

Creative sentence requires a strange, paradoxical combination of traits. It's about being here and now, and heading off to whereabouts unknown. It's about absorbing, selectively, one's immediate physical environment, while knowing what and where to shut it out. History, personal and cultural, enters in. Somehow, through these forces, art squeezes itself into being.

So: we have Stephen Lucky Mosko, composer-conductor-teacher, born a half century ago in Denver. He's been to Iceland. He's been to Yale. As a conductor, he's been inside of works by Carter, Cage, and Babbitt. He's gleaned inspiration and procedural models from these sources, and more.

Now, he lives in Green Valley, a semi-rural outpost just far enough



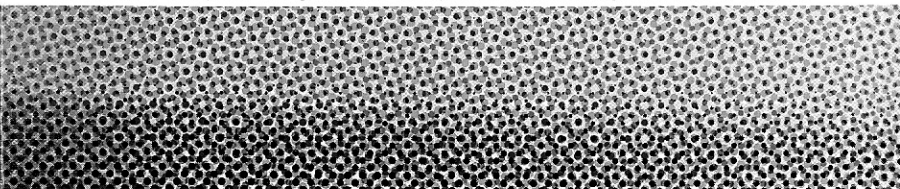
away from Los Angeles to insure solitude and acreage, good soil for the composition process. It's also in close proximity to Cal Arts. Ever since his Yale professor, Mel Powell, convinced him to come West, this has been Mosko's academic home base for over a quarter century, and a forum through which to nurture, perform and celebrate the music of Stockhausen, Cage, Morton Feldman, Xenakis, Steve Reich, and countless others. Somewhere between all this date is a blueprint for his own music, which he has generated with a slow, steady determination over the decades and which bows in the direction of composers his senior, without ever losing touch with its own signature.

A kind of spaciousness visits the music on this CD, in which silences and sustained tones function as active, propulsive elements, equal in expressive portent as the sounds rendered. Hearing this music, we get a sense of the various poles operating in much of Mosko's music: the bracing alertness and compactness of its design, often more about phenomena than structure in the classic sense, and all underscored by a quality of abstraction that doesn't leave out the raw folk-like textures.

It's the sound of a composer, product of a generation of musicians with big ears, who, as a teenager, played jazz drums and studied conducting with Antonia Brico – heavy on Mahler and the Romantics. He later had an epiphany when exposed to Webern and his constellation of influences grew to include the sounds and notions of Cage and Feldman, as well as Icelandic folk music, and Sufi music.

Along the way, a symbiotic relationship has developed with his own students, a group of whom formed the by-now well-established California Ear Unit, whose founding flutist Dorothy Stone is his wife and frequent designated interpreter of his music. The evolving, familial link between composer and ensemble is this project's subplot.

Mosko wrote *Indigenous Music II* in 1984, when the Ear Unit was a fledgling ensemble, armed with a diehard commitment to contemporary music, and a healthy future. Mosko originally wrote *Indigenous Music* in reference to the fact that he was the only composer living in Green Valley, and therefore deigned suited to defining



what was musically 'indigenous.' The idea carried forward into this second piece, dividing it into two parts: *Native Songs and Dances*, and *Het Wapen van Amsterdam*, named after a Dutch ship, loaded with gold, which sank off of Iceland.

The piece opens with an assertive piano fanfare of a sort, with rumbling activity at either extreme of the keyboard. Things air out and open space yields to minimal and neatly-defined gestures. Enter the ensemble, a nasal-toned clarinet and spare-yet-ardent percussion outbursts evoking a vaguely Asian character. Other instruments surface, articulating musical episodes, and always hovering close to fixed tonal centers.

Through it, there is a sense of folk tradition, some unnamable 'indigenous' style at work here. But indigenous to what? To its own design, to the ensemble it is dedicated to, to the particular sound world created by the meeting of those two factors.

In the early '70s, Mosko first traveled to Iceland for pleasure. Hearing its unique traditional folk music, he was lured back for study, on a Fulbright scholarship. "Most people in Iceland have no idea about their folk music and have never heard it. During

World War II, the North Atlantic fleet was there, and the new western music came in. So almost no one knew about it, and some people were even embarrassed that I got recordings of it."

"For one thing, they never conceived of fixed pitch. They thought of pitch as an area. They always kept one note the same, and the translation of that note in English is 'thread.' The melody's translation is 'river.' So it took me several months to not hear it out of tune. I'd listen to it constantly, day and night, but I'd always hear it as being out of tune. Finally, I got to the point where I could hear pitch as area."

"The thing with Sufi music was that they used it to get in a trance, when they'd pierce themselves with swords or walk on hot coals. So obviously, music meant an awful lot to them. I started buying recordings of Sufi music, because if it meant that much, it must be so genuine. Icelandic music came out of the land, and Sufi music was religious music so important that you could use it to transcend pain."

Icelandic influences may have become embedded in Mosko's creative

language, even beyond his own cognizance, especially as regards attitude towards pitch. He notes, "It has been my theory that the reason a lot of Icelandic music doesn't have fixed pitch is that they never sang in resonant places. They'd sing in turf houses with four feet of mud for a roof, or in little churches or in boats or outside. If you sing in a cathedral, you really know if you're in tune. If you sing a fifth in a place with no resonance, you can't quite tell. I think they didn't have resonance to develop intervals."

If Mosko's end results are lean, stripped of superfluous materials, the working process is gradual and closely-considered. He explains, "I write very slowly. I need a lot of time to distill. I don't revise, though. By the time it gets on paper, I've already done the revision, in a way. I always start writing on really cheap paper so I don't mind throwing it out or crossing things out or erasing. I just xerox music paper, because I don't want to feel like I'm committed to it. By the time I put it on nice paper, I've already gone through it many times in my mind." He belongs to the world of composers who are engaged in activities other than setting note to paper and sound to action.

But, as he says, "In a certain way, I think I'm healthier as a composer because I do these other things. I'm constantly dealing with very honest young people who are very curious about music, so I can't give them false answers and I can't give them stale answers. And I'm constantly dealing with trying to give the best possible performances of composers who I hopefully learn a lot from. How could that not help my own music?"

The Mosko oeuvre, of which this CD is a small but vital representation, grows and gathers momentum at its own pace. **Renderings**, written in 1995, is a tapestry of pianistic sonorities, both ornate and elemental, the essential accord in Mosko's work. Pianist Lorna Eder manages the temporal and dynamic stitch work of the piece, which is less concerned with harmonic or structural identity than with creating a multi-dimensional assemblage. Parts in a limited contemporary pianistic vocabulary inform the whole, in a non-linear way.

Ancient Icelandic lore – and, specifically, the intervention of outside

influences on this remote land, again informs the title of Mosko's 1978 work **Rais Murad**, the alias of a Dutch pirate who attacked Iceland in the 17th century. Here, cellist Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick and Eder lay out elliptical passages that fold and overlap, like layers of information seeking form: the act of seeking translates into form.

Psychotropes, another piece tailored for the Unit, stakes its claim between spirit and language. Its structure, built from a series of 22 musical palindromes, inducing in the listener an elusive sense of formal order, while also rewarding our willingness to suspend standard practice music appreciation.

This piece, true to the Mosko axiom, validates the notion that the writing and generating of music is still a mysterious business, given to the non-quantifiable stuff of revelations and meditations. It's not a school of thought or an idiom-in-motion, but an act of faith in the merging of the universal and the individual: art's true domain.

Josef Woodard