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## CD REVIEW

### Hèctor Parra

#### Hypermusic Prologue

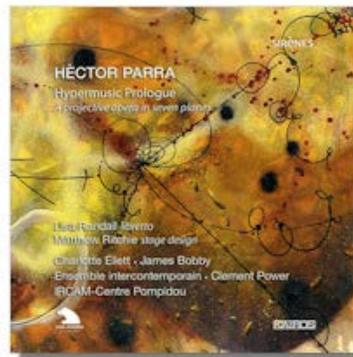
A projective opera in seven planes

- CD 1 - Hypermusic Prologue
- CD 2 - Explanatory interview

Charlotte Ellet, soprano  
James Bobby, baritone  
Ensemble Intercontemporain/Clement Power  
Kairos 0013042KAI

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Hier bestellen



Here's something a little different. It's from the Vienna-based Kairos label, which was founded in 1999 by Barbara Fränzen and Peter Oswald and which focuses exclusively on the promotion of new artists. Each of their CDs is intended as a total work of art. *Hypermusic Prologue - a projective opera in seven planes* is an amalgam of music and science. It's – presumably – something given an implicit stamp of approval by the involvement of Ensemble Intercontemporain. No other recordings exist in the current catalog for James Bobby, only three other CDs with Charlotte Ellet, and one other (piano and chamber music on [Kairos 001282KAI](#)) by Hèctor Parra himself. Assuming that the two disciplines of music and physics share social context and build upon beauty, intuition, elegance and (a striving for) perfection, living Catalan composer Hèctor Parra, who was born in 1976, takes as his starting point the centennial celebrations surrounding the development of theories of relativity, which added a fourth geometrical dimension. That physicists posit a total of seven such dimensions explains this opera's subtitle.

Parra aimed, in *Hypermusic Prologue* to "construct a symbolic space of great richness that may be used as a framework for musical composition; a framework where the instrumentation and instrumentation, the sung music and the electronic techniques in real time are able to generate and provide new acoustic experiences," to quote the excellent notes that come with these two CDs, only the first of which has the opera itself: the second contains excerpts of an interview between Parra and Lisa Randall (the work's librettist), whose book *Warped Passages* (ISBN-10: 0060531096 ISBN-13: 978-0060531096) sets out the physics behind the multidimensionality to which the composer refers. The pages of these liner notes are covered with graphs, formulae (which indeed find their way into the libretto itself), figures, diagrams and photographs representing the space-time distortion from which the opera takes inspiration.

Parra is more of a musician than a physicist, though: he studied at the Conservatoire of Barcelona, where he was awarded distinctions in composition, piano and harmony. Among those with whom he has studied composition are Brian Ferneyhough and Jonathan Harvey. Many major orchestras and ensembles have performed his work; Parra has received commissions from IRCAM, the Spanish Ministry of Culture, the Government of Catalonia and the Berlin Academy of Arts. His music has been performed at numerous festivals ... Lucerne, Avignon, Agora-Ircam, Forum Neues Musiktheater (Stuttgart), Novart de Bordeaux, ADK Berlin, Quincena Musical de San Sebastián, Nous Sons Barcelona, Muziekgebouw (Amsterdam), and Philharmonie Luxembourg. Currently, he is Professor of Electro-Acoustic Composition at the Conservatoire of Zaragoza, invited professor at the Conservatoire of the Barcelona Opera House (El Liceu) and composer in research at IRCAM in Paris. So it was time for his first major CD.

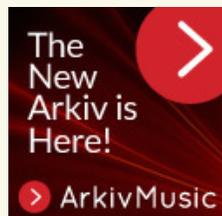
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What's New for  
December 2013?

*Hypermusic Prologue* attempts a partnership between science and music, then. But also with the plastic arts and drama. The artist Matthew Ritchie and stage director Paul Desveaux are involved in creating a form particularly suited to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet the plot is as old as it gets: a love story perhaps not so much between a composer-scientist (Charlotte Ellet, soprano) and James Bobby's baritone role as between Ellet's love both for him and for knowledge. She senses that there's much more to be explored in life than their relationship; the pair take a hypothetical journey to the warped Fifth Dimension. She feels liberated by the experience. He remains constrained by the four "conventional" planes of space and time. If you stop to think about it, Parra is actually using science (not science fiction: this is no excuse for rockets and rubber costumes) as a vehicle for exploring ways, for example, in which two people see the same event, and see reality, so differently. Acoustic phenomena, which shift as vividly as our perception of them, becomes a correlative for our perception and experience of ourselves and our (important) relationships.

The benchmark of success for such an opera – aside from the levels of technical and expressive performance – must of course lie in how successfully the composer translates the highly specific, not to say specialized, theory into a musical and operatic experience. It can safely be said that Parra does that. For this is a very "muscular" opera. You won't find lyricism, free-flowing lines of melody. The style is built from individual cells of sound and phrases. The singing and speaking (many dynamics are used from whispering, yawning, "scat singing", controlled squeaking and squawking to shouting and other vocal techniques other than conventional singing) is forceful and demonstrative. The overall effect is one of broken and "scratchy" delivery. Yet this performance at least makes it plain that there is a cohesive concept behind every bar.

The work is divided into 15 short (from under two to just under eight-and-a-half minutes) sections, corresponding to the planes. Parra makes use of a variety of electronic as well as acoustic techniques. There are ensemble/*tutti* passages as well as solo and duo parts. The second (of four) *Plane V* [tr.12] is entirely electronic. In each case our attention is directed to the meaning underpinning the music... confusion, determination, resolution etc. Most of the Planes consist of dialog, often of question and answer, often strained, usually syntactically fragmented; almost always hinging on the conceptual:

S: Harmonious!  
Unity!  
A: A single force!  
B: Unity?  
A single force?!  
But this is so far away...  
My heart breaks!

This is a work which needs much concentration. It only really reveals its strengths by close attention to the libretto and the sound. In that much of each is conceptual, it's not an "easy" listen. *Hypermusic Prologue* is compact and concentrated. It makes its impact by references to the physics folded in on themselves through words – in English – and music. The performers are obviously wholly at one with the concept of this work. It's a beautifully-produced set of two CDs; but short in duration (as said, the second contains interviews with Randall and Parra). The booklets (two – in five languages) that come with the work are full of background information, the full text and much relevant commentary. This is not a "concept" product though, but an interesting and genuinely ground-breaking experiment in the tradition of Varèse, Stockhausen and perhaps Nono and Boulez at their most metallic and outreaching. Whether or not it convinces you will depend on which side of the dividing line falls between music and experimental exploration of the physics involved. It's close, but the weight of impact on the listener is probably just on the latter. Not to everyone's taste for its elliptical and somewhat caustic sound world. But well worth investigating for its musical and cultural integrity.

The recording is good. The feats of the performers, the two vocalists and eight instrumentalists of Ensemble InterContemporain are significant and worthy of admiration. As stated, close attention is necessary: *Hypermusic Prologue - a projective opera in seven planes* is not conventionally either melodically or even rhythmically approachable. A lot has gone into the conception, performance and presentation of *Hypermusic Prologue*. The least we can do is investigate it.

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