Montage


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Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections


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Charles Cushman’s America, in Kodachrome: Phillips Avenue, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 1959 (left), and Newberry and Maxwell Streets, Chicago, 1950 (right)

Listen to the Landscape

Composer Ben Cosgrove connects sound and place.

by DAVID RICE

“Because they have no lyrics,” explains composer and musician Ben Cosgrove ’10, “the titles of my pieces are the only chance I have to give the listener a hint about where they come from.” Those titles, on his latest CD, Yankee Division, include “Prairie Fire,” “Oarlock,” “Nashua,” “Good Fences,” and “When You are a Road.” All resonate with places in Cosgrove’s native New England; in fact, the CD takes its name from the Yankee Division Highway, another appellation of the Route 128 beltway that rings Boston and separates it from the rest of Massachusetts. Although the links between sound and place are sometimes clear—“Good Fences” echoes the famous Robert Frost poem, and “Nashua” calls up the eponymous New Hampshire town—Cosgrove’s intent is more to evoke than to mirror. “I don’t think of my pieces as ‘rendering places in music,’ but more as responding to places musically,” he says. “Writing music just happens to be the way I process the world.”

The 12 compositions on Yankee Division do things like combine plaintive guitar
and banjo picking with repeated piano phrases, cellos that mimic barges' horns, and electronic accents made to sound like crying voices or amplified breath. Their melodies drift across haunting northern expanses amid polished arrangements, often gradually decomposing as chaos creeps in underneath. The music stirs intimate feelings of loneliness and homesickness, as well as taking on "bigger places, distance, and a greater sense of history," Cosgrove says. His musical journeys evoke the melancholy and the frantic disorientation of departure, transit, and return.

Cosgrove’s work (www.bencosgrove.com) bears traces of stylistic influence from twentieth-century minimalists such as Philip Glass and from contemporary composers like Nico Muhly and the French musician Yann Tiersen, who...