

Review of Leslie Stuck's *Pas*

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Few computer music composers are as intensely and exclusively committed to scoring for dance as Leslie Stuck. While this deprives concert audiences of his provocative music, it serves to highlight his infatuation with movement and his skill for creating its sonic surroundings. Mr. Stuck's recent CD, *Pas*, grants everyone a glimpse into the vibrant soundworld that dance audiences have been enjoying for many years. Spanning ten years of work realized in collaboration with choreographers in Europe, Japan, and on both US coasts, the compositions on *Pas* allude to their fundamental relationship with dance while also standing firmly on purely musical ground. There is movement to be found and felt in this music whether you are performing to it on stage or listening to it while sitting at home.

It is worth mentioning at the outset that any critical treatment of this music is incomplete without a simultaneous consideration of the choreography with which it resides on stage (though such attention is largely beyond the scope of this review.) This is particularly the case with Mr. Stuck's music not because his compositions do not deserve independent analysis and response, but rather because Mr. Stuck places tremendous importance on creating a meaningful, intimate, and non-hierarchical relationship between sound and movement. Having experienced some of the pieces represented on *Pas* in concert, I can assure you that he succeeds in this enterprise.

Though each of the six pieces on *Pas* has its own distinct character and energy, there are certain qualities they all share: crispness, rhythmic vigor, allusions to or direct use of acoustic instruments, and just enough whimsical sound objects to keep you guessing while submerged in an inventive soundworld. The opening piece, *special x*, exemplifies Mr. Stuck's predilection for acoustic instruments, which he samples, processes, and assembles to great effect. Though at times the timbres of *special x* sound slightly dated to 2005 ears, the soundworld in general is incredibly precise as Mr. Stuck plays with the boundaries of source recognition, letting each sonic element have its say, until an undeniable rhythmic insistency emerges.

Soothing the Enemy uses a berimbau as its primary—or at least most recognizable—sound source. This is a more compelling starting point than the collection of instruments in *special x*. Perhaps Mr. Stuck agrees, as the berimbau samples often appear without extensive processing. There is also ample space in the gestures here, one of many indications on *Pas* of Mr. Stuck's sensitivity to the need for moments of silence, even if they are brief. This sonic prudence benefits the music and especially succeeds in the dance theater, when an unsympathetic constancy of sound and movement can easily overwhelm an audience. *Soothing the Enemy* is tight and focused, its rhythmic groove supporting a satisfying use of spatial movement and registral ranges. Though it is included here as an excerpt of the longer original work, it feels whole and well structured.

The more limited pitch world of *maxi-zub* makes its rhythmic character all the more driving. A single high piano note instigates much of the additive action here, as other piano sounds and sampled material snap to an unyielding metrical grid. Here again, one can witness Mr. Stuck's ability to assist, but not overwhelm, the dance for which he composes. Though the rhythmic foundation of *mazi-zub* seems poised to support extended melodic and harmonic lines, Mr. Stuck keeps these to a minimum, granting the choreographer and audience their own gestural space in which to function.

Pas is at its most organic in *Convolution*, a composition with wider-ranging gestures and formal departures than its counterparts. Its modulations in size, space, and mood carry *Convolution* on a living and breathing path through sparseness, self-invention, and frenetic density. Though it stumbles into a slightly meandering section in the middle (quite possibly a choreography-necessitated restraint in Mr. Stuck's otherwise active score,) its formal shape is both welcoming and imaginative. As is the case in other pieces on *Pas*, *Convolution* breaks down to a minimal collection of sounds and gestures about two-thirds of the way through the piece. However, in this case, the rebuilding that occurs as the piece approaches its end never quite attains the ferment heard earlier, a tactful touch that leaves one wanting more after an engaging nine minutes.

The aptly titled *Go* sneaks into the fray as the penultimate piece on *Pas*. This frantic miniature is electric and bubbling. It both flies by and allows you to get lost in its midst, like the two minutes when you decide you are fed up with your list of demands for the day and pull quickly onto that inviting back road that will whisk you out to the country, where you can drive fast and open the windows.

Mondriaan was the first piece of Mr. Stuck's that I experienced in concert, paired with the intense and finely crafted choreography of Mary Cochran. Though complete conjecture on my part, the title perhaps refers to Mr. Stuck's algorithmic compositional processes, which are employed throughout *Pas*, and which echo the painter Mondriaan's weighted grids in their rhythmic character and subtle shifts of focus. In any case, this final piece is wonderfully cinematic. Its sounds have character, it plays with perceptions of foreground and background, and its rhythmic and gestural "cuts" keep the pacing fresh and engaging. Sampled sound objects pop out from a lingering and lush texture of strings, every so often initiating a tangential departure that sometimes succeeds in leading the piece to new territory and sometimes is thwarted by a reassertion of existing material. At times it feels like a struggle between nature and industry, at others like you are standing on a knife-edged peak where on one side of you is the most amazing view you have ever had and on the other is a fall to certain death.

Given his dedication to the venue, the collaborators with which he works, and most importantly, the energy and quality of his work, it is clear that anyone even remotely interested in composing for dance (or dancing to new music) should immediately familiarize themselves with Mr. Stuck's music. But other listeners, composers, and computer musicians in general would do well to explore the works on *Pas*. Their rhythmic invention alone makes them well worth a listen, with superior sonic features, high-level production, and finely crafted structures thrown in as a bonus. Experience Mr. Stuck's music live if you can, as it is a real treat to see choreography and music interact so convincingly, but in any case, do take advantage of finally having this appealing collection in portable CD form.