

CRITICAL COMMENTARY: Excerpts from reviews of Richard Festinger's music.

"Festinger's *A Serenade for Six* proved festive, coalescing fluttering, silvery streamers with multicolored fog and dancing, rhythmic juice. The whole was complicated, yet decorative and merry, a musical garland."

- Timothy Mangan, Los Angeles Times

"... Festinger's *Head Over Heels* offered a cat-and-mouse game... The piece was catchy and full of verve, something to look forward to hearing again."

- Marilyn Tucker, San Francisco Chronicle

"If you follow contemporary American music, you'll want to investigate this collection of eclectic, high-quality composing and outstanding playing. I...was fascinated by Richard Festinger's [*Septet's*] 'little-orchestra' approach to the ensemble..."

- American Record Guide

"Festinger's classical sensibilities are combined with his usual knack for invention... This is music that sparkles in many directions and on many levels... I have rarely encountered a contemporary piece that invokes such delight... *A Serenade for Six* is a virtuoso tour de force... as gratifying to perform as it is to listen to."

- Andrew Rindfleisch, MLA Notes

"... a long spun-out line, stiffened here and there by motoric figures or thinning out into icy tremolandos, took one eventfully from here to there."

- Richard Buell, Boston Globe

"Von Feiertagen und Alltagsgeschäft - Ein bildnerisches Pendant zu Richard Wagners „unendlicher Melodie“, die auch und vor allem den Komponisten Richard Festinger inspiriert. Im Studio III kann man ab 14 Uhr sein kompositorisches Arbeiten am Computer mitverfolgen. Hörbeispiele inbegriffen. Seine Werke sind beeinflusst von Wagner, den expressionistischen Farben eines Arnold Schönbergs – und von Jazz. „That’s what I came from,“ gesteht der Professor of Musik an der San Francisco State University."

- Der Neue Tag (Regensburg)

"...this is great stuff. Well played and recorded recent works by this 52 year-old California based composer. Fully chromatic with a nice variety of forces, the music is both thoughtful and fun, not gimmicky or obscure. *Trigonometry* for flute, clarinet, and piano uses a particularly lovely combination of reflective voices. The quartet's rhythms and syncopations reflect Festinger's youth as a jazz performer. Impressive on first listening but revealing subtle fantasy, joy, and mystery on repeated exposure."

- Lee Hyde, Amazon.com

"Richard Festinger's *Construction in Metal and Wood*, a virtuosic duo for piano and percussion, veered from rambunctious to contemplative."

- Vivien Schweitzer, New York Times

"Fortunately, Festinger is part of the solution, not the problem... In 1984 he founded Earplay, a group that champions the creation and performance of new chamber music in the Bay Area."

- Contra Costa Sun

“Festinger’s... classically-shaped, three-movement *Serenade* spins out kaleidoscopic but transparent contrapuntal elaborations (and, in the lovely slow movement, lyrical lines) with a lapidary craftsmanship and expressive warmth... The *Serenade*’s delicacy and nuance are wonderfully set off by a thrilling final toccata propelled along by jazz-derived rhythmic asymmetries. This splendid work is, for me, the high spot of a very fine program.”

- American Record Guide

"Festinger's *After Blue* is a cleverly designed showcase... full of hairpin turns and intricate linear puzzlework...in a language that alternately recalls Elliott Carter and Frank Zappa."

- Josef Woodard, Los Angeles Times

“...a composer of lesser sensibility than Mr. Festinger could have drowned such words in a soupy line... Instead, he has kept a delicate balance between the lusty emotions of physical love and the subtle variety of colors such emotions produce... intent on quietly luminous mood changes.”

- New Music Connoisseur

“Richard Festinger's *From the Beginning* (String Quartet No.2), a world premiere, found this composer working at a very high level in a work marked by intelligence, focused clarity and expressive depth. The first of two movements, very slow and deeply beautiful, employed muted melodic fragments as the basis for brief imitative episodes... with tremolos creating momentum to support brief, pointed lines above them, the lyrical figures of the opening movement gave way to tighter, more chromatic lines, as the ensemble writing sustained the initial quality of a complex, thoughtful dialogue at a faster pace.”

- Benjamin Frandzel, San Francisco Classical Voice

"[*Violuminescence*] is full of interesting effects -- unusual groupings of violin with solo instruments or groups of instruments... But it is more than a string of effects; it is music, colorful, closely argued, dramatic and interesting."

- Richard Dyer, Boston Globe

“Artisti, la collina della creatività: A Genova da tutto il mondo per trovare insieme l’ispirazione - E’ Richard Festinger, un noto compositore di origine polacca e di nazionalità statunitense. Progetto: composizione di un quintetto per l’Empyrean Ensemble dell’Università di California. «Il gioco dell’immaginazione - dice - e simile per tutte le arti, per questo ritengo stimolante poter scambiare idee con gli scrittori e con i pittori». Festinger lavora dalle nove del mattino, rigorosamente al computer («da cinque anni, per comporre ho buttato la matita») fino al 17. Poi: passeggiata, cena, conversazione e in serata riprende il lavoro. Il paesaggio ligure, lontano dai rumori di San Francisco, lo aiuta: «Somiglia alla California, ma ha qualcosa di più drammatico, insomma l’ideale». I suoi colleghi italiani saranno contenti di saperlo.”

- Corriere della Sera (Milano), 29 Ottobre 2004

“After a surprisingly consonant introduction, Richard Festinger’s *A Serenade for Six* became predominantly prickly and pointillistic in texture and chattery in line, with a cogitating slow movement at its center.”

- Buffalo News

“Richard Festinger’s *Octet*, played Monday night by the expert ensemble Parnassus, was deft and pretty.”

- New York Times

"*Crossfire*... arms the players with parallel percussion batteries and exploits the contrast between pitched and unpitched instruments. The sound was intriguing..."

- Allan Ulrich, San Francisco Chronicle

“The program notes referred to the Alexander Quartet’s ‘refined and elegant style’... and surely this phrase epitomizes the work as a whole... [Festinger’s] *String Quartet* encompasses the tradition – both classical and modern – of its medium, and engages the ear with a taut, athletic lyricism evocative of the whole of that tradition.”

- Twentieth Century Music

“Here now is a most welcome disc... devoted entirely to the chamber music of this California-based composer... The music... is complex and prismatic but transparent... ever managing to find a balance between delicacy and introspection on the one hand and rhythmic vivacity on the other... Festinger (unlike far too many of his contemporaries) never resorts to gimmicks... His music remains unsullied and uncompromising, speaking directly to the hearts of those who care to listen.”

- American Record Guide

“A *Serenade for Six* and *Peripeteia* both belong to what I consider the mainstream late-20th-century “modern” style of chamber music. A clarinet frill of 13 or so quick notes followed by a forte-piano, dissonant long note; a low-register cluster; another brief shriek throwing together random quick notes, deliberately not in a key; an off-beat, clipped Bartók pizzicato or two; a ponticello murmur answered by a trill; detached tremolos passed around... enjoy this type of music by closing your eyes, following the interesting interactions of musical shapes and colors, and sensing the abstract audio drama that unfolds.”

- Beeri Moalem, San Francisco Classical Voice

“Richard Festinger’s selectivity and focus on the core idea similarly produced the finest of the eight songs in his cycle *Letters and the Weather of Six Mornings* (poems by Jane Cooper). Festinger’s music found its own way of extending the elegant character of Cooper’s concentrated poems while escaping the regularity of their design... revealing a touching sensitivity.”

- Robert Commanday, San Francisco Chronicle

“Richard Festinger's *Crossfire*, a premiere, received a performance of high virtuosity and commitment from Dan Kennedy and William Winant. The piece demanded no less, with its fiery passagework and finely detailed, intricate exchanges between the players. This work has many strongly appealing qualities: it's both complex and highly kinetic, sensitive to pure sound and imbued with forward momentum.”

- Benjamin Frandzel, San Francisco Classical Voice

“*Variations for Piano*... is a challenging and rewarding piece for pianists with nimble fingers and agile imaginations... Festinger proceeds with a feeling of spontaneity... a panorama of moods, styles, shapes, figurations... underlying rhythmic play coupled with a vocal feeling for long line lends these variations an attractive point of fascination.”

- Piano and Keyboard

“Richard Festinger’s *Matin*... with its quadrophonic tape, made intriguing, even sensual forays into the soundscape... Nothing else Monday reached this level of thought complexity.”

- Donna Perlmutter, Los Angeles Times

“Richard Festinger’s *Trionometry* was simply breathtaking... This technically demanding tour de force begins with a delicate exposition which... eventually explodes into a contrapuntal argument of grandiose proportions... like a multi-stage rocket that – ignoring gravity – traverses the earth’s atmosphere. Bravo!”

- Twentieth Century Music

“Richard Festinger’s... recently published *Impromptu* is a ... work whose melodic lines have a quasi-improvisatory quality about them... The rhythms, meters and dynamics shift rapidly in the opening section before changing to a majestic character... All in all, this is an attractive, virtuoso work.”

- MLA Notes

“Richard Festinger’s *Ontogenesis* for quintet was music in constant change, the texture open, the piano playing a dominant part. It had an expressive melodic impulse that seemed to spring from vocal utterance, and the sound was fresh.”

- Robert Commanday, San Francisco Chronicle

“*From the Beginning*, compellingly performed by the young Afiara Quartet, progresses captivatingly from ethereal desolation to swarming excitement.”

- Beeri Moalem, San Francisco Classical Voice

“Hochsitze, schwer zu spielen Musik, Malerei mit Folien: Richard Festinger und Régis Labatut zu Gast im Künstlerhaus II / Sonntag offene Studios - Denkste! Welche Klasse der Mann hat, bewies er kurz darauf per Tonkassette. Eine CD-Einspielung seines Kammermusikwerks „Peripeteia“ für Klarinette, Violine und Violoncello entpuppte sich als virtuos konstruiertes, extreme abwechslungsreiches und spannendes Stück. Es gehe ihm darum, sagt er, dass seine Musik jederzeit die Richtung wechseln könne, das immer etwas neues, unerwartetes kommt, es sich dann aber so anhöre, als wäre diese neue Wendung die natürlichste Sache von der Welt. „Das ist natürlich eine sehr, sehr schwer zu spielende Musik“, gesteht er, sagt aber auch mit einem Augenzwinkern: „Ich glaube, dass all die leichten Stücke schon geschrieben sind.“ Festinger legt Wert auf Klangfarbenwechsel, auf ein differenziertes Timbre und hat auch kein Problem damit, wenn man ihm sagt, dass sein Stück schon sehr Deutsche klinge. „Ja, sehr kontrapunktig“, stimmt er überein. Festinger lehrt an der „San Francisco State University“ als Professor für Komposition. Seine Stücke wurden bereits in ganz Amerika, in Europa und Asien gespielt. Ursprünglich kommt er vom Jazz. Da will er auch wieder hin, sagt er – wenn er in Rente ist.”

- Mittelbayerische Zeitung (Nürnberg)

“Richard Festinger’s *Impromptu*... was performed by Peter Josheff, clarinet, and Karen Rosenak, piano. From its lyrical opening through an exuberant contrapuntal exchange, the use of similar motivic materials in each instrument kept the listener riveted to the dialog. Moods alternated swiftly and smoothly, captivating the attention with beauty of design and superb craftsmanship...”

- Janet Livingstone, The Montclarion

“Composer Richard Festinger projects a sweeping strength in his music while managing to retain an enticing intimacy. With a career that began in small jazz clubs more than 30 years ago, Festinger has gained international recognition for accomplishments ranging from the theoretical to the electronically avant-garde. Tonight at the Guggenheim Museum of Art he premieres several of his original compositions, which are performed by soprano Amy Burton and the Group for Contemporary Music. The works are set to texts by author Denis Johnson, whose prose evokes visceral imagery with an intoxicating economy of words. This collaboration should exert a powerful artistic force.”

- FLAVORPILL, <http://flavorpill.com/newyork>

“Richard Festinger a commencé à se faire connaître en tant que compositeur au début des années 80. Il était à cette époque directeur et membre fondateur du Earplay Ensemble for Contemporary American Music de San Francisco, ensemble de renommée nationale. Avant de se consacrer à la composition, il a fondé plusieurs ensemble de jazz, une expérience qui a eu une profonde influence sur son style de composition. Aujourd'hui, sa musique a été donnée sur trois continents: aux Etats-Unis, en Europe et en Asie.”

- Musique nouvelle en liberté (Paris), www.mnl-paris.com

“Following... were settings by Richard Festinger, titled *The Locust Tree*, to three poems by William Carlos Williams. Williams’ objectivist text, with its characteristic one or two words per line, was well-matched by a syllabic text-setting that emphasized the power of each individual word of the poem. Through contrasts in color, range, and dynamics, Festinger drew my attention to the way in which each of Williams’ words played a role in shaping the meaning of the poem.”

- Alexander Kahn, San Francisco Classical Voice

“In *Legerdemain*, common understanding of rhythm is thrown into question, hovering at a tantalizing boundary between groovy and pulse-free. Daniel Kennedy handled the improvised setup of bongos, dumbeks, and a frame drum like a six-armed Indian god, commanding the instruments with precision and power.”

- Beeri Moalem, San Francisco Classical Voice

“Festinger’s *Diary of a Journey* uses a basic arch form: a quiet, slow prelude before a more dramatic section before returning to the mood of the opening. It’s a solidly crafted piece in what I take to be soft-core serial style. There was a certain epic quality to this work, in which sheer craftsmanship reached exceptional levels.”

- Heuwell Tircuit, SF Classical Voice, 2/12/08

“Move over Haydn! Richard Festinger, composer and distinguished Professor of Music Composition at San Francisco State University, presents a recording of five chamber works... featuring the Naumburg award-winning New Millennium Ensemble [Bridge Records 9245]... [Festinger] approaches composition with the intellectual curiosity of an academic, the heart of a romantic, and the depth of one totally immersed in the art...[the music] is neatly structured and rich in counterpoint and rhythmic intricacy... [*Variations for Piano*] culls the intricacy of Liszt’s *Les Préludes* and the spaciousness of Webern’s piano works... [it is] perfectly executed, well-crafted music.... *Construction en metal et bois* for piano and percussion pushes the boundaries of chamber music... Here Festinger gives us his best and the demanding challenges are met with equal passion. Margaret Kampmeier and John Ferrari, like two fighter pilots, perform at lightning speed and with the intensity of a tarantella.... Festinger’s music, like a Mark Rothko painting, is beautiful, even on the surface. And discovering what’s beneath makes it rewarding.”

- Karen Moorman, Classical Voice of North Carolina, 6/11/08

“*From the Beginning*, compellingly performed by the young Afiara Quartet, progresses captivately from ethereal desolation to swarming excitement.”

- Beeri Moalem, San Francisco Classical Voice

“Richard Festinger’s *Equinox* for clarinet and chamber orchestra received its premiere at this series of concerts [San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, February 6-8, 2009, Herbst Theater]. Festinger, a music professor at San Francisco State University... is the same age as Copland’s concerto, and he modeled his work on its great predecessor.... The differences, though, are significant. Festinger’s slow opening movement has faster passages, which Copland’s lacks; and his cadenza is purely contemplative... Festinger writes in an atonal idiom, striving for a lyrical sound similar to Alban Berg’s... Varying textures and patterns for different instruments give variety and interest to the strings. Rhythmic figures were passed around and elaborated on. [Clarinet soloist Dimitri] Ashkenazy introduced one that was promptly picked up by solo violin, then viola, then harp and vibraphone. Then the clarinet extracted a different one from the running string accompaniment. Such moments are a delight to the intellectual ear.”

- David Bratman, San Francisco Classical Voice

“*Insect Voices*, for soprano, flute, violin, cello, percussion, and recorded sound, features sound samples of insect chirps... The accompanying instruments imitated the insects’ sounds with surprisingly literal accuracy. It was a fun, interesting, and at times moving reflection on those highly musical natural sounds, combined with apt poetry selections from the United States and the Far East.”

- Beeri Moalem, San Francisco Classical Voice