



David Liptak
CONSTELLATIONS

Concerto for Piano and Percussion Orchestra (2018)

Eunmi Ko, piano

McCormick Percussion Group, Robert McCormick, conductor

- 1 Dark and mysterious 7:59
- 2 Flowing, but not too fast 7:20
- 3 Rapid and light 6:15

Constellations (2010)

Eunmi Ko, piano

- 4 Orion 5:46
- 5 Canis Major and Canis Minor 2:40
- 6 Cygnus 4:43
- 7 Cassiopeia 3:54
- 8 Vulpecula 7:37
- 9 Colomba 2:22
- 10 Argo Navis 5:45
- 11 Lyra 4:30
- 12 Aquila 2:23

Total: 61:17



© David Liptak. All Rights Reserved, 2019.
innova® Recordings is the label of the
American Composers Forum.
innova.mu dliptak.com



The works on this album constitute two major pieces by composer David Liptak that feature the piano, Liptak's native instrument. The composer's personality is intimately tied to the physicality of the instrument—Liptak's early career was as a composer/pianist—and the sound and feel of the piano underlie his compositional ideas. Written eight years apart, *Constellations* (2010) is a collection of nine pieces for solo piano while the *Concerto for Piano and Percussion Orchestra* (2018) features the piano and an ensemble of six percussionists. Side by side, the pieces offer a rich portrait of Liptak's imagination for his instrument, as the music is filled with diverse characters, from the playful and mercurial to the resonant and amorphous. There are connections between the pieces; for example, an oscillating perfect fourth figure can be found in both "Vulpecula" (The Fox) and the first movement of the concerto. But it's also rewarding to listen for differences between the works: *Constellations* is a set of character pieces with attached extramusical meanings, while the *Concerto* is abstract concert music. The pianist Eunmi Ko plays these works with grace and imagination, and according to the composer, is a perfect match for this music.

At first glance, the *Concerto*, written for Ms. Ko and percussionist Robert McCormick, appears to satisfy many of the expected conventions of that genre. It's in three movements, sets a soloist against an ensemble, and seems to follow a fast-slow-fast paradigm. But a quick look into the work reveals that the situation is

more complicated, as the work dialogues with its inherited form in a number of creative ways. For instance, the second movement does begin with an introspective, quiet pattern that suggests a slow movement, but gives way to one of the most raucous, jazzy sections of the whole work, and later features an extended cadenza for solo piano, which normally appears towards the end of a first movement. Likewise, the final movement begins with the character marking "Rapid and light," implying a typical scherzando character, but a written-out ritardando quickly slows the music to a moment of reflection. The movement proceeds in this manner, such that the opening character, which returns, is consistently questioned. And these moments of reflection foreshadow the end, as the movement, and piece, eventually evaporates into the air.

The relationship of the piano to the "orchestra" is particularly noteworthy. Unlike a traditional concerto, the percussion ensemble doesn't literally echo the piano's material in ritornello passages. Rather, Liptak uses the orchestra, which is comprised of wood and metal pitched instruments, unpitched instruments, drums, and gongs, to suggest various functions; at different times, the orchestra approximates the piano's music, creates a sonic backdrop, augments the piano's activities, and provides counterpoint to the soloist.

The first movement, marked "Dark and mysterious," for example, begins with a cloud of sustained sounds, as the piano, with

pedal down, reiterates a low, gong-like bass note along with quiet bass drum rolls and an actual gong (tam-tam), creating a resonant super instrument. A similar type of cooperation occurs later in the movement, when light, playful music in the piano is intermingled with interjections from temple blocks and a guiro. On the other hand, in the second movement, the percussion ensemble offers a contrasting comment on the piano's opening, following quiet, sustained patterns with shaky maracas, glockenspiel, and temple blocks (the glockenspiel echoes the piano's music while the other instruments are texturally other). In many respects, the percussion orchestra represents a deconstructed piano, the temple blocks, for example, symbolizing attacks, and the tam-tam symbolizing the resonance of a sustained note or chord. Liptak mixes these ingredients in ways that complement and contrast with the piano writing throughout the piece.

Constellations, composed between April and October 2010 for pianist Zuzanna Szewczyk, is a set of nine meticulously crafted character pieces for solo piano. The composer writes in his working notes that they are like Schumann's *Kreisleriana* in that they are a limited collection of extended pieces (rather than shorter pieces, such as preludes, for example). Named after lesser known constellations—the composer avoids those named after the zodiac—the pieces sparkle with bright energy and constant invention. And yet, the stars are only one influence on the music, as the work is imbued with a constellation of other meanings, including

Greek mythology, Schumann's music, and associations with the pianist to whom they are dedicated ("Canis Major and Canis Minor" for example, was inspired in part by Zuzanna's dogs).

This network of meanings can be found in the music in a variety of ways. In the aforementioned "Canis Major and Canis Minor," which is unique in its referencing two constellations, the starry formations have a direct impact on the musical materials. Taking a cue from the constellations' names, Liptak uses major and minor triads in playful and unconventional combinations to create nervous, spiky textures as well as contrasting legato, arpeggio lines (do these contrasting triads and textures represent the two dogs?). The major triad is a representation of Sirius, the "dog star," one of the brightest in the sky, and a member of Canis Major. The opening loud sonority is made up of a major chord in the L.H. set a tritone and several octaves down from a minor chord in the R.H., representing both stars, and perhaps also depicting the dogs barking in unison before tumbling over each other in active play.

The Greek myths are also represented in the music. In "Columba" (The Dove) Liptak references the rocky formations at the opening to the black sea, which would crash together every time a ship tried to sail through them. Jason, who meant to do just that, sent a dove through the rocks first, causing them to close, and when they reopened, Jason sailed safely through (and the dove survived, losing only a

few feathers). According to Liptak's composition notes, these clashing rocks are depicted in "Columba" in mm. 12-17, though this representation is poetically quiet, as if we are listening from a great distance.

In other pieces the mythology is more veiled and incidental. In "Cassiopeia," it is the bright, starry energy that predominates through the constant 16th notes that unfold in a highly articulated and unpredictable manner, as seemingly random notes leap out of the texture into different registers. It was only towards the end of composing the piece that the composer found a way to associate the myth with the music: as these sunburst notes outshine their neighbors, Cassiopeia and Andromeda outshone those they had to defeat to be together, including Andromeda's parents.

The nine pieces of *Constellations* are arranged in three groups, and each group includes a representation of a Greek mythological figure or his symbol ("Cassiopeia," "Argo Navis" - for Jason, and "Lyra" - for Orpheus), a hunter ("Orion," "Vulpecula," and "Canis Major and Canis Minor" - the companion dogs of Orion), and a bird ("Cygnus," "Columba," and "Aquila"). Each set ends with a bird piece, and each of the bird pieces contains a reference to a work by Schumann: "Cygnus" quotes a short passage from the first piece in *Kreisleriana*, "Columba" includes a "footnote" quotation of "Vogel als Prophet" from *Waldszenen*, and there is a disguised quotation of "Des Abends" from the *Fantasy Pieces*, op. 12, in "Aquila."

Mythology and fantasy swirl together in this heady mix for any listener looking for such meanings. But there are equal delights waiting to be had for the listener who simply attends to the music on its own terms. "Orion" starts as a counterpoint of opposites: slow moving, quiet bass notes create a sensation of great depth and space, against which stars twinkle in short bursting figurations many octaves up; furthermore, Liptak's direction to the performer of "Massive, slow" helps to encourage a sense of oceanic time. In the middle of the piece, the bass gradually rises, filling in the space and joining the stars. Eventually the voices separate into their original positions, but they merge once again and the piece ends with a cluster of brightly shimmering stars that quietly burst, leaving us with the aftermath of a few gentle stardust chords.

"Cygnus" (The Swan) includes different musics that suggest the bird and the constellation, creating a piece that is both worldly and cosmic. The opening texture is a gentle, quasi-minimalist ostinato that sounds like a swan gliding over water. The patterns shift subtly in pitch and rhythm, slightly elongating and foreshortening, creating ripples that vary in depth. A bit later these ripples coalesce into extroverted waves, but only briefly, and the music retreats into a quiet, slow-motion quotation of the first piece from *Kreisleriana*. A star-like, twinkling polyrhythm with wide leaps emerges, and is followed by dense but quiet bell-like chords, a third material that is neither star nor bird. The piece continues on, moving

between these three materials until coming to rest on the twinkly polyrhythms.

“Argo Navis” is like “Cygnus” in its abundance of different materials, but is even more varied. This stems from Liptak basing the form on the constellation, which in the 18th century was broken apart into four different constellations: Carina (The Keel), Vela (The Sail), Puppis (The Stern), and Pyxis (The Compass). Each of these constellations is given its own section of music, such that this piece has the most varied topography of any in the set. “Carina” begins with a loud middle-C bell that tolls at irregular time intervals. Other bells (notes) begin tolling in a rhythmic canon, creating a texture evocative of change-ringing, as the overall dynamic dies away. Finally, a mercurial gesture quietly enters, foreshadowing the next section, “Vela” which features these quicker gestures and which slowly phases out the tolling notes. “Pyxis” begins with a rapid, chromatic figure that ends on a repeated note, and this whole idea is transposed several times. “Puppis” recalls the irregular rhythms of the opening, but is scored now as dense, quiet, resonant chords. Perhaps most surprising is the last section (is it part of “Puppis,” some other, unnamed constellation, or a summation of the four small constellations as a representation of Argo Navis?). It starts with a burst of starry energy, with wide resonant leaps, and eventually bring this piece to a close.

“Lyra” is likely more Greek myth than constellation. It is of course the lyre of Orpheus, and it’s easy to imagine Orpheus playing this thoughtful, sad music in remembrance of Eurydice. The low, shifting minor-tenths create a blanket of mournful gongs that color all that occurs above them, even the brighter, quick passages. The composer writes in his working notes that m. 26 represents Orpheus’ fateful glance back at Eurydice. Another myth associates the constellation Lyre with two others, Aquila and Cygnus as the birds of the late summer triangle. Lyra represents one of the Stymphalian birds, which were man-eating birds with bronze beaks and metallic feathers they could launch at their victims.

“Aquila” (The Eagle) begins with rapid, brightly colored arpeggios that weave through the air, giving the sensation of flight. The eagle’s path is full of surprising twists and turns. An insistent repeated note appears (Liptak marks these notes as “sharp, biting”), suggesting that the eagle has caught its prey. The eagle diverges at times from its linear flightpath into patterns that are full of geometric twists and turns. Gentle bell chords suggest a momentary rest for the eagle, who takes off once again, soaring into ear-tickling patterns that persist from m. 54 until the end, where the piece’s final declamatory chords ring out, ending the eagle’s flight and the entire cycle.

– Adam Roberts



David Liptak's music has been described as "luminous and arresting," "richly atmospheric," and having "transparent textures, incisive rhythms, shimmering lightness," and his compositions have been

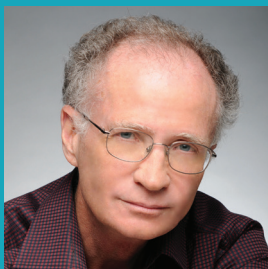
performed throughout the United States and abroad. In 1995, David Liptak was awarded the Elise L. Stoeger Prize, given by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in recognition of distinguished achievement in the field of chamber music composition. He has received awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition, both in 2002, and he is the 2006 recipient of the Lillian Fairchild Award from the University of Rochester. Commissions for new music have included those supported by the Fromm Foundation, the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust. Recordings of David Liptak's music can be found on New Focus, Bridge, Innova, Albany, Centaur, and other labels, and his music is available from several publishers, including American Composers Edition and Keiser Classical. Much of his music written very recently has explored the poetry and magical quality of stars and starlight, imagined and real. David Liptak is Professor of Composition at the Eastman School of Music, where he has been a dedicated teacher of composition students since 1986.



A collaborator of contemporary composers, pianist Eunmi Ko frequently premieres new solo piano repertoire as well as ensemble works. Praised for original interpretation and kaleidoscopic colors, she has per-

formed as a soloist in Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York, Herbst Theatre in San Francisco, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Festival de Musica Contemporanea, the San Francisco International Piano Festival, the Chautauqua Music Festival, and many other venues. Since 2015, she has been the resident artist for McCormick Percussion Group and collaborated with Director Robert McCormick for the Concerti for Piano and Percussion Project. She teaches as a member of the piano faculty at the University of South Florida and serves as co-advisor of the New-Music Consortium at USF. Ko is co-founder and co-director of *Strings & Hammers*, a trio with the unusual instrumentation of violin, piano, and double bass that commissions new repertoire and regularly premieres compositions written for the ensemble, and she is the co-director of the annual new music festival *Dot The Line* that takes place in Korea. Eunmi Ko studied and holds degrees in piano from Seoul National University and the Eastman School of Music.

eunmiko.com



Robert McCormick is currently Professor of Music and director of the percussion program at the University of South Florida in Tampa, and he was principal percussionist/assistant timpanist with the Florida

Orchestra. A former member of the Harry Partch Ensemble, he often performs with high profile artists of all genres. In 2010, he conducted the premiere performance of Chan Hae Lee's Korean folk opera *Simcheongga* at the National Center of Performing Arts in Seoul and, in March 2014, performed the world premiere of Baljinder Sekhon's *Double Percussion Concerto* at Carnegie Hall with percussionist Lee Hinkle. His myriad recordings with the McCormick Percussion Group, McCormick Duo, and others continually receive the highest critical acclaim. Robert was the 2006 recipient of the Florida Music Educator of the Year Award, the 2007 Grand Prize in the Keystone Percussion Composition Award, the 2010 University Distinguished Teacher Award and the 2015 Percussive Arts Society Lifetime Achievement in Education Award.

The award winning **McCormick Percussion Group** is recognized by composers and aficionados throughout the world for their creative interpretations and recordings of unique and often out-of-the-mainstream percussion literature. The MPG often collaborates with guest non-percussion performers to explore and develop new trends of compositional thought and is among the most recorded ensembles of the genre, having recorded and released over two

dozen CDs. The McCormick Percussion Group is a proud endorser of Zildjian Cymbals, Grover Pro Percussion, and Encore Mallets. Performers for this recording are Kyle Spence, Nick Bruno, Kacey Howell, Tyler Evans, Maria Petropoulos, and Michael Standard.

mccormickpercussiongroup.com

CREDITS

- *Concerto for Piano and Percussion Orchestra* was recorded April 8, 2018, at Springs Theater Recording Studio in Tampa, Florida.

Producer: Robert McCormick

Audio Engineer: John Stephen

- *Constellations* was recorded December 29 & 30, 2017, in Barnes Hall at the University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.

Producer: Eunmi Ko

Audio Engineer: Tyler Kline

Additional Audio Engineering: Rich Wattie

- Mastering by Paul Coleman
- Music published by American Composers Edition (BMI)
- Program notes by Adam Roberts, adamrobertscomposer.com
- Cover photography by Michael Schauer, michaelschauer.com
- David Liptak's photograph by Hanna Hurwitz
- Eunmi Ko's photograph by Jiyang Chen
- Robert McCormick's photograph by Buni Photography

The project was completed with generous support from a publications grant from the University of South Florida and from the Eastman School of Music with thanks to Donna Brink Fox, Dallas Oestara, and Jamal Rossi.

Innova Recordings is supported by an endowment from the McKnight Foundation.

Philip Blackburn, director, design

Chris Campbell, operations director

Tim Igel, publicist