

Karptet: Program Note

It was a great pleasure to receive another commission from Christopher Karp (this was the third time). But whereas the first two commissions were requests for piano, violin and cello trios, this time both viola and a second piano were added, so that Katrin Talbot could be part of the piece, as well as both Howard and Frances Karp simultaneously! The medium of string trio plus two pianos is certainly unusual, for a simple reason: even one grand piano can eclipse the power of a small group of strings, to say nothing of two. But in the hands (literally!) of such sensitive and experienced musicians as the Karps, I have come to see that just about anything is possible.

The “Karptet” falls into three movements, of which the first, “Karpcanons”, is the longest by far. Its title is inspired by the fact that the two pianos wind around each other in a continuous imitative path. The three string parts also work together, forming a second integrated unit which interacts with the pianos in a variety of interdependent ways. The whole can be understood as a kind of a musical mirror of a richly complex and mostly cooperative extended family. What binds all of it together is a very limited harmonic vocabulary—all five parts have only the same seven notes with which to work. The second movement is called “Karpinversions”—again a collection of very limited materials which are organized into a series of short phrases and which focus on musical palindromes and rightsideup/upsidedown juxtapositions. The third movement, “TuttiKarpi” is a musical game of tag—with the sounds of all five instruments running around the stage trying to keep up with the game, and each other. “Karptet” is dedicated, as you have guessed by now, to a most unique and wonderful family.

Joel Hoffman
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