomes its own screenplay. In the case of my own explorations in this mode of composing, the music is itself the score.

*Strandlines* also explores the extension of instrument and performer through live computer enhancement and processing. It is a work not so much for guitar as for guitarist, the merging of person and instrument. In the case of *Strandlines*, Stefan Östersjö's integral role in the development of guitar material seems more about who he is as a performing artist than about the guitar.

But what kind of work is *Strandlines*? The greater form is firmly fixed, but the individual details vary according to the different characteristics that define each section of the piece. This is a type of work that bears similarities to music in many extra-European traditions. Turning to Roland Barthes, one may say that it is "a music that is not abstract or inward, but that is endowed, if one may put it like that, with a tangible intelligibility, with the intelligible as tangible".<sup>1</sup> However, while the identity of *Strandlines* may be similar to other complex, non-notated forms of music, such as an Indian raga, its stringent form and the overall sound of the work is coherent with the earlier compositions in Karpen's oeuvre, thereby combining a performative identity with the structural complexity of contemporary Western traditions.

The working methods developed by Karpen and myself in the making of *Strandlines* have proven to be particularly fruitful in intercultural collaboration, and the second piece on the CD – *Nam Mái*, for three soloists, nineteen string instruments and film, composed for The Six Tones and string players of the Seattle Symphony – is the outcome of extensive work in this domain.

<sup>1</sup> Gritten, A. (2013), 'A labour of trust: Working (at) ensemble interaction', Second PSN Conference, Department of Music, University of Cambridge, 4–7 July, Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge.

*Nam Mái* is the third and most ambitious work with the Six Tones in which Karpen employs these methods of collaboration with a larger group of performers. The first of these, based on Karpen and my work on *Strandlines*, led to the making of a piece of musical theatre titled *Idioms* (2010-11). Here, The Six Tones – a trio consisting of myself and two Vietnamese master performers, Ngô Trà My and Nguyễn Thanh Thủy – were joined by actors from Sweden, Vietnam and the USA. The collaboration also involved the Swedish playwright and director Jörgen Dahlgvist, who devised methods inspired by the making of *Strandlines*. *Idioms* was eventually followed by the making of *Seven Stories*, a feature-length dance film inspired by traditional Vietnamese *Tuồng* Theatre subjects, which added choreographer Marie Fahlin to the artistic group.

In the process of creating *Seven Stories*, a piece of traditional Vietnamese music became the central material in one scene, but at the same time also gave rise to ideas for a new composition for three soloists and orchestra. This traditional piece is often called *Nam Mái* and is commonly found in *Tuồng* Theatre, a Vietnamese form of theatre which shares common traits with Beijing opera. It is in the *Ai* mode, which affords a grave and serious expression. Since *Tuồng* is dramatic theatre that also is normally bent towards tragedy, this mode is rather common here. *Nam Mái* made its way into the collaboration between The Six Tones and Richard Karpen in the morning of the second working day on the film *Seven Stories*. The artists purposefully set out on a project that was to follow dogma-like rules: each scene should relate to a story from a specific play from *Tuồng* Theatre. As examples, its choreography should be developed from gesture in this scene and the music should be created on the same day as the film was shot. The film itself was also to be a documentary of the creation of the film. The play for the second day was *Đào Tam Xuân*, the story of a female military general whose husband is executed due to the ill doings of the queen, and subsequently, her son is killed while attempting to prevent the execution. As Karpen recalls, "We started the session by presenting music from *Tuồng* Theatre to the artists involved. As the first piece, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy played *Nam Mái*, and we decided on the spot to use it for this scene." This is how he describes his

encounter with the piece:

I was immediately drawn in to *Nam Mái*. It was not a matter of simply “liking” the melody or being attracted to the musical qualities. In the case of *Nam Mái*, hearing it created an instant response in my thoughts and in my body. I heard this music as if I had heard it before and it opened up a range of abstract memories and feelings. There is certain music that acts like a “carrier signal”; in fact, I now think that this is exactly what music mostly is, in general. As our brains “process” musical “signals”, deep memory connections are triggered, as if we were searching for meaning, perhaps scanning memory in order to assemble an “image” so that the carrier can be decoded. It seems that emotional memory is where the brain finds the most effective set of pathways for decoding music and so our response is emotional. One could make the point that all sensory stimulation acts as a carrier that triggers memory. But we’re talking about music and my experience and analyses over many years is that music is an especially complex carrier signal that the brain processes by searching deep and wide across “universal” and individual experiences, not of music but of everything.

A couple of weeks before the premiere, all artists got together in Seattle to create the solo parts and finalize the role of video and choreography. Some months before that, Karpen had finished the score to the piece, which is through composed in the orchestral part. But he left the staves for the soloists blank and also inserted a number of fermatas indicating the placement of cadenzas for one or more of the three soloists. The orchestral score is entirely drawn from the musical structures in *Nam Mái* and is organized in a manner which gives a certain set of freedom and constraints for the soloists.

One could think of the orchestration in *Nam Mái* a bit like a set design, providing a series of distinct scenes for the three solo instruments, or, as Richard Karpen put it in conversation with the conductor, Stilian Kirov, before the recording session with the Seattle Symphony: “think of the orchestral part as the music in a film and that the solo parts are the film”. Indeed, the score

also obtained this function of a set in the working sessions in Seattle. With Karpen’s analogy then, the artists met to start making the *film* together, a bit like how the filmmaker Mike Leigh would draw his actors together to start creating the characters and eventually the script and the film through a collaborative process.

In a recent book chapter on the function of trust in musical performance, Anthony Gritter reminds us how “interaction without trust has no pragmatic means to get itself beyond microscopic, atomistic, local interactions and begin developing its own self-sustaining ecology”.<sup>2</sup> The ecology created in the world of the work titled *Nam Mái* involves agreements between Karpen and each musician on the specific shape of musical materials, of how they develop and relate to larger structures. Further, the musical form is drawn directly from the interaction between the three performers.

This kind of trust is inherent to any of the compositional projects carried out by Karpen and various performers, especially over the past fifteen years. Certainly, a composition like *Strandlines* would not have happened without the ecology of musical collaboration. But *Nam Mái* seems to even more heavily emphasize this dependence on trust, perhaps because it involves more people and a collaboration across cultures. Trust is written into the score, not just through the absence of written instructions in the solo parts but also in the ways in which the orchestral score constitutes a fabric, clearly intended for the voices of three specific performers to join in, to align with, to resist, and to develop its musical content. Ngo Trà My describes her experience of the collaboration with Karpen as a negotiation of individual license and a search for a space in which a common ground can be created:

The way Richard set the piece up allows me to float freely in the material from *Nam Mái*, operating the playing techniques and the sonority of the *đàn bầu*. I know that I cannot fully understand the intentions that Richard had with the piece, but I can still draw out my own story from my subjective experience of the music. In this way, my sound is

<sup>2</sup> Barthes, R. (1977) *Musica Practica in Image, Music, Text* (trans. S. Heath) London: Fontana Press (pp 152-153).

brought together with the sonority of the entire piece, as if we were telling the same story.

Richard Karpen's compositional output since the early 2000s points beyond old paradigms in experimental Western music, discovering new modes of musical creativity drawn from approaches to complexity more ancient than the invention of musical notation. The two compositions on this CD are the result of extensive collaborative exploration, where the voice of each participating artist is essential to the identity of the final work.

### Biographies

**Richard Karpen** is a composer and researcher in multiple areas of music and the arts. His compositions for both electronic media and live performance are widely known, recorded, and performed internationally. Over the last 30 years, he has also been in the forefront of the development of computer applications for music composition, interactive performance, and the sonic arts. He recently returned to the stage and the studio as a pianist.

Karpen was the founding director of DXARTS and is currently Director of the School of Music at the University of Washington where he is also Professor of Music Composition. He has been the recipient of many awards, grants, and prizes including those from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bourges Contest in France, and the Luigi Russolo Foundation in Italy. Karpen has composed works for many leading international soloists, such as soprano Judith Bettina, violists Garth Knox and Melia Watras, trombonist Stuart Dempster, flutists Laura Chislett and Jos Zwaanenberg, guitarist Stefan Östersjö, and ensembles such as The Six Tones, JACK Quartet, The Seattle Symphony, and the Harry Partch Ensemble.

Karpen is a founding member, with Cuong Vu, of the experimental improvisation ensemble, Indigo Mist. As a pianist, Karpen has performed with Cuong Vu, Bill Frisell, Ted Poor, Steve Rodby, and others. Karpen's compositions and performances have been recorded on a variety of labels including Wergo, Centaur, Neuma, Le Chant du Monde, DIFFUSION i MeDIA, Fleur du

Son, Capstone, and RareNoise.

**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 instruments and traditional Vietnamese instruments. They improvise in traditional and experimental Western idioms and also commission new works in collaboration with artists in Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. The Six Tones are two Vietnamese performers, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (who plays đàn tranh) and Ngô Trà My (who plays đàn bầu), and the Swedish guitarist Stefan Östersjö.

**Nguyễn Thanh Thủy** was born into a theatre family and was raised with traditional Vietnamese music from an early age in Hà Nội. She studied at the Hanoi Conservatory of Music where she received her diploma in 1998 followed by a Master of Arts at the Institute of Cultural Studies in 2002. Since 2000, she has held a teaching position at the Vietnam National Academy of Music. She has toured in Asia, Europe, and the USA and has received many distinctions. In 1992, she received First Prize in the Contest of Traditional Instrument Performance on Television and Radio Vietnam. In 1998, she earned First Prize and the Best Traditional Music Performer Prize in the National Competition of Zither Talents in Vietnam. Nguyễn Thanh Thủy has recorded several CD's as both a soloist and soloist with orchestra.

**Ngô Trà My** studied at the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music, where she received her diploma in 1994 and a pedagogical diploma in 2007. She has taught the đàn bầu at the conservatory in Hanoi since 1994. She has performed at festivals in China, Spain, Korea, Scandinavia and Vietnam and, in 2001, recorded a CD as a soloist with orchestra entitled, *Lời ru quê hương (Lullaby of the Native Land)*. Since 2008, she has served as a board member of the Asian/Korean Orchestra. With The Six Tones, she has toured in Europe, Asia and the USA.

**Stefan Östersjö** is a leading classical guitarist specializing in the performance of contempo-

rary music. He has released more than 20 CDs and toured Europe, the US and Asia. He has collaborated numerous times with composers and participated in the creation of works involving choreography, film, video, performance art and music theatre. He has developed inter-cultural artistic practices with the Vietnamese/Swedish group The Six Tones as a platform since 2006. As a soloist, he has worked with conductors such as Lothar Zagrosek, Peter Eötvös, Pierre André Valade, Mario Venzago and Andrew Manze. He received his doctorate in 2008 and became a research fellow at the Orpheus Institute in 2009. Today, he is an associate professor and head of doctoral studies in artistic research at the Malmö Academy of music.

**The Seattle Symphony** is one of America's leading symphony orchestras and is internationally acclaimed for its innovative programming and extensive recording history. Under the leadership of Music Director Ludovic Morlot since September 2011, the Symphony is heard from September through July by more than 500,000 people through live performances and radio broadcasts. It performs in one of the finest modern concert halls in the world – the acoustically superb Benaroya Hall – in downtown Seattle. Its extensive education and community engagement programs reach over 65,000 children and adults each year. The Seattle Symphony has a deep commitment to new music, commissioning many works by living composers each season. The orchestra has made nearly 150 recordings and has received three Grammy Awards, 23 Grammy nominations, two Emmy Awards and was named *Gramophone's* 2018 Orchestra of the Year. In 2014 the Symphony launched its in-house recording label, Seattle Symphony Media.

#### Credits

**Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:** đàn tranh (Vietnamese 19-string zither)

**Ngô Trà My:** đàn bầu (Vietnamese monochord)

**Stefan Östersjö:** 6-string classical guitar (*Strandlines*), đàn tỳ bà and Vietnamese electric guitar (*Nam Mái*)

Produced by **Richard Karpen** and **Stefan Östersjö**

*Nam Mái*

Commissioned by the **Seattle Symphony**

Conductor: **Stilian Kirov**

Seattle Symphony recorded in October 2014 by **Dmitriy Lipay** at Benaroya Hall, Seattle

The Six Tones recorded in August 2015 by **Silas Bieri** at Malmö Theatre Academy

Edited and mixed by **Stefan Östersjö**, **Doug Niemela** and **Richard Karpen**

*Strandlines*

Recorded in March 2016 by **Doug Niemela** in the Meany Studio Theater, University of Washington, Seattle

Edited and mixed by **Stefan Östersjö** and **Martin Svensson**

Live Electronics realized in SuperCollider by **Richard Karpen** with programming and live performance implementation by **Joshua Parmenter**, and performed in this recording by

**Martin Svensson**

Back cover photo by **Steven Korn**

Liner notes by **Stefan Östersjö**

Graphic design by **John Mosher**

Text editing by **David Burns** and **Jerry Tabor**

Special thanks to Elena Dubinets, Vice President for Artistic Planning, and Ludovic Morlot, Music Director of the Seattle Symphony, who made possible the commission and realization of *Nam Mái*. Thanks too, to everyone at the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media, University of Washington.