

Cedille Records  
5255 N. Lakewood Ave.  
Chicago, IL 60640  
(773) 989-2515  
www.cedillerecords.org

Press contact: Nat Silverman  
Nathan J. Silverman Co./PR  
1830 Sherman Ave., Suite 401  
Evanston, IL 60201-3773  
Phone (847) 328-4292  
Fax (847) 328-4317  
Email: natsilv@aol.com

# News

For release: November 2006

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## **STRANGE IMAGINARY ANIMALS: EIGHTH BLACKBIRD'S NEW CD TAKES EXTENDED TECHNIQUES TO THE OUTER LIMITS**

### **Groaning Instruments, Funky Riffs, and Evocative Textures From Sizzling New-Music Sextet**

The acclaimed new-music ensemble eighth blackbird travels to the outer limits of instrumental performance practice for *strange imaginary animals* (Cedille Records 90000 094), a CD of contemporary chamber pieces employing exotic techniques that fly in the face of tradition.

The engaging ensemble's fourth and newest Cedille CD offers world premiere recordings of Jennifer Higdon's *Zaka*, Gordon Fitzell's *violence* and *evanescence*, David M. Gordon's *Friction Systems*, and Dennis DeSantis's *strange imaginary remix*, plus Steven Mackey's *Indigenous Instruments*.

The CD takes its title from an indication in the score of Mackey's *Indigenous Instruments*, where the violin should sound like "the moaning of some strange imaginary animal."

"Each piece on the disc is a strange, imaginary animal," says eighth blackbird violinist Matt Albert.

Everything on the recording calls for "extended" techniques from sextet members: Albert plays a violin string tuned so low that it rattles and flops around, producing a twisted, growling sound; cellist Nicholas Photinos plays guitar-like glissandos on his de-tuned instrument; flutist Molly Alicia Barth breathes like a creature gasping for air; clarinetist Michael Maccaferri removes the mouthpiece from his instrument and slaps his palm against the open barrel; percussionist Matthew

Duvall strikes clay pots, temple gongs, a thunder tube, and a toy piano; and Lisa Kaplan pounds a piano fitted with metal screws wedged between the wires.

Opening the CD with a burst of energy is Jennifer Higdon's pulsating *Zaka* (2003). Written for eighth blackbird, the title is a made-up word that Higdon defines as: "To do the following almost simultaneously and with great speed: zap, sock, race, turn, drop, spring. See also: *eighth blackbird*." The piece was "designed around their sound," Higdon says. "It made me think of their playing and their energy."

*New York Times* critic Allan Kozinn called the piece a "kaleidoscopic fantasy" that "grabs the ear."

Gordon Fitzell's *violence* (2001) is "more philosophical and gentler than its title suggests," Kozinn wrote. The violence manifests mainly in "interruptions of musical ideas by one instrument imposing on themes started by another." *Boston Globe* critic Richard Dyer heard "the most restrained timbres and techniques of French impressionism." For the electronic work *evanescence* (2006), Fitzell reinterpreted the acoustic recording of *violence*, electronically distorting elements to create a new piece with a unique and often bizarre sound world.

Steven Mackey has written that *Indigenous Instruments* (1989) "is vernacular music from a culture that doesn't actually exist. I fantasized about a culture and their uses for music, leading me to sounds and textures that I would never have thought of in my mode as a serious concert music composer."

In Mackey's mythical world, de-tuned instruments groan and wail, broken clocks tick irregularly, and funky riffs alternative with calm, floating tunes. In the third movement, a distorted growling from the violin was inspired by the engine noise of a delivery truck that distracted Mackey while he was writing the music. Composers "take dictation from any place we can get it," says Mackey.

The pounding, repetitive rhythms of David Gordon's *Friction Systems* (2002; revised 2005) evoke futuristic scenes of foundries and factories, heavy machinery and high-tech devices. The

composer “uses microtones not to sound weird but to add an additional resonance and element of instability,” wrote the *Boston Globe*’s Richard Dyer.

Composer, percussionist, and electronic musician Dennis DeSantis used all the preceding works on the CD as raw material for his *strange imaginary remix* (2006). DeSantis, known for his work with the Minimum Security Composers Collective and new-music ensemble Alarm Will Sound, has turned it all into a multi-layered, hip-hop-influenced IDM (intelligent dance music) track.

The new CD, like eighth blackbird’s previous Cedille Records releases, was produced by Judith Sherman, known for her Grammy Award-winning work with the Kronos Quartet. It was mastered by Paul Zinman of New York’s Soundbyte Productions.

James Ginsburg, Cedille Records founder and president, says, “Sales of eighth blackbird’s CDs have been impressive. They’re extremely effective ambassadors for new music among audiences of all ages.”

More about eighth blackbird is available online at [www.eighthblackbird.com](http://www.eighthblackbird.com).

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE’) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: [info@cedillerecords.org](mailto:info@cedillerecords.org). On the Net: [www.cedillerecords.org](http://www.cedillerecords.org).

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*strange imaginary animals*  
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 094)

**Higdon: *Zaka* (2003) (12:50)**

**Fitzell: *violence* (2001) (9:46)**

**Mackey: *Indigenous Instruments* (1989) (17:34)**

**Gordon: *Friction Systems* (2002; rev. 2005) (14:37)**

**Fitzell: *evanescence* (2006) (11:18)**

**DeSantis: *strange imaginary remix* (2006) (5:33)**

**eighth blackbird**