



spark

Common Sense Composers' Collective
Friction Quartet

1	Marc Mellits	V: Five <i>(from String Quartet No. 3: Tapas)</i>	4:21
2	Dan Becker	Lockdown	6:53
3	John Halle	Sphere('s)	5:21
4	Belinda Reynolds	Open	7:19
	Melissa Hui	Map of Reality	(15:00)
5		I	3:25
6		II	3:52
7		III	2:28
8		IV	3:07
9		V	2:09
10	Ed Harsh	Trill	10:37
	Carolyn Yarnell	Monographs	(13:33)
11		1. <i>Hiko</i>	6:16
12		2. <i>Angel on a Bridge</i>	7:14
13	Randall Woolf	No Luck, No Happiness	4:24

—67:28—

Friction Quartet:

Kevin Rogers & Otis Harriel, violins;
Taija Warbelow, viola; Doug Machiz, cello

Call me an *amicus curiae*, a friend of the court. I have known a couple of members of the Common Sense Composers' Collective since their undergraduate days at Berkeley over thirty years ago, and have become friendly with several of the others. All of them know me as a now venerable music historian who has challenged the utopias and teleologies that dominated academic music study in a manner that now middle-aged composers found oppressive while at school. They thought I might be a sympathetic commentator on their work, and they were right. I admire anyone's commitment to common sense, although we all have our own definitions of it.

Dan Becker says the CSCC takes it the way Thomas Paine meant it in 1776. That chimes with the rebellious spirit that motivated their banding together. Ordinarily, common sense means sound practical judgment. That chimes, too, since the group's primary purpose was strategic—getting their music played and paid for by persuading donors to enable willing performers to commission pieces from the lot of them. But I am partial to another sense of common sense: the one that goes back to the origins of aesthetic theory in the work of Immanuel Kant, for whom *sensus communis* meant the shared faculty of judgment that allowed for intersubjective consensus, as if comparing our own judgment “with the collective Reason of humanity.” Artists (say, musicians) who believe in that will seek, rather than reject, common ground with observers (say, listeners). The revival of that sympathetic bond was called postmodernism for a while, but now it simply seems to be the twenty-first-century aesthetic.

The compositions recorded here seek that link in different ways. Marc Mellits's “Five” displays the traditional earmarks of a lullaby, thus creating through metaphor an affecting mood of (maternal?) tenderness. The generic resonance does for this abstractly titled piece (the fifth of eight in the composer's “Tapas” cycle) what poetic titles do for the other pieces in the program. Dan Becker's “Lockdown” evokes prisons to lend emotional resonance to its tightly, even rigidly coordinated hockets. Like its companions, Becker's piece creates and sustains a distinctive texture, which the title helps characterize and fix in memory.

The relationship is not always straightforward. The bracketed apostrophe in John Halle's “Sphere[']s” suggests a *double entendre*. Without it the word obviously refers to the round-and-roundness of endlessly repeated phrases, their constantly fluctuating lengths suggesting the multiple perspectives of solid objects in space. With it, we may be prompted to recall Thelonius Monk's middle name. Halle confesses that the piece was an attempt to exorcise a couple of ear worms he had picked up from Monk's “Straight No Chaser” and “Brilliant Corners.” (Monk himself seems to have been contending with an ear worm from Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*.)

Belinda Reynolds's title, "Open," is a teaser. An adjective? A verb? If a verb, infinitive or imperative? The composer, asked, withheld assistance. Schumann, the master of enigmatic titles, would have approved. Titles, he felt, were invitations to listeners to engage, but explicit titles limited their freedom of engagement. "Open," without further qualifiers, leaves things, well, open. Melissa Hui was similarly reluctant to stipulate. Titles can create mystery; but Hui's "Map of Reality" is an especially clear example of texture-based composition. Its five movements are, in effect, five contrasted textures, specified not in conventional notation but in fairly detailed prose descriptions (somewhat amplified by rhythmic symbols) which the performers are asked to convert into musical sounds. There are infinite ways of realizing the sounds within the terms of the descriptions, but the resulting textures, having been vividly imagined by the composer, describe (map?) a vivid progression of moods.

Ed Harsh's "Trill," as it unfolds, reminds us that a trill is a special kind of oscillation. Oscillations can have a multifarious import, suggestive not only of smooth motion but, when slow and emphatic, of frustration. Or so it seemed to me. Does the composer agree? I dare not ask. Or rather, I insist on my right to construe. Kant's contemporary, Friedrich Schiller, wrote that "the real and express content that the poet puts in his work remains always finite; the possible content that he allows us to contribute is an infinite quality." Carolyn Yarnell's "Hiko" has a made-up title, she says, contrived to evoke the personality of the conceptual artist Mary Ellen Carroll—"unusual, spare, consistent and gracefully beautiful." But the word also happens to be the name of a celebrated Los Angeles sushi restaurant. Yarnell's piece, distinctively textured as ever, is played pizzicato, the instruments mostly in ghostly unison. Can I be blamed for thinking of koto music? Those are the risks one runs when one exposes one's work to a beholder's imagination. But of course a sympathetic response is worth more than a correct answer. As Schumann, Schiller and Yarnell would all agree, my reaction to her work is not disobedient but, rather, enriched by my particular frame of reference, which the composer could not predict.

Or not. The title of Randall Woolf's "No Luck, No Happiness" blithely contradicts the mood the music inescapably evokes with its exuberantly syncopated dance rhythms over a prerecorded drum-machine and turntable accompaniment. Reaction to it cannot be "obedient." Yet apparent incongruity also invites imaginative participation. The "core values" enunciated in CSCC's mission statement, "community and collaboration," apply equally to its members, who have sought mutual benefit from their association, and to the listeners who cooperate in creating a meaningful experience.

— Richard Taruskin

About Spark

The pieces contained on SPARK were originally developed in 2010 in collaboration with the Afara and Cecilia String Quartets and premiered at the Banff Centre. These two ensembles will always remain the honored 'birth parents' of this set of pieces. A new collaborative dynamic was later formed with the Friction Quartet. With months spent breathing new life into these works, it's fair to say that Friction has become the loving 'adoptive parents' of these compositions. The performances on this disc are remarkable, all recorded under the keen and watchful eyes (and ears) of Judy Sherman and Leslie Ann Jones.

About Common Sense

The Common Sense Composers' Collective is now in its third decade. So far, as a group, we've completed 70+ new works, released four compact discs, and produced five New Music Marathons (named Opus415) in the San Francisco Bay Area. The mission of Common Sense has always held as its core values community and collaboration. We workshop and evolve our compositions through a process that, at the time of our founding in 1993, was seen more in the theater and dance worlds than in new classical music. It's to the benefit of all that this collective approach has become much more common in the decades following.

CommonSenseComposers.org

About Friction

Friction Quartet is an Oakland-based string quartet that exists to modernize the chamber music experience and expand the string quartet repertoire. They achieve this mission by commissioning new works, curating imaginative programs, collaborating with artists, and presenting interactive educational outreach. They have commissioned 43 works for string quartet and premiered over 80 works throughout the United States, Canada, and Denmark.

FrictionQuartet.com

Producer: Judith Sherman

Engineer: Leslie Ann Jones

Assistant engineer: Robert Gatley

Editing/mastering assistant: Jeanne Velonis

Executive Producer: Dan Becker

“No Luck, No Happiness” mixed by Sheldon Steiger

Cover painting by Carolyn Yarnell

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