

## ARTS NEWS

### ON FULFILLING ALL 88 POSSIBILITIES the work of pianist Tim Ray

*by Roanna Forman*



When you enter Tim Ray's home, the first thing you're struck by, before you plop down into a comfortable seat to talk about his music, his career, and his agitated cat – is what's in the large adjoining room. It's a Steinway grand, with a serape draped over it. The Southwestern colors of the blanket are fitting – Ray is originally from Phoenix – and the piano is the type of instrument a player of his caliber merits. An extremely versatile pianist, Ray's output encompasses country (a fifteen-year gig with singer/songwriter Lyle Lovett gave Ray name identity, even if it didn't make him a household word); jazz; and new music with his trio Tre Corda that combines scored and improvised music, often in a classical-sounding framework.

He has been playing piano since the age of seven, when he started classical studies. "I didn't always practice," he remembers. "I would play by ear; I would improvise." Serious classical study began in college when a piano teacher at Arizona State University focussed him on technique. He went on to study with Fred Hersch at New England Conservatory, whose influence is evident in his clarity and lightness of attack as well as the assurance that you feel more when you watch him play in person. After completing his Masters in the mid-eighties, Ray divided his time between playing and, at one point, teaching at Berklee. During that period, he did some great dates as sideman. He kept the teaching gig until 1997, when he decided to devote himself full-time to music.

And devote himself he did, with a diversity and success that is the envy of many musicians. Having appeared on over 50 recordings, Ray is a seasoned and versatile artist. He has enjoyed frequent tours and the experience of playing big venues, nationally and internationally, including Carnegie Hall, the White House, and essentially every important jazz festival in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Dates with the likes of Gary Burton, Oliver Lake, Scott Hamilton, Harvie Swartz, John Abercrombie, Eddie Daniels, Bucky Pizzarelli, and Duke Robillard have paved the path of an extremely successful career.

Although “musically...never as much fun as a jazz gig,” working with Lyle Lovett was very important - a great experience, Ray feels. It could be argued that besides exposure, it was valuable in developing this pianist’s extraordinary gift as an accompanist, making him the choice of talented local vocalists Mili Bermejo and Donna Byrne, as well as singer/songwriter Jane Siberry and west-coast based jazz and world music vocalist Rhiannon.

With so much experience under his belt, Ray was more than ready to record “Ideas and Opinions,” his first album as bandleader - with Lewis Nash, also from Phoenix, and Rufus Reid. He was in the company of giants, recording a project he had worked years to realize. (Nash, Tommy Flanagan’s drummer, recommended Rufus Reid.) “It was a thrill for me,” he recalls. First, there was the level of musicianship: “it felt like I was just trying to keep up.” Then, there was the responsibility of being a band leader. But most of all, the vibe: “Rufus Reid has a complete Buddha-like aura – he listens intently, is supportive, but critical, too.”

“Ideas and Opinions” takes off with an arrangement to David Clark’s “Flypaper” that nothing can stick to. On the album, Ray tackles everything from a flawless, hard-swinging “Evidence” to the groovin’ original “Grover’s Blue,” and a solo ruminative and melancholy original ballad, “Why?”, written as bombs fell during the Persian Gulf War, and timely once again. The lyricism of the tune almost asks for words, and, sure enough, Lisa Thorson, a Boston-based jazz singer with whom Ray has worked, wrote a lyric with political content that was performed at a concert. It hasn’t been recorded yet with vocals, Ray says. Compositions by Kenny Wheeler and Bill Evans, two of Ray’s favorite pianists, are also on the album, but with the singular treatment by Ray and his sidemen. Overall, the album sparkles from the players’ chops, synergy, and commitment to each take.

Ray’s lyricism on unaccompanied solos gives the listener a hint to his appeal for a vocalist, although being a consummate accompanist is an art he has worked to acquire over the years. He is masterful at all song types, but really shines on a ballad. Listen to him set up jazz vocalist Donna Byrne on “All the Lonely People,” moving into the middle register of the keyboard and ending on a polychord arpeggio to introduce the right musical and emotional mood. He breathes perfectly with the singer on this rubato rendition, using the full range of the instrument for fills, color, and the right amount of drama. The piano, a highly complex instrument, becomes not merely a complement, but another voice. Again, accompanying Byrne on Jon Hendricks’ vocalise of Monk’s “How I Wish,” Ray sparkles through an intro, bottoms the singer with sensitive support, and develops a solo that, as Bob Blumenthal has written, “demonstrate[s] how Monk’s lessons can be heeded without falling into mimicry.”

Whoever the singer and whatever the form, Ray adds the right accompaniment. That’s been the case with Mili Bermejo, whose eclectic repertoire and warm, rich vocal technique are enjoyed by Boston audiences. Accompanying Bermejo on the CD “Pienso El Sur,” Ray enhanced the restrained romanticism of his backup to “Por la Vuelta” with very subtle Latin accents that made perfect musical sense. The song is an elegant ballad about a couple parting. In “Cambalache,” a black-humor “plus ça change” commentary on the twentieth century by Enrique Discépolo, Ray’s solo is anarchic – his right hand goes in circles while his left hand runs up and down the keyboard in the song’s absurdist environment.

The mood of the “Cambalache” solo, and other work from the past, such as Ray’s composition “Pokey’s Favorite Stream/What a Friend We have in Jesse,” on “Ideas and Opinions,” show him moving away from jazz into other genres, and satirical compositions and arrangements. “Pokey’s Favorite Stream,” with a Kurt-Weill-meets-the-Southwest feel, also took aim at Jesse Helms’ support for cuts in arts funding.

Other musical ideas and conceptual frameworks had been fermenting since the late nineties. “I’d had ideas to incorporate a jazz/improvisational and classical approach as a composer and a performer,” Ray recalls. “I was composing, jotting down ideas. Around 2000, I decided on the instrumentation of trumpet and cello.” For trumpet, the choice was Greg Hopkins. Eugene Friessen ultimately became cellist for the group.

The result was Tre Corda, “literally ‘three sounds,’ from the classical piano notation, an instruction to the pianist to release the soft pedal, letting all three strings vibrate freely.” The name symbolizes the artists’ individual and joint search for creative growth beyond “the boundaries and categories that limit musical expression.” Its debut CD, released in 2003, is like nothing else Ray has produced to date. It will take a separate article to discuss Tim Ray’s new sound.

See sequel article on Tre Corda below. For more information on Tim Ray, see <http://www.agitatedcatmusic.com/>.

## PART II: THE MUSIC OF TRE CORDA

## Tim Ray's Latest Project

*by Roanna Forman*

Good players are constantly evolving – technically, stylistically and creatively. Tre Corda, the debut CD by Tim Ray's trio of the same name, is fascinating proof positive of this adage. Dedicated to the free play of creative ideas without the stricture of genre, this instrumentation of piano, cello and horns is collectively true to Ray's own observation that "I try to open myself up to anything and everything I can." It's original, and it's exciting.

The musical aims of this trio are realized by the imagination and impeccable musicianship of Ray and his two co-members. Greg Hopkins, a trumpeter who doubles on fluegelhorn and cornet for this CD, has enjoyed a long career with big bands, major singers, musicals, symphony orchestras, and jazz festivals. A professor of Jazz Composition at Berklee College of Music since 1974, Hopkins is a published arranger and composer of considerable stature (witness the reaction to his "Inner Voyage" at Berklee - Performance Center with soloists John Abercrombie and Abe Laboriel, Sr.) The ensemble's other member, cellist Eugene Friesen, is a long-time member of the Grammy-winning Paul Winter Consort and records for Winter's label Living Music.

Ray describes his compositions in Tre Corda as tackling "the challenge...to write things that set up an improvisational environment. As players, to try and find places to improvise within the framework. The lines blur. People come up and ask, 'Which is the [scored] music?'" He's working with musicians who feel comfortable playing in that context – Friesen is known for his improvisational bent and gifts, and Hopkins' compositions contribute to the musical synergy.

This music defies genre. Its players would be happy to hear that. Take "Shorter Suite," by Ray, with "Variations on Wayne Shorter's Nefertiti," "Fall," and "Pinocchio." In "Nefertiti," the sultry exoticism of the Miles Davis arrangement becomes a romp. Influenced by Stravinskian primitivism and irony, the Tre Corda variation opens with the trumpet stating the theme, carried along by an ostinato in Ray's left hand. After the cello restates the theme, a piano flourish leads to wide-angled lines and an intertwined piano and cello pizzicato exchange. Other thematic echoes by a muted trumpet and cello give way to a somber piano solo. Although the cello briefly joins in the solemnity, the trumpet gallops back in with the theme. Ray finishes off with single notes at the top and bottom of the piano, like a fat lady in the circus taking a bow.

In Ray's treatment, Wayne Shorter's "Fall" morphs from the light hipness of Miles' horn lines into a dirge-like cello melody with haunting piano pedal point accompaniment. Tony Williams' phrase endings in the Miles version become a light piano punctuation, leading into a duet by fluegelhorn and cello. The ensemble builds in improvised density and volume to a tsunami climax propelled by the keyboard. The denouement is gentle, as the piece falls lightly to a close.

"Pinocchio," which Miles and his quartet swung hard, becomes a delicate piano theme statement which is echoed by the trumpet. This leads to improvised conversations between cello and horn separated by light piano accents. After restating the theme, the piano starts a primitive Stravinskian stomp alternating between cello and trumpet. Ray takes off ricocheting around the keyboard and pulling the music to a raucous ending, banging and clanging the upper register like bells gone wild. A choreographer would enjoy working with the piece.

Greg Hopkins' compositions are equally important to defining Tre Corda's sound. The irregular accents of "Cargasian," easy-paced and urbane, closes with hints of "Giant Steps." Next, all three players appear to be improvising interactively (with this music you never know), soloing over the form, often weaving their lines together. Ending as a round, the piece has a whimsy that is integral to this group's sound.

The contemplative but hopeful "Olive's Branch," also by Hopkins, sounds like Noah opening the ark after the storm. It exploits the strengths of the horn but gives the other players plenty of room to stretch out. After a solo introduction, the horn states the theme, accompanied by a descending cello line, then expands resolutely, and diminishes to a holding pattern for a delicate piano solo. Repeating the strong expansive closing lines of the theme, the horn, with the same descending cello motif accompaniment, leads the players into a quiet close.

Tre Corda may be serious, but it doesn't take itself seriously. "Humor is underappreciated in jazz, in music in general," Ray has said, and this album puts the "play" back in "players." From titles – witness "Sound Escapades, Part 1-The Kitchen Sink," where the musicians converse with free form crashes, low notes, muted lines, bangs, cadenzas, and rumbles. To treatment – in a lugubrious, death-march-slow "Blue Moon" Friesen's cello sings the melody over Ray's ghostly Transylvanian reharms. The whole arrangement clamors to a manic pitch before dragging through the melody one more lumbering time. The slapstick B section in "Monk's Nightmare" reminiscent of the composition's namesake is laced with Monk keyboard mannerisms and doubly funny in contrast to a self-absorbed A section. In the satiric "The Colonel's Final Journey," Hopkins creates an absurdist feel just right for an anti-imperialist film set in 19th century British Colonial India.

"Blues & Rhythm" plays with a title, but not with the music. After the cello establishes a quasi-funk feel, the trumpet and piano develop the head over an 11-bar form with changing meter. Ray's sinuous piano solo gives way to quick restatement

of the head, and then Eugene Friesen establishes a Slavic groove underpinning a frenzied trumpet solo that eventually continues unaccompanied. As the trio takes the head out, playing intertwined lines, it's hard to tell how much was scored, how much spontaneous.

In this unconventional album, the more straightforward "Church Rhythms" creates a beautiful balance to some of the offbeat pieces. Floating the piano and trumpet over Eugene Friesen's anodyne cello-picking, it sets a meditative mood, like monks in contemplation.

With more than enough material for a second CD, the trio will continue to develop its creative direction. For Tre Corda and listeners alike, it's uncharted ground.

CD: Tre Corda, Agitated Cat Music

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