

MUSIC OF
DAN VISCONTI

(b. 1982)

*Tracks 1-11 performed by Scharoun Ensemble Berlin &
other guests of the Berlin Philharmonic*

1 **Black Bend (2003)** (5:23)

*Wolfram Brandl and Christoph Streuli, violins
Micha Afkham, viola, Richard Duven, cello,
Peter Riegelbauer, bass*

2 **Lawless Airs (2008)** (4:50)

Christoph Streuli, violin & Marie-Pierre Langlamet, harp

3 **Ramble and Groove (2009)** (6:53)

Markus Weidmann, bassoon

4 **Hard-Knock Stomp (2000)** (3:03)

Micha Afkham, viola

5 **Drift of Rainbows (2009)** (5:19)

for chamber ensemble and delay unit

*Alexander Bader, Stefan de Leval Jezierski
& Markus Weidmann, blow-organs*

Jan Schlichte, percussion, Majella Stockhausen, celesta

Wolfram Brandl and Christoph Streuli, violins, Micha Afkham, viola

Richard Duven, cello, Peter Riegelbauer, bass

Michael Hasel, conductor

Fractured Jams (2006) (12:48)

6 I. eleven (5:10)

7 II. jug band jamboree (3:27)

8 III. series echoes (feedback) (2:29)

9 IV. kaleidoscope rag (1:42)

Wolfram Brandl, violin, Alexander Bader, clarinet

Richard Duven, cello, Majella Stockhausen, piano

10 **Remembrances (2008)** (2:51)

Richard Duven, cello, and Majella Stockhausen, piano

11 **Low Country Haze (2009)** (7:20)

for chamber orchestra

Rebecca Lenton, flutepiccolo, Alexander Bader, clarinet

Markus Weidmann, bassoon, Stefan de Leval Jezierski, horn

Jan Schlichte, percussion, Majella Stockhausen, piano

Wolfram Brandl and Christoph Streuli, violins, Micha Afkham, viola

Richard Duven, cello, Peter Riegelbauer, bass

Michael Hasel, conductor

12-18 **Lonesome Roads (2012)** (18:00)

Horszowski Trio

Rieko Aizawa, piano

Jesse Mills, violin

Raman Ramakrishnan, cello

Dan Visconti: American Bred

Here in America, we like to categorize our own music. For decades, there existed on these shores a much-vaunted rift in modern music, a tripartite schism between the Minimalists who wrote music with repetitive structures based on a mix between music of the East and current-day rock and roll, whose scene focused on the galleries in The Village; the Neo-Romantics, who wrote multi-movement symphonies, chamber music and operas and made Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall their home; and the High Modernists, who experimented with electronics, defied tonality and made the studio at Columbia University their haven. These are obviously oversimplifications—but so were the

errant and often-frustrating labels. With these “guidelines” one could not just be composing music but an acquiescent type of music. Composers had to make a choice, or risk being left out of the conversation altogether. These strictures were (are) handy for historical vivisection, but leaving little option for the composer who did not wish to hitch their wagons. Never mind that for every composer who fit a specific category there were several just guilty by association; never mind that music, at its best, is a personal expression and therefore defies sectile categorization, no matter how convenient; never mind that there is a lot to love in every “kind” of music, especially if you strip out the politics.

This disc, *Lonesome Roads*, is a sample of American composer Dan Visconti's chamber music, much of it played by members of the Berlin Philharmonic. His work is difficult to slot, to categorize, which means it both engages and defies the above-mentioned labels, and ultimately comes out just being music you plain old want to hear. Stylistically, his work is favored by an unhitched freedom, because he is young enough—in both actual and spiritual age—not to be freighted by the previous generation's notions. Even just listening to the first minutes of the disc—the sparse, portentous opening of the string quintet *Black Bend*, with its smarmy slides and carefully-heard “improvisations” that eventually give way to raucous and on-message blues—it is easy for listeners to know they are in good musical hands, non-pandering hands at that. Visconti aims where his ear takes

him; it feels remarkably and refreshingly genuine; and he is neither too beholden to high culture nor does he wink loudly when mashing up the low. And yet, for all his “outside” references to non-literate music (meaning nobody wrote it down) he composes work equally florid and with a unique voice, work that has and should be played in those same venues and by those same performers (as his already-impressive resume attests) alongside the music of the Great Western Canon. In this representative sample of his work—played by musicians from the Berlin Philharmonic (who might not be the first group one thinks of when one thinks of “being able to swing,” about which one would be wrong)—we see (hear) the composer working out these especial notions in a personal, rooted way. There's something distinctly American about his approach.

Travel through America's Great Open Spaces might be our single most important cultural trope. From Walt Whitman to Harry Partch, Tom Waits to Kerouac, Oakley Hall to Aaron Copland, we as a vivid culture have the deepest trouble being still; we like to roam the plains, to see our purple mountain majesties from the rails—or at least we like imagine it via the lens of distinctive and quintessential art. There is a long history of Westward-ho Wanderlust in American work; it is an old story from a (relatively) new country. Visconti takes this mythology—which, as an American, is his birthright—extremely seriously. A lot of his work is plainly indebted to and in agon with vernacular music, specifically blues, with jazz, with rock and roll, our local contribution to the vast non-literate tradition. In skilled hands, this interaction between musics can give any piece of chamber or

orchestral music a homespun shiver, add bristle and allow the toe to tap within the closed quarters of centuries-old chamber music. That is Visconti's wheelhouse: he communes, but does not condescend; one hears no envy of "the other", but rather a genuine affection for and respectful relationship to traditions to which he is not exactly native.

But *Lonesome Roads* is more than an entry into the American vernacular or the American landscape: it is a nod to the American century. Returning to the idea of the three-part turf war of the mid-20th-century (New York, specifically), a schism that still has its adherents today, Visconti can be said to be of equal minds on the matter, which makes him an absorbent original. The grit and vernacular of the Minimalists can be found in the bassoon solo called *Ramble and Groove*, the blues-

soaked string quartet *Black Bend*, and the third movement of *Fractured Jams*; the raw, unfettered beauty of the Neo-Romantics is in the plainspun prettiness of *Lawless Airs* and the fragile deliquescing of *Drift of Rainbows*; the compositional rigor and adherence to lofty notions of the High Modernists is in the pointillist opening movements of *Fractured Jams* and the introductory aleatory of *Black Bend* before the blues trope comes to dominate. And there are pieces, like *Low Country Haze* or *Lonesome Roads* that either meld or ignore these mostly obsolete distinctions, trading up party loyalty for music that is just plain rapturous to hear.

Visconti is a young composer with a broad career no-doubt ahead of him, which means this will someday qualify as his early work, and as a collection of future past work, this is a remarkably consistent

and quite sophisticated group of pieces. Nothing stodgy or throwback, little in the way of a grinding axe or someone trying to impress beyond their means. Instead, the pieces are appropriately rough-hewn, short and to-the-point for the most part (not a *longeur* in the batch) and above all distinct. And like most artists, he'll no doubt look back on some of this and cringe a little, having bested it in music yet to come, being older and wiser and more settled. And yet, here, a CD of compelling music played by some of the more gifted instrumentalists in the hemisphere, is a record that is, if nothing else, a record that even the slightly older Dan Visconti will enjoy. We can get there first.

—Daniel Felsenfeld
Brooklyn, NY

Notes from the Composer

Black Bend takes its inspiration from an old ghost story about a train derailment and a supposedly haunted stretch of Ohio's Cuyahoga River, where the eerie moans of deceased passengers are said to echo through the drone of insects and oppressive heat.

The piece begins with a spacious sonic landscape populated by seemingly random natural sounds and the languid drawl of rural vernacular; from this texture a slow blues emerges and accelerates in a wailing frenzy, only to dissolve into nothing as quickly as it materialized.

The thought of these haunted cries rising up from the river suggested to me

the painful, almost supernatural power of expression which often inhabits the voice of the blues singer, with the relentless click-clack rhythm of the doomed train surging ahead. Many special techniques are employed in order for the unamplified stringed instruments to produce a raw, distorted tone more typical of electric guitars.

Black Bend was originally commissioned by the Cleveland Museum of Art and first presented in a version for string quartet.

Drawing from the rustic outlaw ballads that so strongly characterized the old American West, *Lawless Airs* reflects the plaintive, lyrical style typical of cowboy songs—as well as an image of the often

unforgiving wilderness that gave this simple music its rough-hewn shape. The piece is cast in two distinct sections. The first is marked by a bittersweet violin line accompanied by what resembles a creaking, broken guitar more than a classical harp; and the second by strands of ethereal harmonics that dissolve without properly concluding.

The original version of *Lawless Airs* was commissioned by the Concert Artists Guild and BMI Foundation for the Janaki String Trio, with this new arrangement made especially for my friends in the Berlin Philharmonic.

Ramble and Groove is a piece about two kinds of motion—that which is searching, meandering, and discursive, and that which organizes itself with a driving, rhythmic “groove”. Like an old clunker of a car that won't start,

the beginning of the piece is full of quiet, indistinct sounds as well as sudden, rude outbursts; as the piece lopes along, it eventually gains momentum and bursts into joyous, bouncy licks and saxophone-styled slides.

The piece is dedicated to Berlin Philharmonic bassoonist Markus Weidmann, who brings the piece to reed-smacking, foot-stomping conclusion on this recording.

Hard-Knock Stomp is the earliest composition listed in my catalogue—which means that although it was by no means my first composition, it was the first one I felt like keeping around.

Looking back, I'm now better able to understand how this unassuming little piece manages to articulate many of the musical features that I would spend

the next ten years exploring: a fusion of traditional playing with the extended techniques of folk and bluegrass fiddle, and an exploration of compact, tuneful forms inspired by popular song as much as the classical canon.

The piece is structured in a series of free-flowing variations on a bluesy opening melody, some building up an underlying shuffling rhythmic pattern, some sputtering off into distant keys. It's the kind of rowdy, lowdown music that might seem more at home at a roadhouse than a concert hall: tuneful, driving, and full of flavor.

Driving through Arizona's Painted Desert during sunset provided for a breathtaking and dreamlike experience, a moment in which inner and outer realities become blurred as a brilliant landscape falls into darkness. *Drift of Rainbows* was

envisioned as an evocation of these layered bands of color slowly shifting to reveal new meaning and interactions, and the chant-like melody reflects a certain austere beauty as it unfolds slowly over time. The use of electronic delay and the dark, cresting chords played on toy blow-organs suggest an eternal process, something untouched by human hands and still full of mystery.

Drift of Rainbows was commissioned by the Annenberg Foundation for Scharoun Ensemble Berlin.

Several of my most recent works explore my affection for aspects of popular music styles, but in *Fractured Jams* I wanted focus on something even more fundamental: the thrill and confusion of the popular listening experience, born of packed, dimly-lit clubs, beat-up records, and homemade mixtapes.

As Tim Munro of the ensemble eighth blackbird (who toured with the work in 2011) remarked in an interview with Australia's *Daily Telegraph*, "It's like Dan's taken 70 years of popular music and put it through a blender, so what you get is a wild, off-kilter jam session gone wrong." In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he added: "It's chaotic sometimes and whimsical others, it's violent sometimes and crazy all the time."

I. *eleven* is a wry reference to Nigel Tufnel's tricked-out amp in *This is Spinal Tap* and is based on the conflict of extremes—sections characterized by hesitant, insecure fumbling and those marked by thrashing, almost overwhelming bombast. It's also a reaction to the strangely beautiful and unexpected rawness of a barely-trained ensemble blissfully hopping aboard a musical train wreck.

II. *jug band jamboree* is my stab at kind of hoedown, barnyard sounds and all; but it's also a reaction to the very idea of a "band", especially the old string and jug bands where each member had a highly particular role. The players in this movement stumble along on their own, trying to come together in some kind of harmony and only once, perhaps, achieving a consonant coincidence.

III. *series echoes (feedback)* is a more spacious aural canvas colored with sounds and gestures inspired by "mistakes"—that is, microphone hiss and guitar feedback. Sometimes it's these "unwanted" sounds that are most interesting and provocative.

IV. *kaleidoscope rag* is inspired heavily by recorded media and its quirks—record skips, popping, and out-of-control warping all assert themselves in a sound world that seems spliced together from several different "takes." The music clips along hurriedly, almost like a jerky silent film played a bit too fast, in a quirky evocation of a thumpy ragtime march.

Fractured Jams was commissioned by the BMI Foundation Boudleaux Bryant Fund for Antares.

Remembrances alludes to memories, but also to the mementos or keepsakes that represent them—tokens of something cherished, or perhaps a simpler, more innocent time.

The piece is cast in the form of a short “parlor song”, in which an antiquated musical style is viewed at a distance that is—I hope—affectionate rather than ironic. *Remembrances* was commissioned by Joshua Roman and Evelyne Luest for the New Music Champions series at NYC’s Symphony Space.

In responding to conductor David Alan Miller’s request for a piece inspired by one of the European voyages of exploration, I took as my subject Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto’s 1540 expedition into what we now call Georgia and the Carolinas. Expedition logs written by de

Soto’s secretary took particular interest in the sounds of this new land in a way that can only be described as musical—the calls of strange birds the company had never heard before, the chattering of insects and other animals scurrying in the vegetation, and the new languages of the native Americans. It must have been thrilling to hear sounds that literally no other European had ever heard before.

My piece, then, is not really about de Soto himself so much as the experience of hearing the sounds of someplace mysterious and unfamiliar. The piece begins with a seemingly random chatter of percussive effects, like the snapping of twigs and clicking of insects; slowly, longer, folk-like lines begin to emerge and sing a more human song—perhaps in awe and appreciation, perhaps in excitement. As the work concludes, this vision of

unspoiled splendor is overtaken by the sound of tuned wine goblets played with the fingers—the evocation of an all-enveloping haze.

Low Country Haze was commissioned by David Alan Miller and the Albany Symphony

Lonesome Roads was inspired by memories of long, cross-country car trips and the rumbling, uneven grooves that underscore a constantly-shifting landscape. Beginning from the faintest murmurs, the music evokes a vast space that can be alternately lonely, hypnotic, or hard-driving and rhythmic. Across several brief, fragmentary movements, the initial melodic murmurings assemble themselves into propulsive ostinato figures and wild, aggressive riffs colored with raw timbres and powerful rhythms characteristic of rock and beat-

driven music. These movements may be played in any order so that each ensemble can make their own journey with the piece, which becomes a kind of road atlas with many routes connecting any two points. It’s pure “driving music”, a mixtape populated with the vastness, diversity, and flavor of the North American landscape.

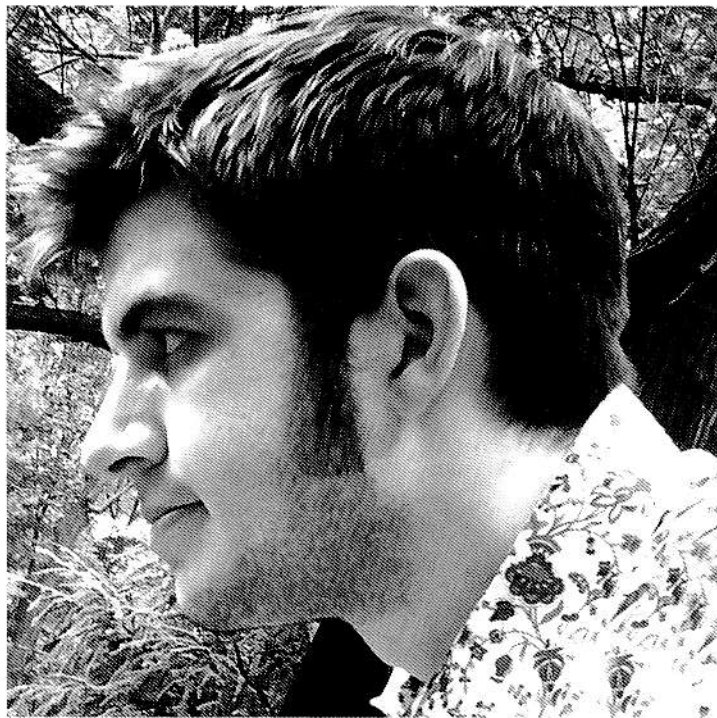
This work was commissioned for the Gryphon, Deseret, and Triple Helix piano trios by the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University and the 2010 International Barlow Prize.

Dan Visconti composes concert music infused with the directness of expression and maverick spirit of the American vernacular. His compositions often explore the rough timbres, propulsive rhythms, and improvisational energy characteristic of jazz, bluegrass, and rock—elements that tend to collide in unexpected ways with Visconti's experience as a classically-trained violinist, resulting in a growing body of music the *Plain Dealer* describes as "both mature and youthful, bristling with exhilarating musical ideas and a powerfully crafted lyricism."

Recent concert seasons have showcased several Visconti premieres, including a work commissioned by the Jupiter Quartet for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's international string quartet series; a work featuring

experimental video commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra for premiere at Carnegie's Zankel Hall; and a new work for soprano Lucy Shelton and the Da Capo Chamber players commissioned by the Naumburg Foundation. Other commissions have come from the Kronos Quartet, the Berlin Philharmonic Scharoun Ensemble, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Albany Symphony, the Annapolis Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, the New York Youth Symphony, the Bakken Trio, the Corigliano Quartet, the Janaki String Trio, Town Hall Seattle, and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Visconti's music continues to receive performances by some of the top interpreters of contemporary music, including eighth blackbird, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and the Locrian



Chamber Players. His compositions have been honored with the Berlin Prize, the Bears Prize from Columbia University, the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship in the Performing Arts, and the Cleveland Arts Prize; awards from BMI, ASCAP, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters; and grants from the American Music Center, the Fromm Foundation, Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Chamber Music America. He has also been the recipient of artist fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Copland House, and the Virginia Commission for the Arts.

Visconti recently completed a multi-year residency with opera companies including Seattle Opera, Opera Theatre St. Louis, New York City Opera, the Glimmerglass Festival, and the Metropolitan Opera as recipient of the Douglas Moore Fellowship in American

Opera. Beginning in the 2013/14 season, he will serve as composer-in-residence of Chicago's Music in the Loft series.

Visconti studied composition at the Cleveland Institute of Music and the Yale School of Music. He is a member of BMI and currently resides in Washington, DC, where he serves as Artistic Director of the VERGE ensemble, the city's longest-standing presenter of new music.

Founded in 1983 by members of the **Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra**, the Scharoun Ensemble is one of Germany's leading chamber-music organizations. The permanent core of the Scharoun Ensemble is a classical octet (clarinet, bassoon, horn, two violins, viola, cello and double bass), made up entirely of members of the Berlin Philharmonic. When called for, the ensemble brings

in additional instrumentalists as well as noted conductors. The Scharoun Ensemble has prepared and presented various programmes under the direction of Claudio Abbado, Sir Simon Rattle, Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez. It has also performed with singers including Thomas Quasthoff, Simon Keenlyside and Barbara Hannigan. Complementing the Scharoun Ensemble's brisk international concert activity is its annual residence at and artistic directorship of the Zermatt Festival, founded in 2005. Bridging the gap between tradition and the modern is the Scharoun Ensemble's principal artistic focus. It has given world premieres of many 20th- and 21st-century compositions while dedicating itself with equal passion to the interpretation of works from past centuries. Lending his name to the Scharoun Ensemble is the architect of its musical home. In designing

the Berlin Philharmonie, Hans Scharoun (1893-1972) created a concert hall that was unique in the world, undertaking a synthesis between innovation and awareness of tradition and opening up new approaches to artistic communication – ideals to which the Scharoun Ensemble is also committed.

When the members of the **Horszowski Trio** – Jesse Mills, Raman Ramakrishnan, and Rieko Aizawa – played together for the first time, they immediately felt the spark of a unique connection. Many years of close friendship had created a deep trust between the players, which in turn led to exhilarating expressive freedom. Two-time Grammy-nominated violinist Jesse Mills first performed with Raman Ramakrishnan, founding cellist of the prize-winning Daedalus Quartet, at the Kinhaven

Music School over twenty years ago, when they were children. In New York City they met pianist Rieko Aizawa, who, upon being discovered by the late violinist and conductor Alexander Schneider, had made her U.S. debuts at the Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall. Their musical bonds were strengthened at various schools and festivals around the world, including the Juilliard School and the Marlboro Festival.

The Trio's 2012-2013 engagements include the People's Symphony and New School Concerts series in New York, the Phillips Collection in Washington, the Athenaeum in La Jolla, the Friends of Chamber Music in Troy and Fullerton, the University of Texas in Brownsville, the Bard and Cooperstown festivals, Bargemusic in Brooklyn, and several concerts in India. The 2013-2014 season

includes their debut performances in Japan. Based in New York City, the members of the Horszowski Trio teach at Columbia University and the Longy School of Music of Bard College.



Producers: Christoph Franke (*Black Bend, Lawless Airs, Ramble and Groove, Hard-Knock Stomp, Drift of Rainbows, Fractured Jams, Remembrances, Low Country Haze*); David Starobin (*Lonesome Roads*)
Engineers: René Möller (*Black Bend, Lawless Airs, Ramble and Groove, Hard-Knock Stomp, Drift of Rainbows, Fractured Jams, Remembrances, Low Country Haze*); Silas Brown (*Lonesome Roads*)

Black Bend, Lawless Airs, Ramble and Groove, Hard-Knock Stomp, Drift of Rainbows, Fractured Jams, Remembrances, Low Country Haze, recorded May 13-19, 2009 Kammermusiksaal, Philharmonie, Berlin; *Lonesome Roads* recorded July 26, 2012, Performing Arts Center, Theater C, SUNY College at Purchase, Purchase, New York

Mastering Engineer: Silas Brown

Editor: Doron Schächter (*Lonesome Roads*)

Executive Producers: Becky and David Starobin

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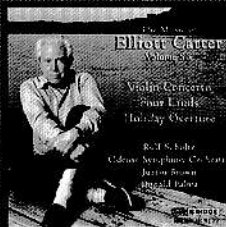
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