

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1996) (17:48)

- 1 I Prologue (2:02)
- 2 II Sputtering, with perseverance (15:45)

Curtis Macomber, violin
Aleck Karis, piano

Interior Design for solo violin (2003) (21:31)

- 3 I Hardwood Tile (2:38)
- 4 II Vermont Slate (1:43)
- 5 III Skylight (5:39)
- 6 IV Demolition (4:02)
- 7 V Feng Shui (7:09)

Curtis Macomber, violin

Humble River (1997) (30:25)

- 8 I Prelude (1:26)
- 9 II Part I (4:06)
- 10 III Part II (7:11)
- 11 IV Part III (2:18)
- 12 V Part IV (15:23)

Susan Palma-Nidel, flute; Curtis Macomber, violin
Maureen Gallagher, viola; Gregory Hesselink, violoncello

I was first attracted to Steve Mackey's music when I was a member of the New World String Quartet. We were looking around for a composer with an original voice, and happened to hear Steve's *On All Fours*. We were taken with its visceral, primal quality, especially captured in that "detuned" violin part which evoked some kind of pathetic, sulking animal.

Much of what I find so successful in Steve's music is that kind of willingness to explore the immediate, the vulnerable, the personal, and sometimes the downright silly. He'll tap from whatever source suits the moment, be it a naive children's tune or some bluesy plaint. There is an intelligence and a discerning judgment for proportion and scope, but it's his audacious use of the vernacular that I particularly love and enjoy playing.

-Curtis Macomber

Notes by Steve Mackey

I like getting lost in music, and I like music I can get lost in. One of my first classical music listening experiences was Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, and I was lost when the opening phrase just sort of wandered into the room. It didn't sound like the beginning; I started the record over again because I thought it must have skipped the rhetorical opening that I projected on all classical music. Then of course it only gets more expansive, adding themes, changing keys, reaching thunderous climaxes and receding to intimate whispers, all of which awed me. I was a serious musician and a good listener so every turn of phrase registered, but I was used to monothematic rock songs that projected one image at a time. My songs were like studio apartments and Beethoven's Sixth was like a palace with dozens of rooms and elaborate corridors connecting them.

It was sort of disappointing to learn in the course of my music education that all the activities of that first movement were normal parts of Sonata-Allegro form, and had names like First theme, Second theme, Development, etc. The word "Transition" really stuck in my craw; the idea that my most favorite passages were merely utilitarian connective tissues between themes was disappointing.

I traveled to more exotic places to get lost, and found a home in the music of the early twentieth century. There was less pedagogical convention to explain this music away, but the main thing is the music itself. Late Debussy, early Stravinsky and Schoenberg are not as concerned, as Beethoven Symphonies, with making logical, linear "sense." The pieces don't always return to the beginning and they pass through many surprising places along the way. If, formally speaking, *Sunshine of Your Love* seemed like a hip, studio apartment, and the Sixth Symphony like a palace, then *Jeux*, the *Rite of Spring* and the *Five Orchestral Pieces* op. 16, suggested something more like the Winchester Mystery House – a tourist attraction in San Jose, CA, that I vis-

ited many times while I was growing up.

From its official website:



"The 160 room Victorian mansion, designed and built by the Winchester Rifle heiress, is filled with so many unexplained oddities, that it has come to be known as the Winchester Mystery House. From rambling roofs and exquisite hand inlaid parquet floors to the gold and silver chandeliers and Tiffany art glass windows, you will be impressed by the staggering amount of creativity, energy, and expense poured into each and every detail. These stairs that lead to the ceiling are just one of the many bizarre features that Mrs. Winchester designed and had built."

The music on this disc is more intimate and, it seems to me, less bizarre than the Mystery House. (But then again how would I know? I've inhabited my own psyche for so long that its interior design – the hidden rooms, secret passageways and stairways to nowhere – are simply home.) At any rate, I thought it would be consistent with the title and governing metaphor of the disc to give a guided tour with background and some points of interest:

Sonata for Violin and Piano has an unusual, very unbalanced floor plan. The first movement is two minutes and the second is sixteen.

Notice that in *Prologue* both instruments sound unusual. The violin's first phrase is played with a practice mute, and even when it is replaced by a regular mute, the line slides around more like a ghostly version of back porch bottle-neck blues guitar playing than a traditional violin. The piano plays very high and very low with the effect of de-emphasizing the pitch and turning it into some manner of percussion instrument.

I have a penchant for musical characters that are cock-eyed and quirky.

They usually invent their own eccentric forms; however, in ‘Sputtering, with perseverance’, as an experiment, I required that the *fakakte* material live within the confines of a normal sonata. As part of my recovery from music education, I wrote a sonata that one could get lost in the way I first heard late Beethoven. Debussy had shown the way in his *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, where it seems like a coincidence that the wistful tunes just happen to glide into one another in the manner of a sonata form. In my case, I think there is even more irony, as the non-rhetorical material stumbles into a sonata. It’s kind of a fish out of water story I suppose.

The exposition really sweats and struggles to get from the sputtering first theme to a kind of celebration (2’48”) near the end of the second theme group with the chiming piano part and some violinistic fiddling. It is still the same gimpy world we began with but at least there is an attempt at dancing.

The development (3’49”) is where you can really get lost; it is almost twice as long as the exposition. The fastidiously logical development of the antique sonata is replaced by free-association of sounds and ideas. A few of my favorites among the weirder passages are:

- The movement from the “shiny” sound of the violin pizzicato doubling an octave below the piano (4’10”) which turns into an off-kilter interplay between the innocent piano chords and the violin pizzicato (4’15”) and then darkens and drifts on, (4’20” and following). Each step seems surprising but plausible.

- The texture and character at 6’20” - the piano plays a big staccato chord but a different note is allowed to ring with each attack so that a line comes into relief with a more intense take on the sputtering gesture from the beginning. Meanwhile the violin tosses electric jabs into the fray to keep it all edgy.

- I just love the sound of the fluttering, pathetic, wounded violin against the bittersweet piano harmonies at 9’22”. On second thought, this is a pretty bizarre design.

There are a couple of nice features in the recapitulation like the gratuitous, twisted, ragtime piano solo (13’15”) and the wistful coda (14’59”).

Sonata for Violin and Piano was commissioned by the McKim Foundation in the Library of Congress for The Abel/Steinberg Duo and premiered by them at Mills College in the fall of 1996.

Interior Design uses a variety of strategies to enable the violin to suggest more than one part at a time. The materials tend to be simple to make this feat transparent. I wrote this piece for Curtis Macomber in 2003 and its polyphonic approach was inspired by his clean and elegant technique.

Curt and I don’t know each other that well, we don’t visit or call each other on the phone without reason, but we have had a great professional relationship over the past 15 years. It occurs to me that he has probably played in more pieces of mine than any other single performer. I love his playing and he must feel okay about my music because he made this CD.

Short, rhythmic, obsessive phrases fit together to make up ‘Hardwood Tile.’

‘Vermont Slate’ is another take on material similar to ‘Hardwood Tile’ but with a little more variety and less predictability.

‘Skylight’ is a medley of three tunes. I like the tunes, but I’m particularly fond of the way they connect to one another – the transitions – if you’ll pardon the expression. One interesting feature is the extreme distance between the ethereal second tune (2’50”) in the stratosphere, and it’s accompaniment in the lowest register of the violin. It’s a fluke of nature that Curt makes this as vivid as he does.

‘Demolition’ is a *bizarre oddity*. I imagine a flurry of activity as a fire-place is dismantled –jackhammers buzzing and dust flying –, alternating with waves of nostalgic memories involving the family hearth.

'Feng Shui' begins as though it could be a proper, organized piece of music with a well-structured melody: an 'A' section (with a pretty hook at the end), 'A' repeated, a 'B' section (1'02"), and a 'C' section (1'21"). The 'A' section returns (1'50") and then... the metaphorical secret panel is pushed revealing a mysterious labyrinth of freely associated ideas (2'44"). This stream of ideas leads to an ecstatic rendition of the pretty hook from the end of the 'A' section (4'39") and rest of the piece basks in that good fortune.

Interior Design was commissioned by Judith Sherman for Curtis Macomber and premiered by him at the Yellow Barn music festival in the summer of 2003.

Dutch flutist Eleonore Pameijer commissioned *Humble River* to round out a program with the Mozart Flute Quartets. The four Mozart quartets are about 30 minutes shy of a full concert. My approach was to write a single continuous piece that would flow throughout the evening – a "river" with Mozart "islands." Each part of *Humble River* leads to a Mozart Quartet and, when that is finished, picks up from where the previous part left off. The river metaphor really did inform the composition; as corny as it sounds, I imagined the modest trickle of Part 1 leading eventually to a cosmic sea of sound by the end. The piece can either be done with Mozart, or, as in this version, as a stand-alone, continuous, 30-minute composition.

Humble River has the most sensible continuity of any piece on this disc. There are audible connections leading one idea into the next. The only thing out of order is the Prelude, which is a glimpse into the distant future (track #12, 9'50"). Once the piece starts in earnest with 'Part 1', it is a pretty straight line. Even the instrumentation evolves logically; 'Part 1' is for violin and viola duo, 'Part 2' adds the cello and later the flute. The flute's role grows into a solo that serves as 'Part 3',

and then the dam bursts in 'Part 4'. Because of the linear flow, the listener is not likely to get lost in mysterious corners along the way. However, the sheer distance traveled is an adventure in itself; thirty-plus minutes on a one-way trip can take you far from home.

There are many triumphant, extroverted and confident passages in *Humble River*. I think these are made all the more vivid by being laced with cock-eyed, quirky, crippled, or otherwise challenged musical characters for whom I earlier confessed a sympathy. The destiny of the piece is to ultimately achieve incredible virtuosity and brilliance, but don't miss some of the misfits along the way:

- The 'Prelude' bears the instruction "a collection of broken toys".
- Then there is the viola solo marked "flabby, pathetic" at track #10, 1'23".

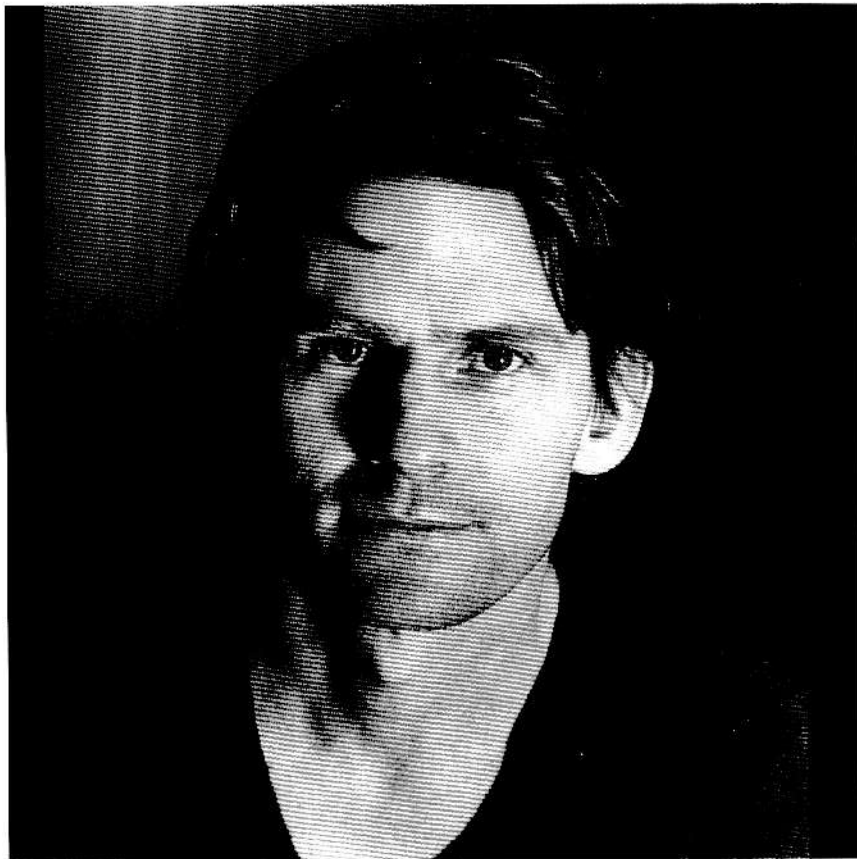
The stuttering, amorphous rhythm, while sliding down is virtually a notated viola joke.

- This theme recurs throughout the piece like the version for cello at 2'07", barely heard beneath the brutal chords in the violin and viola. As the piano did in the Sonata, the violin and viola attack four-notes but sustain only one to create a sputtering, coughing line.

- Still on the topic of pathetic is the first flute solo at 4'02". For 45 seconds the flute can only manage to toot a single pitch. (No need to feel sorry for the flute player though; as time goes by, the flute dominates, drowning the strings in buckets of notes – bravissima Susan Palma-Nidel!)

- The most extreme passage in the misfit vein is the pitiful moaning at track #12, 9'12".

The list goes on but my favorite part in the piece is where the athletic/extroverted merges with the off-kilter in the last section of the piece (track #12, 13'27"). The mood is ecstatic but something about the rhythm still sputters albeit joyously.



Steven Mackey was born in 1956 to American parents stationed in Frankfurt Germany. His first musical passion was playing the electric guitar in rock bands based in northern California. He later discovered concert music and has composed for orchestras, chamber ensembles, dance and opera. He regularly performs his own work, including two electric guitar concertos as well as numerous solo and chamber works and is also active as an improvising musician.

As a composer, Mackey has been honored by numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, two awards from the Kennedy Center for the performing arts, the Stoeger Prize for Chamber Music by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and in 2000 the Miami performing arts center acknowledged his contributions to orchestral music with a special career achievement award. His *Indigenous Instruments* was selected to represent the U.S. at the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris in 1990. Mackey will again be in residence at Tanglewood in the summer of 2005 and has, in the past, been composer-in-residence at Aspen, Yellow Barn, and Bennington among others. He was featured at the 2000 American Mavericks Festival presented by the San Francisco Symphony and the 2003 Holland festival in Amsterdam. Zankel at Carnegie Hall will present a portrait concert of his work on their "Making Music" series, February 9, 2006.

Available discs of Mackey's work include "Lost and Found": Mackey performing his own solo electric guitar music, released by Bridge records in 1996; "Tuck and Roll": Michael Tilson Thomas conducts orchestral music of Steven Mackey, released in 2001 by BMG/RCA Red Seal; "String Theory": string Quartets and string quartets plus with the Brentano String Quartet

released in 2003 on Albany Records; "Heavy Light": Mosaic plays mixed chamber ensemble music, released in 2004 by New World Records; "Banana/Dump Truck: concerti for cello and electric guitar released in 2005 on Albany records. "Tuck and Roll" and "Lost and Found" made several year-end top ten lists including the New York Times. Individual pieces are included on numerous collections on Nonesuch, BMG/Catalyst, CRI, Newport Classics, and many other labels.

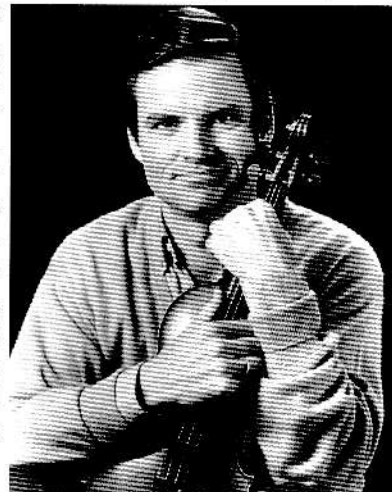
As a guitarist he has performed his own music with the Kronos Quartet, the Arditti Quartet, Brentano Quartet, New World Symphony, Dutch Radio Symphony, The London Sinfonietta, Nexttime Ensemble (Parma), Psappha (Manchester), Joey Baron, Fred Sherry and others.

Mackey is currently Professor of Music at Princeton University where he has been a member of the faculty since 1985. He teaches composition, theory, twentieth century music, improvisation and a variety of special topics. As co-director of the Composers Ensemble at Princeton he coaches and conducts new work by student composers as well as twentieth century classics. In 1991, he was awarded the first-ever Distinguished Teaching Award from Princeton University.

Mackey's web address is www.stevenmackey.com. His music is published by Boosey & Hawkes.

The playing of violinist **Curtis Macomber** has been praised recently by Fanfare Magazine as "remarkable for its depth of feeling as well as for technical excellence." Macomber is considered to be one of the most versatile soloists and chamber musicians before the public today, equally at home and committed to works from Bach to Babbitt, and with a discography ranging from complete Brahms String Quartets to the Roger Sessions Solo Sonata ("This is one of the best recordings of 20th Century solo violin music ever made." American Record Guide) to the complete Grieg Sonatas (released fall of 2002 on the Arabesque label).

Mr. Macomber has for many years been recognized as a leading advocate of the music of our time. He has performed in hundreds of premieres, commissions, and first recordings of solo violin and chamber works by, among others, Carter, Davidovsky, Perle, Wuorinen, and Mackey. As first violinist of the award-winning New World String Quartet for 11 years (1982-1993), Mr. Macomber performed the standard repertoire as well as numerous contemporary works in performances in major halls throughout the United States and Europe, and, with the Quartet, was appointed Artist-in-Residence at Harvard University from 1982-1990; with that group he also recorded 14 discs and performed numerous times on Public Radio and Television in this country, and



the BBC in Great Britain.

A founding member of the Apollo Piano Trio and a member of the 20th-Century music ensemble Speculum Musicae since 1991, Mr. Macomber has also appeared with the New York New Music Ensemble, Group for Contemporary Music, Sea Cliff Chamber Players, and in chamber music series across the country and in Europe. He is a regular participant at La Musica in Sarasota and at the Monadnock Music Festival. He has recorded for Nonesuch, Koch, Vanguard, Pickwick, and Musical Heritage; CRI has just released his third solo recording, entitled "Casting Ecstatic"; the previous disc ("Songs of Solitude") was named by the New York Observer as one of 1996's best instrumental solo discs ("Macomber's intensely human fiddle...seems an entire universe, sufficient unto itself."); and sonatas of Amy Beach and John Corigliano are available on Koch.

Mr. Macomber is a member of the chamber music faculty of the Juilliard School and the violin faculty of the Manhattan School of Music, and has also taught at the Tanglewood Music Center, Taos School of Music and Yellow Barn Music School. Other recent summer engagements have included Chamber Music Northwest and the Bard Festival. He holds his B.M., M.M., and D.M.A. degrees from the Juilliard School, where he was a scholarship student of Joseph Fuchs and winner of the Morris Loeb and Walter Naumburg Prizes.

Flutist **Susan Palma-Nidel** has been a member of Orpheus since 1980. She has traveled with the group throughout the world, often appearing as soloist, giving master classes, and performing chamber music. She is also the principal flutist of the American Composers Orchestra and the Naumberg Award-winning Speculum Musicae, with whom she has premiered hundreds of

works, including compositions of Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Milton Babbitt. She has performed as principal flutist and soloist with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, Martha Graham Dance Company, the Stuttgart and Royal Ballets, Bach Chamber Soloists, the Santa Fe Opera, and the Madeira and Oregon Bach Festivals. Since 1973 Ms. Palma-Nidel has been a member of the North Country Chamber Players in New Hampshire.

Ms. Palma-Nidel can be heard on more than 100 recordings for Deutsche Grammophon, Columbia, Nonesuch, New World, CRI, London, Sony Classical, Verve, RCA Victor Red Seal, and Bridge Records. Her recordings of the Mozart Flute Concertos and Flute and Harp Concerto with Orpheus and Nancy Allen in 1990 received wide acclaim and have been termed the finest recordings of these works to date by Grammophon magazine.

Ms. Palma-Nidel, a native of Midland, Michigan, received her musical training at the University of Michigan and the Juilliard School, and she is on the faculty of Columbia University. She also is a painter and lives in Manhattan with her husband, attorney and restaurateur, Richard Nidel.

Violist **Maureen Gallagher** is a member of the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble and Speculum Musicae, a contemporary chamber music ensemble with whom she premiered a chamber concerto by Jon Deak. She is also co-principal violist of the Orchestra of St. Luke's, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the Mito Chamber Orchestra of Japan. Among her over seventy-five recordings she has recorded Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra for Deutsche Grammophon, with whom she also won a 2001 Grammy for *Shadow Dances*, a CD of Stravinsky's chamber music. She recently recorded two new works by Elliott Carter, the *Oboe Quartet* and *Au Quai* for bassoon and

viola. Ms. Gallagher has performed as a guest with the Tokyo, Emerson, Orion, Cleveland, Brentano, and Miami String Quartets. She graduated from Indiana University with a Bachelor of Music with Distinction, and is on the faculty of Columbia University. Ms. Gallagher plays a Paolo Antonio Testore viola made in 1743.

Cellist **Gregory Hesselink** leads an eclectic musical life performing as a chamber musician and soloist, with mediums such as theater and dance, while being active as a teacher and promoter of new music. He is a member of the New Millennium Ensemble, New York Philomusica, Sequitur, New Band (caretakers of the Harry Partch instrument collection), the Locrian Chamber Players, and is principle cellist of the Riverside Symphony. Mr. Hesselink has premiered more than 100 works including concertos by James Tenney and Daniel Weymouth, and currently, a concerto is being written for him by Ross Bauer. He has performed at festivals throughout North America, Europe and in Japan and is a regular participant at the Monadnock Summer Festival. Always teaching, he is on the faculty of Mannes Prep., and in the summer teaches during one session at Apple Hill. Mr. Hesselink attended the Interlochen Arts Academy, and holds degrees from the Eastman School of Music and SUNY Stony Brook, where his primary teachers were Steven Doane and Timothy Eddy. His recordings can be heard on Nonesuch, Wergo, CRI, Innova, Bridge, Koch, Albany, PPI and the Point Records Labels.

For over twenty years **Aleck Karis** has been one of the leading pianists in the New York contemporary music scene. Particularly associated with the music of Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, and John Cage, he has championed their works all over the world. Among his numerous solo piano discs on Bridge

Records are acclaimed recordings of Stravinsky, Schumann, Carter and John Cage.

At home with both contemporary and classical works, Karis has performed concertos from Mozart to Birtwistle with New York's Y Chamber Symphony, St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra, the Richmond Symphony and the Erie Symphony. He has been featured at leading international festivals including Bath, Geneva, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Miami, New York Philharmonic's Horizons Festival, Caramoor, and the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He is the pianist with Speculum Musicae. Awarded a solo recitalists' fellowship by the NEA, Karis has been honored with two Fromm Foundation grants "in recognition of his commitment to the music of our time."

Karis has recorded for Nonesuch, New World, Neuma, Centaur, Roméo and CRI Records. *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano by John Cage received a "Critic's Choice" from *Gramophone* in 1999. His most recent CD, on the Tzadik label, is an acclaimed recording of *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* for cello and piano, by Morton Feldman. He has also recorded solo music by Davidovsky, Babbitt, Glass, Primosch, Anderson and Yuasa. Chamber music recordings include works by Carter, Wolpe, Feldman, Crumb, Babbitt, Martino, Lieberson, Steiger, and Shifrin.

Karis has studied with William Daghlian, Artur Balsam and Beveridge Webster and holds degrees from the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School. Currently, he is a Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

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I want to give sincere thanks to Susan Palma-Nidel, Curtis Macomber, Maureen Gallagher, and Greg Hesselink for bringing this difficult music to life and a special thanks to my favorite producer, Judy Sherman and Judy's assistant Jeanne Velonis.

-Steven Mackey

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