ARLENE SIERRA, VOL. 1
Cicada Shell, Birds and Insects, Book One
Surrounded Ground, Two Neruda Odes,
Colmena, Ballistae
BRIDGE 9343

ARLENE SIERRA, VOL. 2
GAME OF ATTRITION
BBC National Orchestra of Wales
Jac van Steen, conductor
Huw Watkins, piano
BRIDGE RECORDS.COM
ARLENE SIERRA
(b. 1970)

1) Moler (2012) (8:09)
   BBC National Orchestra of Wales
   Jac van Steen, conductor

2) I. Captive Nation (10:30)
3) II. Strategic Siege (10:51)
   Huw Watkins, piano
   BBC National Orchestra of Wales
   Jac van Steen, conductor

   BBC National Orchestra of Wales
   Jac van Steen, conductor

5) Aquilo (2001) (10:52)
   BBC National Orchestra of Wales
   Jac van Steen, conductor

This recording was made possible in part by grants from
the Aaron Copland Fund for Recorded Music.

Produced in association with BBC Radio 3 and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales

BBC Radio 3 and BBC National Orchestra of Wales word marks and logos are trade marks of
the British Broadcasting Corporation and used under license. BBC logo © BBC 1996.

For Bridge Records: Barbara Bersito, Douglas Holly
Doron Schächter, Casey Siu, Allegra Starobin, Robert Starobin

Brad Napoliello, webmaster
E-mail: Bridgerec@bridgerecords.com

Bridge Records, Inc.
200 Clinton Avenue
New Rochelle, NY 10801
www.BridgeRecords.com
To judge by the many subjects referenced in her compositions, Arlene Sierra is an omnivorous reader with a plethora of interests: Asian studies, evolutionary biology, entomology, game theory, siege engines, architecture, and medicine, to name just some of them. Her music is similarly challenging to pin down. A dissonant harmonic vocabulary more often associated with modernism exists side by side with poignant melodic writing. Ostinati, the calling card of minimalism, abound. That said, the composer seldom lets these repeating gestures repeat exactly; somehow they are always spun sideways.

Sierra is a storyteller; readings of her opera-in-process Faustine show a beguiling work that is eminently “stageworthy.” Nonetheless, when writing for instruments, she doesn’t seek to compose a passel of program music. Instead, these various ideas are the inspirational sparks for the musical materials she crafts and the ways in which they relate, be they small, layered gestures or the shapes of larger formal designs. From wind charts to the pulse rates of sleeping teeth grinders, the “road maps” to her compositional inventiveness are elusive and multifaceted, but always engaging.

Currently, the composer divides her time pretty evenly between large-scale projects and chamber works. Volume 1 of Bridge’s Sierra series (BRIDGE 9343) focuses on smaller ensembles; Volume 2 is comprised entirely of orchestra music. As one might suspect, the works on these two recordings share compositional and conceptual concerns; but there are differences worth noting as well. When asked to compare her work in these two genres and on the two discs, Sierra responds, “I would say my
orchestral and chamber music is united by an interest in the interaction between instruments and choirs, the sense of color that this interest brings out, and also the idea of larger forms being made up from smaller musical elements. Perhaps what might surprise those who have already listened to my first Bridge CD is the degree of atmosphere, accumulation and drive the orchestra brings out in my work. It’s one of the genres I love most, and in some ways I find it to be the most freeing and satisfying, compositionally.”

Volume 2 contains nearly a decade and a half of Sierra’s orchestral works. Aquilo was begun in 1999: Moler premiered in late 2012. Thus, listeners will be able to hear an evolution in Sierra’s approach to the orchestra. Sierra says, “The earliest work on the disc was my first orchestral piece and including it here is like bringing along an old friend. It wears its influences a bit more openly than my more recent work, but I’m still happy with the piece on its own terms. The other three compositions are a culmination of a lot of things, returning to and developing my language for orchestra after writing a lot of chamber music between 2001 and 2008.”

Aquilo is based on an ancient term for the Northeast wind. Other elements - such as fire and water - are also musically depicted. There is an elemental quality to Sierra’s music – small, often simple, building blocks are juxtaposed and layered to build a complex whole (in discussing Sierra’s work, the eminent music writer Paul Griffiths calls this technique “chaining”). One wonders whether the composer starts from these small gestures and builds from there or instead finds a larger idea that coalesces first and gets her hunting for appropriate sized “building blocks” to layer.
Sierra replies, “Sometimes both, but usually the larger idea gets the piece going. It’s like setting up a drama, or an experiment, deciding the parameters and then seeing how they play out. I make the setup pretty flexible to stay interested in (and surprised by) the outcome, keeping a sense of suspense as part of my compositional process.”

The piano concerto *Art of War* is one of several of Sierra’s pieces that incorporate tactical or game theory. (One can hear another work of bellicose temperament on Volume 1 – *Ballistae*, written in homage to the eponymous medieval siege engine.) The concerto’s first movement is subtitled “Captive Nation,” referencing a quotation by Sun Tzu. In it, the piano plays the role of an overconfident smaller nation “attacking” the orchestra; the soloist is outnumbered and subsequently surrounded and overwhelmed. In the second movement, subtitled “Strategic Siege,” Sierra describes the soloist’s role as changing from “instigator to saboteur.” The piano’s pinprick musical assaults gradually coerce the orchestra to modify its music to be more in accord with that played by the soloist. One is reminded of the relationships between soloist and orchestra in two of Elliott Carter’s concertos: the *Piano Concerto* (1965), in which the soloist is at times overwhelmed by a powerful orchestra, and *Dialogues* (2003), in which a chamber orchestra is pushed around by an ebullient pianist.

When asked what inspired her to write a work based on Sun Tzu’s writings, Sierra responds, “The US response to the September 11th attacks and subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 got me thinking a lot about how nations start wars and also how others manage to find ways to avoid war. I had been introduced to Sun Tzu’s writings when pursuing my BA in East Asian Studies at Oberlin, but when rereading *Art of War*...
in response to events in the news, I suddenly found unanticipated musical connections. So many scenarios described seemed like potential pieces, and they locked in very naturally with the way my technique was developing.”

In one of her most high-profile performances to date, in 2009 the New York Philharmonic premiered Game of Attrition as part of the inaugural season of their new music concert series Contact!. Mimicking the ways that similar species in nature compete for limited resources -- the natural selection process detailed by Charles Darwin in The Origin of a Species -- Sierra has various instruments in the orchestra “compete” by playing simultaneously in similar registers. One wonders whether orchestra members enjoy this Darwinian take on the ecology of the orchestra. Sierra says, “I love working with different orchestras and ensembles and seeing what they can bring to a piece. Invariably some performers are more interested in subtexts while others are all about the dots, but I’ve been delighted to have performers engage with the work on both fronts. It’s rewarding to me to have performers discover the depths, the true elemental aspects of a piece, whether they have any interest in musical subtexts or not.”

The most recent work on this recording, Moler references teeth-grinding. Sierra assures me that, when the deadline for a commission looms, this is something that composers should be mindful to avoid. “Teeth-grinding absolutely comes with the job!,” she says. The piece was written for the Seattle Symphony and part of the commission requested that the composer reference -- without specific quotations -- the Seattle music scene. Will we find some grunge rock if we listen carefully to Moler?
Sierra replies, “Yes, the Symphony commissioned Moler and asked for a connection to some aspect of the Seattle scene (which is very distant indeed from my roots in Miami and New York). I found out that the Alice in Chains song ‘Grind’ had a lyric about teeth-grinding, which sent me off reading scientific papers about the effects of Bruxism on a sleeper’s pulse and quality of rest. The findings included charts about relative pulses and grinding speeds, plenty of fantastic material for a piece. Aside from this concept, my one nod to the music of Alice in Chains was a decision to limit the entire piece to a steady 4/4, but this gets continually subverted in various ways. So teeth-grinding, yes; but grunge rock, no.”

- October 27, 2013

Jac van Steen was born in The Netherlands and studied orchestra and choir conducting at the Brabants Conservatory of Music. Since participating in the BBC Conductors Seminar in 1985, he is enjoying a very busy career, conducting the best orchestras in The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Germany, which included holding the post of Music Director and Chief Conductor of the National Ballet of The Netherlands, the orchestras of Bochum and Nuremberg, the Staatskapelle Weimar, The Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra of Dortmund (Germany) Musikkollegium Winterthur (Switzerland) and Principle Guest Conductor for

- Composer Christian Carey has published articles and reviews in Perspectives of New Music, Intégral, Musical America, and Tempo. The Boston Symphony, American Composers Orchestra, Lincoln Center, Merkin Hall, and Trinity Wall Street Church have commissioned him to write program essays. He teaches at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey.

JAC VAN STEEN

tival. Watkins was named winner of the Vocal Award at the 2011 British Composer Awards for his Five Larkin Songs which he premiered with Carolyn Sampson at the 2010 Weekend of English Song in Ludlow. His most recent orchestral work was a Violin Concerto for Alina Ibragimova, commissioned at her request by the BBC and premiered during the 2010 BBC Proms by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Edward Gardner. A disc of his music was released by NMC in 2012.
ARLENE SIERRA

An American composer based in London, Arlene Sierra writes music that takes its impetus from rich sources including military strategy and game theory, Darwinian evolution, and the natural world. The Guardian describes her work as having "its own character, in which historical and contemporary influences are fused into a highly flexible and distinctive style". While Time Out New York describes it as "spry, savage, sly and seductive." Performers include the Tokyo Philharmonic, the London Sinfonietta, New York City Opera VOX, ICE, Psappha, Lontano, the New Juilliard Ensemble, the Schubert Ensemble, and many others. Important commissions include Game of Attrition – New York Philharmonic, Art of War – BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Cicada Shell - Ralph Vaughan Williams Trust, Insects in Amber – Cheltenham Music Festival, Neruda Settings – Tanglewood Music Festival, Hand Mit Ringen – Huddersfield Music Festival, and Moler – Seattle Symphony. Sierra gained international recognition when she first orchestrated work. Aquilo was awarded the 2001 Takemitsu Prize. Subsequent awards have included the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Classical Recording Foundation Composer of the Year, a PRS New Music award, and many others. Sierra has gained commissions from important institutions and musicians, including the 2001 Takemitsu Prize. She has performed with major orchestras and ensembles around the world, and has received critical acclaim for her innovative and expressive compositions.

HUW WATKINS

Huw Watkins was born in Wales in 1976 and studied piano with Peter Lawson at Chetham's School of Music and composition with Robin Holloway, Alexander Goehr and Julian Anderson at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music. He was awarded the RCM's Constant and Kit Lambert Junior Fellowship in 2001 and now teaches composition there.

Huw Watkins is in great demand as composer and pianist. He is regularly heard on Radio Three, both as a soloist and chamber musician. He has a strong commitment to the performance of new music, and has given premieres of works by Alexander Goehr, Peter Maxwell Davies and Michael Zev Gordon. He has performed concerts with BBC SO, London Sinfonietta and BBCNOW, with whom he gave the first performance of his own Piano Concerto in 2002. His recordings include Thomas Adès's song cycle The Lover in Winter with the countertenor Robin Blaze for EMI Classics and Alexander Goehr's Symmetry Disorders Reach for Wergo in 2007. Recordings of Mendelssohn and Martinu sonatas for cello and piano with his brother, Paul Watkins, have been released on Chandos.

Huw Watkins was Featured Composer at the 2009 Presteigne Festival of Music and the Arts, and Composer in Residence at both the 2011 Heimbach Festival (at the invitation of Lars Vogt) and Nürnberg Fest.
Cardiff, and also performs a season of concerts in Swansea. The Orchestra performs annually at the BBC Proms in London, and also appears biennially at BBC Cardiff Singer of the World.

Running parallel to the main season, the integral work of the BBC NOW Education and Community Outreach team has included the creation of a DVD resource pack distributed to every primary and special school in Wales and the development of a new innovative concert format designed for adults and children who are Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing.

The Orchestra's home is BBC Hoddinott Hall, a specially designed dual-purpose concert hall and recording studio based in the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff Bay. As well as recording studio sessions and concerts for BBC Radio 3, it enjoys close working relationships with television programme-makers, including Doctor Who for BBC Cymru Wales and the BBC's Natural History Unit, most notably with composer Nitin Sawhney for the *Human Planet* series.

The Orchestra also records highly regarded, often award-winning CDs, including the 2011 Grammy nominated *Ivanhoe* by Arthur Sullivan; the critically acclaimed cycle of Stravinsky's three scores for Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, conducted by Thierry Fischer; a live recording of Havergal Brian’s *Gothic Symphony*, performed at the BBC Proms 2011 with the BBC Concert Orchestra; and David Matthews’ Symphonies 2 and 6, which won Premiere Recording BBC Music Magazine Award 2011.

Sierra’s catalogue includes works ranging from song cycles Streets and Rivers and Neruda Settings to operas Faustine and Cuatro Corridos. Chamber works include the piano album Birds and Insects, two piano trios Truel and Butterflies Remember a Mountain, ensemble works Ballistae, Cicada Shell and Colmena, and a new series of scores to Maya Deren films. Urban Birds, for three pianos with electronics, percussion and sampled birdsong, has been featured by BBC News and has performances scheduled for London’s South Bank Centre and the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in 2014.

Dr Sierra is Senior Lecturer and Director of the MMus in Composition and Postgraduate Taught Programmes at Cardiff University School of Music. A sought-after teacher and lecturer, her guest professorships and master classes have included Eastman School of Music, Bowdoin International Music Festival, Yonsei University (Seoul, South Korea), Cambridge University, and Kings College London.

Born in Miami to a family of New Yorkers, Arlene Sierra is a graduate of Oberlin College-Conservatory, Yale School of Music and the University of Michigan. Her principal teachers were Martin Bresnick, Michael Daugherty and Jacob Druckman; she also worked with Betsy Jolas and Dominique Troncin at Fontainebleau, and Paul-Heinz Dittrich in Berlin. At Tanglewood, Aldeburgh, and Dartington she studied with Louis Andriessen, Magnus Lindberg, Colin Matthews, and Judith Weir.
BBC National Orchestra of Wales occupies a special role as both a broadcast orchestra and the national symphony orchestra of Wales, and is supported by the Arts Council of Wales.

Led by Principal Conductor Thomas Søndergård, alongside Conductor Laureate Tadaaki Otaka the Orchestra has won considerable critical and audience acclaim over the years. With an outstanding ability to refresh core repertoire, the Orchestra is proud of its adventurous programming and continually demonstrates artistic excellence in new or rarely performed works. As part of this commitment to contemporary music, the Orchestra appointed Mark Bowden as Resident Composer in June 2011, alongside the continuing relationship with Composer-in-Association Simon Holt.

BBC National Orchestra of Wales is Orchestra-in-Residence at St David’s Hall,