Karen Tanaka is one of the leading Japanese composers of her generation. The purity of sound, the sensuality and intensity in her music has gained her a large audience. This recording will make much of Tanaka's piano composition available on one album. Pianist Signe Bakke divulge the complexity and yet the integrity of Tanaka's music.
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**A glittering world of sound**

Karen Tanaka is one of the leading Japanese composers of her generation. The purity of sound, the sensuality and intensity in her music has gained her a large audience, and the release of this recording will make much of Tanaka's piano composition available on one album. Pianist Signe Bakke gives us an interesting overview of the complexity and yet the integrity of Tanaka's music as it has evolved through the twenty years of her career that this disc covers.

**En funklende verden av klang**

Karen Tanaka er en av Japans ledende komponister i sin generasjon. Den klanglige renheten, sanseligheten og intensiteten i hennes musikk har truffet et stort publikum, og med denne utgivelsen blir mye av Tanakas klaverproduksjon tilgjengelig under ett. Pianisten Signe Bakke gir oss et interessant overblikk over både hvor sammensatt og allikevel helhetlig Tanakas musikk er, slik den har utviklet seg gjennom de 20 årene av hennes karriere som denne innspillingen omfatter.
A GLITTERING WORLD OF SOUND

Karen Tanaka, one of the leading Japanese composers of her generation, has long had an audience in Norway. It all started with the performance of her piano piece Crystalline during the Oslo Contemporary Music Festival back in 1990. As always at ISCM festivals, a mixed bag of music from all over the world was performed in a wide variety of styles and traditions. For many of us present at the festival, the performance of Crystalline was a uniquely beautiful revelation and an inspiring breathing space in a dense festival programme. Moreover, it was a joy to experience a piece of music that so supremely demonstrated how the piano, so rooted in classical tradition, could hold its own in competition with the refined ensemble instrumentation and electronic landscapes that were strongly represented at the festival. The purity of sound, the sensuality and in the intensity of Crystalline spellbound much of an audience that largely consisted of blissful composers and musicians. In the wake of the concert an interest in Tanaka’s work was awakened in Norway that led to several commissions, festival appearances and performances here in the north.

In 2003 Karen Tanaka was a featured composer at the Bergen Festival of Contemporary Music and the festival presented a wide range of her solo and chamber works. Pianist Signe Bakke was engaged to perform both Crystalline and its sequel Crystalline II, the notion being that Bakke’s distinctive sensitivity to sound would be the perfect match for these virtuoso sound compositions. This CD confirms the wisdom of this notion. Working with the highly precise and complex notation of Tanaka’s other piano pieces. This was the prelude to a long-standing collaboration between Tanaka and Bakke that has virtually amounted to a journey through Tanaka’s œuvre that led to several commissions, festival appearances and performances here in the north.

In 1995-96 Tanaka composes the sequel, Crystalline II. Tanaka herself emphasises that she does not create, but finds and uncovers a music that has always been hidden in nature and then makes it accessible to us.

THE PRIMAL FORCE OF THE MACHINE

In 1999 Tanaka was asked by pianist Tomoko Mukayama if she would write a new piano piece for her. Mukayama originally requested that it should synchronize with her choice of pre-recorded techno music. But after further discussion this solution was discarded in favour of a solo piano work without a tape part. However, the idea of an energetic piece of music with an almost machine-like drive was retained as the basis for the composition, with three key words - techno, rhythm and speed - as Tanaka herself describes this work. On first hearing, the intense machine-like drive of the techno etudes seems in extreme contrast to the glittering sound universe of the Crystalline pieces. But on closer listening we find that they have several features in common. They share an attractive “hardness” of expression, and the horizontal flow of Crystalline II is to a large extent maintained and reinforced in these etudes. And although the music has a machine-like moder-
Techno Etudes

of the work. The music presents a rich, flickering and changing surface: just as the water flows constantly of sound that is unshakeable. The many tiny changes in accentuation and the alternations on the musical surface correspond to the sharp glinting and jingling of the crystals and draw us into the music. At the same time as we are in an intense flux, the music opens up a timeless, infinite landscape that we can enter. With repetitive, hypnotic patterns Tanaka creates an almost ritual musical experience: Tension is built up gradually towards breaking point before the energy explodes and the music races ahead until the energy is spent. New ostinati repeat and raise this process again until the whole thing suddenly stops. However, when the piece ends it does not seem as if the music is finished. It has just passed out of our hearing and continues to swirl intensely into infinity.

The first movement with its semi-quaver ostinati is almost like a large rotating flywheel. The movement sounds like a frenetic boogie-woogie machine that sometimes seems to get stuck, and then rolls on again with overwhelming force. The second etude challenges this sharp-edged rhythmic play from the first movement by adding a simple, singable melody line which gradually gains the motion of a rising staircase, striving ever higher and higher towards the light, over these dark, rumbling, eruptive sounds. The last etude differs from the previous ones in its softer groove and rhythmically alternating figures, giving the movement an elegant “swing” feeling as it dances off at high speed.

WATER GAMES

In the three movements of Water Dance, commissioned in 2008 for Signe Bakke, the sound is slimmer, lighter and more diluted than in both the Crystalline pieces and the Techno Etudes. The music is undulating and soft; here the hard crystalline glinting has become a more subdued shimmer, and the sharp-edged energy of the Techno Etudes is also gone. The tangible “crystals” and “rocks” have been replaced as conceptual starting points by undulating and shifting “water”. Tanaka has commented that the music suggests how the cool, translucent water flows out freely; the work is a joyful dance, with a pleasant feeling of a pulse, where the water occasionally whispers to us through its shimmering play of light. At the same time we notice a hidden, vague unrest below the surface. For although the music is placed in a different expressive register than Techno Etudes, it has much of the same objective distance — creating precisely the awe for eternal nature that we all are faced with. Once again it is the tiny nuances, accents and shifts that create much of our experience of the work. The music presents a rich, flickering and changing surface: just as the water flows constantly and never the same phase. In contrast to the sudden gusts and shifts in Techno Etudes, this music has a much more meditative and static character, without it being passive. Water Dance was written in California where Tanaka now lives after many years in Paris. The composition has many parallels to American minimalism, which again draws on a more Eastern understanding of time. So our experience of this work links different ideas and cultural impulses and opens up new sound landscapes for us. A good example is the continuous tremolo motion around which Tanaka builds her second movement; the piano behaves more like a couple of marimbas in a harmonic shadow play than like an ordinary piano, and out of this play of light and shadow she conjures up a quite distinctive sound in the instrument. With the glittering chords symbolising the movement of the water it is tempting to see similarities to other pieces inspired by water: the music of Ravel’s Jeux d’Eau is based on similar figures. But where Ravel plays on the water’s undulating motion for his unifying sound concept, Tanaka’s main preoccupation is to catch the play of light with the aid of the water. The intrinsically fluid and elusive phenomenon water is used here to grasp and describe the even more fluid and elusive phenomenon light, as a musical state, and to hold it fast for us. So in spite of its different musical character, the work has much in common with the sound sculptures and infinity perspectives of the Crystalline pieces.

THE CHILDLIKE JOY OF DISCOVERY

Karen Tanaka’s piano pieces for children are loved and widely played in Japan. It is interesting to include a selection of these pieces in this connection; the distinctive features of her larger works can also be found in these small character pieces, making them far more than “just” tuition pieces. In these evocative miniatures Tanaka the composer and the piano teacher meet.

These children’s pieces have that particular clarity of sound that is so characteristic of Tanaka’s music. Several of the movements have an extra lightness and playfulness of touch, often using “uneven” rhythms (like 5/4), in contrast to the more “strolling” or “marching” 4/4 rhythms that permeate so much of the music around us. Children’s hands can master these beautiful and distinctive melodies. But they must be played with presence, not sentimentally or romantically (which often reflects the adult view of the world of childhood). The child’s curious, expectant gaze on the wider world is to be found in the clear, taut and simple melody lines, and it is this gaze that gives the music its magic. It is this form of distant wonder that creates the typical “coolness” that Tanaka emphasises so strongly also in her “adult” pieces.

The collection Children of Light expresses Tanaka’s commitment to the living, vulnerable environment and its encounter with the industrialised world’s exploitation of natural resources. The collection a tribute to Earth, to all threatened species, and to the children, who represent the future, in the hope that they will
look after the richness of nature. The disc gives us a selection of altogether twenty movements that describe different threatened species from around the world. Originally the twenty pieces were grouped thematically according to geography and nature. Each group opens with the childlike main character – Children of Light – arriving at each particular part of the globe and meeting its distinctive beauty.

The separate piano pieces Northern Lights and Lavender Field are not part of this collection. These were commissioned by The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in England for their editions of new piano pieces for teaching purposes. Tanaka’s instructions to the pupils show her sensual relationship to sound and sound moods: Performers, even if they are small children, must be stimulated to use all their senses and associations to keep their concentration in order to conjure up these rich landscape pictures, not just master the placing their fingers on the keys. These short instructions to the performer can here serve as a final comment; a successful invitation and instruction to us adult listeners about what we should listen to in Tanaka’s works and how we must be willing to use all our senses.

“Northern Lights”: Imagine a mystic colour of Northern Lights. Play in a transparent and crystalline manner, and listen carefully to how the harmony and colour change. Remember to keep the rhythm pattern on the right hand always even and stable. Listen carefully to the resonance created by pedalling.

“Lavender Field”: Imagine weaving colour and scent with sounds. The harmonic series on E flat appears and disappears into space at the end.

KAREN TANAKA is an exceptionally versatile composer and pianist. She was born in Tokyo where she started piano and composition lessons as a child. After studying composition with Akira Miyoshi at Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo, she moved to Paris in 1986 with the aid of a French Government Scholarship to study with Tristan Murail and work at IRCAM as an intern. In 1987, she was awarded the Gaudeamus Prize at the International Music Week in Amsterdam. She studied with Luciano Berio in Florence in 1990 – 91 with funds from the Nadia Boulanger Foundation and a Japanese Government Scholarship. In 1998 she was appointed as Co-Artistic Director of the Yatsugatake Kogen Music Festival, previously directed by Toru Takemitsu. In 2005 she was awarded the Bekku Prize.

Tanaka’s love of nature and concern for the environment has influenced many of her works, including Questions of Nature, Frozen Horizon, Water and Stone, Dreamscape, Ocean, Tales of Trees, Water Dance, Crystalline series, and Children of Light. Her works have been performed by distinguished ensembles and orchestras worldwide, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, NHK Symphony Orchestra in Tokyo and Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. Various dance companies, including the Nederlands Dans Theater, have also featured her music. Karen Tanaka currently lives in Los Angeles, California.

As an 18-year-old SIGNE BAKKE distinguished herself by winning the most senior class of Norway’s Youth Piano Competition. From 1977-1981 she studied under Jan Henrik Kayser at the Bergen Music Conservatory (now called the Grieg Academy of the University of Bergen) and held her debut recital in Oslo, sponsored by the Norwegian Concert Institute, at the age of 23. Two years later she was soloist with Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra while continuing her graduate studies under Jens Harald Bratlie at the Norwegian Academy of Music. During her studies she took part in master classes with Adele Marcus, Albert Ferber, Jenny Solheid and Vlado Perlemuter. Today Signe Bakke is a busy pianist with a broad repertoire and extensive and varied concert experience. She has been soloist in piano concertos by Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Schumann and Franck, and her solo repertoire ranges from baroque to contemporary music. Her concert tours included performances in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Great Britain, Germany, the USA, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and she has featured at various festivals, including the Oslo Contemporary Music Festival and the Bergen International Festival. She has a close association with Troldhaugen where she performs Grieg’s music in numerous concerts. Her solo CD “Grieg: Piano Works” was a sales success and a second edition was recently released. Chamber music and accompaniment are an important aspect of her activities, as her discography reflects. Signe Bakke is associate professor at the Grieg Academy where she has been employed since 1992.
'swing-feeling’, der den danser avgårde i høyt tempo.

VANNSPILL

og omskiftelige 'vannet'. Tanaka har i en kommentar uttalt at musikken antyder hvordan det kjølige, og mer uttynnet enn både og fortsetter å virvle like intenst, ut i uendeligheten. Klangverdenen i tre satsene i Den første satsen med sine sekstendelsostinater er nærmest som et stort roterende svinghjul. Satsen låter Med de repetitive, hypnotiske mønstre skaper Tanaka nærmest en rituell musikkopplevelse: Spenningen er også borte. De håndfaste 'krystallene' og 'klippene' som utgangsidéer er blitt erstattet med det bølgende samtidig kan vi merke at det er en dulgt, vag uro under denne lette overflaten. For selv om musikken er i øyeblikket virker energisk buldrende og eruptiv, fremstår den over tid som en enslig, migrerende 'blader-fire' som de østlige er innom, og at vannet inntil slår av.
formen for undrende distanse som skaper den typiske 'coolness' som Tanaka så sterkt vekleger også i sine 'voksne' stykker.


De to selvstendige klaverstykkene *Northern Lights* og *Lavender Fields* inngår ikke i denne samlingen. Disse ble bestilt av ‘The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in England’ til deres utgaver med nye klaverstykker til undervisningsbruk. Tanakas instrukser til elevene viser hennes sanselige forhold til lyd og klangstemninger. Utøverne, selv om det er små barn, må stimulieres til å bruke alle sine sanser og asosiasjoner for å holde konsentrasjonen for å fremkalle disse rike landskapsbildene, ikke bare mestre fingernes plasseringer på tangentene. Disse kort instruksjonene til utøveren fungerer like godt som en sluttkommentar; en velduende invitasjon og instruksjon til oss voksne lyttere om hvordan og hva vil må lytte til i Tanakas verker og hvordan vi også må være villige til å ta alle våre sanser i bruk:


«Lavendelengen: Se for deg hvordan lyden seker sammen farger og dufter. Overtonerekken på tonen Ess kommer til syn og forsvinner ut i rommet mot slutten...»
2L. (Lindberg Lyd) records in spacious acoustic venues; large concert halls, churches and cathedrals. This is actually where we can make the most intimate recordings. The qualities we seek in large rooms are not necessarily a big reverb, but openness due to the absence of close reflecting walls. Making an ambient and beautiful recording is the way of least resistance. Searching the fine edge between direct contact and openness; that’s the real challenge! A really good recording should be able to bodily move the listener. This core quality of audio production is made by choosing the right venue for the repertoire, and balancing the image in the placement of microphones and musicians relative to each other in that venue. There is no method available today to reproduce the exact perception of attending a live performance. That leaves us with the art of illusion when it comes to recording music. As recording engineers and producers we need to do exactly the same as any good musician; interpret the music and the composer’s intentions and adapt to the media where we perform. Surround sound is a completely new conception of the musical experience. Recorded music is no longer a matter of a fixed two-dimensional setting, but rather a three-dimensional enveloping situation. Stereo can be described as a flat canvas, while surround sound is a sculpture that you can literally move around and relate to spatially, surrounded by music you can move about in the aural space and choose angles, vantage points and positions.

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Recorded Producers Ståle Hebaek Ødegård and Wolfgang Plagge / Co-producer Karen Tanaka
Balance Engineer Morten Lindberg / Assistant Engineer Beatrice Johannessen
Recording Engineer, track 1 and 18 Hans Peter L’Orange
Piano technician Thron Irby STEINWAY & SONS
Editing Jørn Simenstad
Mix and Mastering Morten Lindberg / SACD Authoring Lindberg Lyd AS
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Executive Producer Jørn Simenstad

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This recording was made with DPA microphones, Millennia Media amplifiers and SPHYNX2 converters to a PYRAMIX workstation, all within the DXD-domain. Digital eXtreme Definition is a professional audio format that brings “analogue” qualities in 32 bit floating point of 352.8 kHz. With DXD we preserve 11.2896 Mbit/s (4 times the data of DSD). This leaves headroom for editing and balancing before quantizing to DSD. Super Audio CD is the carrier that brings the pure quality to the domestic audience.

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