

CD Review by [Huntley Dent](#)

**ROGER REYNOLDS** *Dream Mirror (Sharespace I)*.<sup>1</sup> *Shifting/ Drifting (Sharespace IV)*.<sup>2</sup> *Here and There*.<sup>3</sup> *Sketchbook*<sup>4</sup> • <sup>2</sup>Irvine Arditti (vn); <sup>1</sup>Pablo Gómez Cano (gtr); <sup>4</sup>Liz Pearse (voc, pn); <sup>3</sup>Steven Schick (nar, perc); <sup>1,2</sup>Paul Hembree (elec) • NEUMA 128 (2 CDs: 104:30) <https://www.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=CDR90000-221>

As he turns 90, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Roger Reynolds feels old, new, exploratory, and a historical holdover all at the same time. Beyond the big established avant-garde figures like Boulez and Cage, Reynolds lays a major claim to the experimental music tradition with numerous recordings, prestigious grants, residencies at the major centers for electronic music, including Boulez's IRCAM in Paris, and countless commissions. His stock in trade isn't any single style or idiom—wherever New Music goes, Reynolds has been there from the outset. His style is best signified, as Robert Carl pointed out (*Fanfare* 32:1), by his omnivorous intellect. “What I mean by this is that Reynolds's music is saturated with *ideas*, but not just ones about musical technique. Instead, it plays with concepts and artifacts from such points of departure as non-Western culture, literature, geography, architecture, science, to name a few.”

Such a heavy reliance on conceptualization seems fitting for a composer who was undecided as he entered college about his chances to become a professional pianist. As a backstop Reynolds took his degree in physics engineering. A strong pull toward technology became a major thrust when Reynolds decided to reject engineering and return to his alma mater, the University of Michigan, for a music degree.

This is where my mixed impression of old/new/exploratory/holdover enters. The four works on this release are straightforward in format, consisting of a single acoustic instrument (guitar, violin) forming a duo with a computer musician (as Reynolds calls him) or else a quasi-duo in which one performer (percussionist, singer-pianist) also acts as a speaker. The booklet for this release, however, carries a heavy load of conceptual jargon that makes for tortuous reading. An example: “The apparatus of electro-acoustic technology and carefully elaborated algorithms, of spatial defamiliarization and exploration, of multimedial layering ...” and so on. The unlovable and unloved era of Xenakis, Wuorinen, Nono, and Boulez is reinvented. At the same time, the music itself accomplishes little that cannot be found by throwing a dart anywhere in the New York New Music scene. Listening to these four works is a challenge for which a general listener isn't easily equipped, but if you are in the swim with New Music, each piece has a distinctive

contour and mood. CD 1 contains two selections from a project Reynolds calls *Sharespace* (i.e., two performers occupy a common space). *Dream Mirror* is scored for guitar and computer musician. As is often the case with New Music, the listener is asked not to listen in the usual way (themes, development, harmony, etc.) but instead to be immersed in a sound world. Various electronic timbres are juxtaposed with a free-form guitar solo, the proceedings sounding like pure *obligato*—I can't actually discern from the booklet how much Reynolds has composed and how much is left to the performers. The range of sounds moves from gentle guitar strumming to crashing and crunching from the electronica. *Shifting/Drifting* follows the same basic process, substituting a violin for the guitar (both works last around 22 minutes). The performer is the distinguished Irvine Arditti, founder and first violin of the Arditti Quartet. On his website, Reynolds offers an abstract conceptualization of the “ways” a violinist’s hands behave (his quotation marks), which borders on the obscurantist. Immediately thereafter, however, he describes the texture of *Shifting/Drifting* with helpful clarity. “The work is a metaphorical journey, from the violinist’s tentative responses to a distant, sonic fog, through an increasingly dynamic interplay between solo violinist and a computer-musician, who manages—in real time—four algorithmic processes.” This was the work that spoke to me most directly through its evocative atmosphere and a densely imagined but appealing soundscape.

CD 2 contains two works for multi-purpose performers. *Here and There*, lasting 33 minutes, calls for a “speaking percussionist.” The initial idea, which was proposed by Steven Schick, the performer here, was to combine a spoken text with percussion. The chosen words are by Samuel Becket (*Texts for Nothing IX*), and the format is structured, at its most basic, in three modes: solo voice, solo percussion, and combined voice and percussion. Reynolds succinctly states the core idea at work here. “There is a figure hoping to find ‘a way out, somewhere.’ I identified the commonplace phrase ‘here and there’ as the most fundamental pair. The ‘here’ identifying a local positioning that challenged and contained, while ‘there’ offered a liberating alternative.”

In practice, *Here and There* requires a professional percussionist faced with a wide array of conventional and new-sounding instruments, who in addition must recite Beckett like a professional actor. Schick fits only half the bill, the first half. He recites clearly and with sincerity, but Beckett’s literary quality counts for nearly nothing. I’m not so sure, after the fact, that playing around with a percussion set while reciting Beckett isn’t a caricature, something close to *avant garde* kitsch. The same strategy reappears in *Sketchbook* (for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) from 1985. The text, as the title indicates, consists of Reynolds’s selected extracts from the late Milan Kundera’s bestselling novel, *The Unbearable*

*Lightness of Being*. The soloist is a singer, in this case Liz Pearce, who also has an extensive background as an actress. She accompanies herself on piano (this part mostly consists of simple chords and short motifs). There is also an unspecified role for electronic processing, largely to augment Pearce's voice. Reynolds offers an ambitious range of themes for the piece, which is long at 25 minutes: "The themes treated are: I., The idea of eternal return; II., Seeing one's own "I", and III., The unbearable lightness of being." Pearce's singing is satisfying, but as a speaker she doesn't capture Kundera's literary tone, for me at least. The randomness of pitches and chords also does little to amplify the themes Reynolds describes. Beyond a mood of stilted theatricality, *Sketchbook* is hard to grasp or appreciate. I sometimes felt as if a bowl of word salad was being poured over my head. Probably I haven't done justice to a figure who is considered an important composer in what used to be called "advanced music." Clearly Reynolds deserves the esteem he has earned—at least one documentary has been made about him, and he was honored as a distinguished professor by the University of California San Deigo—but general listeners will have to tread lightly through this release. **Huntley Dent**

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