

**Articles**

2010 Artist Picks  
 Francesco Tristano

**Albums**

36  
 Access To Arasaka  
 Aeroplane Trio  
 Christian Albrechsten  
 Gilles Aubry  
 Andreas Bick  
 Wil Bolton  
 Caroline  
 Chaim  
 Scott Cortez  
 Dead Voices On Air  
 Margaret Dygas  
 F. Gerard Errante  
 Seren Flordd  
 Field Rotation  
 Marcus Fischer  
 The Ghost of 29 Megacycles  
 Tania Gill  
 Gord Grdina Trio  
 Herion  
 Hummingbird  
 Ironomi  
 Yoshio Machida  
 Machinefabriek / Liondialer  
 Phil Manley  
 Matta  
 Mem1  
 me:mo  
 Miko  
 Momus  
 Moshimoss  
 Roger O'Donnell  
 orchestramaxfeldparrish  
 Cédric Peyronnet  
 Resoe  
 Danny Saul  
 Dirk Sheries  
 Shedding  
 Clive Tanaka y su orquesta  
 Robert Scott Thompson  
 Two People In A Room  
 Undermathic  
 Wires Under Tension  
 Clive Wright

**Compilations**

Joachim Spieth Selected 6  
 Playing with Words  
 Reconstruction of Fives  
 20 Centuries Stony Sleep

**EPs**

Balmorhea  
 Clara Moto  
 d\_rradio  
 Deepgroove  
 Kyle Bobby Dunn  
 Fear Falls Burning  
 Hammock  
 ptr1  
 Quiroga  
 Sawako

**DVD**

Playing with Words - Live

**F. Gerard Errante: *Delicate Balance***

Aucourant Records

*Delicate Balance* presents ten electro-acoustic set-pieces created by composers with whom clarinetist F. Gerard Errante has collaborated over the years. The pieces pair his solo playing with electronic backings that are full and often symphonic in character, and as the woody character of the clarinet is preserved, a clear contrast emerges between its acoustic sound and the oft-shimmering backdrops. One of the things that stands out is the general unanimity of the recording's material in spite of the contributions of ten different composers to the project. Many of the composers are university music professors (Errante himself retired from Norfolk State University after thirty years of service as a music professor), but the compositions are anything but stuffy academic exercises; on the contrary, they're eminently accessible in spirit. Much of *Delicate Balance* exudes a serene and mystical quality, though there are occasional moments where dark clouds dot the horizon.

Alex Shapiro composed "Water Crossing" after Errante presented her with an image of his canoe tied to the dock at his home on the Virginia coastline, an image that in turn prompted Shapiro to envision a water journey that has the canoe morph into a sailboat chaperoned by dolphins as it glides through ocean waters. The adventurous composition finds Gerrante's clarinet fluidly weaving through passages alternating between peaceful splendour and dramatic portent. "Passage" drops Errante's playing into an ever-shifting sound-world of rich colour and texture crafted by Robert Scott Thompson. The clarinet blends into the mercurial context Thompson fashioned for it from percussion instruments (bamboo wind chimes, gongs, tam-tams) and environmental and "found" sounds (a nightingale's song also figures prominently during the piece's later sections). Douglas Quin's "A Little Night Music" uses treated field recordings of thrumming insects heard on a warm midsummer's night in rural North Carolina as an evocative sonic painting for Errante to emote against.

McGregor Boyle's "Midway Inlet" is one of the recording's loveliest pieces, in no small part because its stirring melodic dimension is derived from the early plainchant hymn "Veni Creator Spiritus." Designed to simulate a boat journey through a tiny creek to the inlet and back, the piece shadows Errante's becalmed musings with a computer part that tracks the clarinet's playing and replicates it by sustaining certain notes; strip away the superfluous nature sounds (water, bird chirps) and the piece begins to sound very close in spirit to Ingram Marshall's *Dark Waters*, even if the latter is a work for English Horn, not clarinet. In a setting such as Joseph Harchanko's "Breath," the way that Errante's clarinet weaves against the ebb and flow of a constantly shifting backdrop often calls to mind the compositional voice of Gavin Bryars.

Particular inspirations guided the creation of many pieces: a dreamlike vision from Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* of Belle running in slow motion down a long hallway inspired Peter Terry's "Echoes of the Invisible," which offers a five-minute meditation that's soothing yet mysterious at the same time. Inspired by a moonlit night on a beach in Majorca, Robert Mackay's "Equanimity" integrates environmental elements into its evocative backing. A nocturnal stillness hangs in the air, with Errante's voice murmuring softly amongst chattering insects and animal noises, almost as if the fundamentally unlike creatures are communing with one another. The blending of the voices is enhanced by the use of live electronic processing, so that the clarinet is merged even more dissolubly into the whole. Inspired by a print of the same name made by the Japanese printmaker Hokusai, "Cherry Blossom and a Wrapped Thing" by Judith Shatin is more conspicuously electronic in nature, with the clarinet gently floating against an equally delicate and minimal backdrop. With opening chords that oddly evoke Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time," D. Gause's "Rain of the Heart, Reign of the Soul" ends the album on a soothing, melodic note that's not unappealing but whose smooth jazz style is obviously somewhat at odds with the more experimental compositional bent of the other pieces. Even so, there's ample evidence on hand to suggest that Errante's release is worth the attention of both clarinet *and* non-clarinet enthusiasts.

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