

FORM

New World Records 80308

"Comet-like radiance, conviction, fervent intensity, penetrating thought on many levels of seriousness and humor, combined with breathtaking adventurousness and originality, marked the inner and outer life of Stefan Wolpe, as they do his compositions."

Elliott Carter's encomium, written in tribute on Wolpe's death in 1972, pays homage to those qualities, both personal and professional, that contribute to the composer's continuing significance.

Although Wolpe (see also New World Records 80344 and 30354) emigrated to America and to his most fruitful creative years in 1939, his strengths were forged in his formative years, in the crucible of political, social, and artistic upheavals that roiled the century's opening decades and transformed both the tenor of Western Europe's culture and the nature of our own.

Born in Berlin in 1902 of Russian and Austrian parentage, Wolpe evinced an uncommon precocity. By 14 he had written an opera, a wind octet, and numerous piano pieces. At 16, with World War I ended, he embarked on the archetypal Teutonic odyssey, the adolescent *Wanderjahr*, after which he studied further at the Staatliche Hochschule in Berlin, and privately with Busoni, Webern, and Hermann Scherchen, who published several of Wolpe's works in *Melos*, the journal then edited by the eminent conductor.

Feeling the need to start afresh, Wolpe destroyed his juvenilia in 1923. Alive to the trends of the time, he responded first to jazz, as did contemporaries such as Krenek and Weill, and produced several operas in this idiom (among them *Strange Stories* and *Zeus and Elida*, both in 1927). Shortly thereafter, convinced of the power of music as a moral force, he adopted a simplified style and produced pieces for schoolchildren and amateurs, workers' songs reminiscent of Hanns Eisler, and didactic compositions that overtly addressed social issues of single importance, such as *On the Education of Man* (1930) and *About Sport* (1931).

When the Nazis came to power in the early nineteen-thirties, Wolpe moved to Palestine via Russia, Romania, and Austria. From 1935 to 1939 he lived and taught in Jerusalem. During this period his scores increasingly reflected the Eastern coloration of Hebraic cantillation. Perhaps the finest of these works are the *Ten Songs from the Hebrew* (1936-38).

After settling in America in 1939 (he became a naturalized citizen in 1944), Wolpe taught at several institutions, including Black Mountain College and the Philadelphia Musical Academy, before making New York his home and becoming head of the music department at C.W. Post College on Long Island. It was during his final years that Wolpe might be said to have found his true voice, and although he never won a widespread popularity, his compositions of these decades were often honored by his peers and by professional organizations, including the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Fromm Foundation, and the New York Music Critics' Circle. He died in the spring of 1972, after suffering from Parkinson's disease for more than a decade.

In a discussion of Wolpe's style in *The Musical Quarterly*, Henry Cowell noted that

The hard core of bitter and unmitigated dissonance is by no one better organized to bring out its special qualities . . . His music belongs to the school of atonal counterpoint, but instead of the aimlessness and lack of direction often found even in skilled twelve-tone writing, he manages to give furious drive and energy to his efforts.

One might add that this atonal counterpoint arose from Wolpe's belief that "chromaticism imposes no sense of restriction within itself . . . The more endless the combinations of tone, the more necessary it is to invent or develop a system to evaluate sounds in order to give them sense." (See "A Colophon for Stefan Wolpe," by Larry Stempel, in *Perspectives of New Music*, xi, 1 [fall-winter 1972], p. 8.) To create this sense, Wolpe sought to free chromaticism from its limited definition in relation to the diatonic system and also to free it from the more rigorous models of twelve-tone practice devised and developed by Schoenberg and his school. To this end, Wolpe structured the harmonic world of this later music around constellations, clusters of pitches defined by specific intervals that in themselves form a harmonic unit.

Form for Piano (1959) echoes some of the assertions of Cowell's commentary cited above (written two years earlier). Its rhythmic nature takes on a complexity that characterizes the composition as a whole--the work is rich in groupings that accelerate the surface texture, and in rhythmic displacements that skew the sense of a regular bar line.

The euphonious first measure is made up of a harmonic constellation whose six quarter-notes move with metrical regularity mostly by seconds and thirds within a restricted range; contrasting harmonic material is introduced in measure four in a hexachordal cluster. And, until the untransposed restatement of the opening motivic constellation five measures before the work's end and an eventual coda in the ultimate bar, the piece inventively explores the registral and harmonic implications of its opening measures.

The *Piece in Two Parts for Solo Violin* (1964) is a less demanding work both in execution and exegesis. Its melodic material unfolds in a symmetrical theme that might have been marked *gracioso*. The first part examines, embellishes, and enhances this theme in a manner that is quasi-improvisatory, while the second part presents the material within a less fanciful, more regular rhythmic framework.

Although akin to Stefan Wolpe in his seriousness of purpose and his absolute musical probity, Arthur Berger is reflective of a different segment of the stylistic spectrum. Though Berger was nourished by his times and its techniques, he was less susceptible to trends than was Wolpe in his early years. Throughout his distinguished career, Berger has kept a critical distance from the immediate past, appropriating as his own certain aspects of its style and its spirit only after a conscious and selective process of examination. As a result of this self-imposed dispassion, and because of characteristics of musical surface and structure, Berger has been described as a New Mannerist, analogous in aesthetic to the school of painters, sculptors, and architects who were active in the cinquecento.

Berger himself invoked a precedent drawn from the visual arts in describing his *Five Pieces for Piano* (1969). In a letter to Robert Miller, who gave the work its first performance and who was subsequently named its dedicatee, Berger acknowledged the technical demands made by the work, and then went on to note that

I like to think that the real difficulty is intellectual & conceptual--phrasing, attack, color, touch, balance of sonority, etc., especially atmosphere. (Yes--they're almost Impressionistic in this respect.)

At the time of this correspondence, early in 1968, *Five Pieces* was actually only four pieces. Miller explains:

The piece composed as number 1 became number 2, and 2 became 1; then 3 became 4, and 4 became 3. Five was added almost as an afterthought; it was like an inspiration; it ends up being the most beautiful.

Miller says he conceives the work as an arch. In a set of program notes he describes *Five Pieces*

as one large movement in the following form: Introduction, Scherzo, Climax (third piece), which is sustained dynamically in the fourth piece, Postlude. The economic use of two prepared notes in the first two pieces and of muted strings is a fine and all too rare instance of how such techniques can fit within the framework of a whole composition without being gimmicky or mere nonfunctional ornamentation.

Miller's explanation continues:

A problem in performance, of course, is that the fourth piece ends *largo*, so the question is how to make sure that the fifth piece isn't redundant. The only thing you can do is to have the kind of touch that keeps attention fixed on a very soft level, on the filigree winding around that sort of hypnotizes an audience.

Despite his precise notation, Arthur is most concerned with a spirited performance. That's number one. And that means pacing and quality of sound, a beautiful sound. Most important is the right ambiance.

The *Five Pieces* are characterized by an acerbic vocabulary that is rich in dissonance, with seconds, sevenths, and ninths playing prominent roles both harmonically and melodically. Registral polarities and rhythmic complexities are the norm within phrases, yet the feeling throughout the piece is almost one of expressive improvisation. The piece is conceived in terms of melody, and despite its disjunctive surface, the long line emerges as paramount in Berger's thinking.

While harmonically related to the *Five Pieces*, Berger's *Septet* (1965-66) is more immediately accessible. Its instrumental texture is deftly drawn: chords are spaced and orchestrated with special care, and the colloquy among the winds (flute, clarinet, bassoon), strings (violin, viola, cello), and piano is crafted with a consummate lightness. Compared with the *Five Pieces*, phraseology and rhythm are more regular, enabling the argument of the work to more readily emerge.

Both these pieces reflect the "keen and sophisticated musical intellect" that George Perle saluted in a discussion of one of Berger's earlier works; it is through these earlier works that we can trace the path of the composer's concerns. Born in 1912 in New York City, by his early twenties he was

already part of the New York contemporary music scene as a member of the Young Composers Group that revolved around Aaron Copland and included Bernard Herrmann and Paul Bowles. At the time, he was an undergraduate at New York University. As a graduate he continued his studies at Harvard which awarded him the Paine Fellowship for study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and at the Sorbonne.

Among his major works are *Ideas of Order*, commissioned by Dimitri Mitropoulos for the New York Philharmonic--greeted at its premiere by a full page in *Time*--and *Polyphony*, commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra. But most of his works have been for chamber combinations. Notable among them is a *Quartet for Winds* (commissioned by Pierre Monteux and hailed by Virgil Thomson as "one of the most satisfactory pieces for winds in the whole modern repertory"), a String Quartet (cited by the New York Music Critics Circle in 1962), and the *Septet* on this CD (commissioned by the Koussevitsky Foundation).

When Berger returned from Paris in 1939 he taught briefly at Mills College in California and then at Brooklyn College, before joining the music staff of the *New York Sun*. This was also a brief tenure. But when Virgil Thomson invited him to join the *New York Herald Tribune* he found it congenial to stay put for a while, until 1953 when he decided to return to academe and accepted an appointment at Brandeis University, where he is now Irving Fine Professor Emeritus, continuing since his retirement to do limited teaching at the New England Conservatory.

Along with his teaching and newspaper work, Berger has written numerous articles and edited a number of music journals, notably *Perspectives of New Music*, which he founded in 1982. His seminal study, "Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky," explored the structure of the 8-note scale that has since become conventionally known by the term "octatonic" that he coined for it. He was one of the first to recognize and write about Charles Ives, and the first to write a book on Aaron Copland (reprinted by Da Capo Press in 1990).

Berger has received numerous honors and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Though Berger is no follower of trends, certain phases can be discerned in his output. His works from the nineteen-forties for instance, were inspired in part by the neoclassical Stravinsky (works such as his 1944 *Serenade Concertante* and the *Three Pieces for Strings* from 1945), while in the nineteen-fifties there was a gradual embracing of twelve-tone techniques. Even when this system was fully accepted, however, Berger refused to write pieces according to the standard procedures, instead fashioning for himself, as in the String Quartet (1958), a heterodox, more personal methodology.

Referring to the Quartet as "an original approach to the most perplexing problem of twelve-tone composition" and praising "his serial music [for being] as far removed from current fashionable trends as his diatonic music was a few years ago," George Perle also noted that

in the quartet, as in Berger's earlier works, and in most of the great music of our Western heritage, timbre, texture, dynamics, rhythm, and form are elements of a musical language whose syntax and grammar are essentially derived from pitch relations. If these elements never seem specious and arbitrary, as they do with so many

of the dodecaphonic productions that deluge us today from both the left and the right, it is precisely because of the authenticity and integrity of his musical thinking at this basic level.

These, indeed, are the qualities of Berger's mind and music that continue today to win our respect and hold our attention.

—George Gelles

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Arthur Berger:

- Chamber Music for 13 Players. Columbia Chamber Ensemble. CRI CD 622.
- Duo No. 1 for Violin and Piano. Joel Smirnoff, violin; Christopher Oldfather, piano. New World 80360-2.
- Duo for Cello and Piano. Joel Krosnick, cello; Gilbert Kalish, piano. New World 80360-2.
- Duo for Oboe and Clarinet. Phyllis Lanini, oboe; Don Stewart, clarinet. New World 80360-2.
- Quartet for Winds. Members of the Boehm Quintette. New World 80360-2.
- Serenade Concertante*. Brandeis Festival Orchestra, I. Solomon, conductor. CRI CD622.

String Quartet. Lenox String Quartet. CRI CD 622.

Trio For Guitar, Violin & Piano. David Starobin, guitar; Joel Smirnoff, violin; Gilbert Kalish, piano.
New World 80360-2.

Stefan Wolpe:

Battle Piece for Piano. Marc-André Hamelin. New World 80354-2.

Form IV: Broken Sequences. G. D. Madge, piano. CPO 999055.

Passacaglia. G. D. Madge, piano. CPO 999055.

Pastorale. G. D. Madge, piano. CPO 999055.

Quartet for Oboe, Cello, Percussion & Piano. S. Taylor, oboe; F. Sherry, cello; D. Kennedy, percussion; A. Karis, piano. Koch KIC 7112.

Quartet for Strings. Juilliard String Quartet. CRI CD 587.

Quartet for Trumpet, Tenor Saxophone, Percussion & Piano. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79222-2-J.

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Arthur Berger (b. 1912)

Five Pieces for Piano (publ. Henmar Press Inc.)

1 I (2:19)

2 II (1:55)

3 III (2:37)

- 4 IV (3:22)
5 V (3:00)
Robert Miller, piano

Septet (publ. Henmar Press Inc.)

- 6 1. Leggero (3:47)
7 2. Sostenuto (3:58)
8 3. Moderato (4:20)

The Contemporary Chamber Players:

Paul Lustig Dunkel, flute; Jeanne Benjamin, violin; Arthur Bloom, clarinet; Jacob Glick, viola;
Gilbert Kalish, piano; Michael Rudiakov, cello; Donald MacCourt, bassoon; Arthur Weisberg,
conductor

(originally issued on Acoustic Research 0654 088)

Stefan Wolpe (1902-1972)

- 9 *Form for Piano* (publ. Seesaw Music Corp.) (4:28)
Russell Sherman, piano

Piece in Two Parts for Solo Violin (publ. Josef Marx Music Co.)

- 10 Part 1 (7:19)
11 Part 2 (5:14)

Rose Mary Harbison, violin

(originally issued on Acoustic Research 0654 087)

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