

MICHAEL COLGRASS
Déjà vu/Light Spirit

New World Records 80318

JACOB DRUCKMAN
Aureole

Michael Colgrass and Jacob Druckman: 20th Century Eclecticism

by James Wierzbicki

Along with advances in electronic technology and the emergence of the minimalist aesthetic, one of the most important developments in music in the mid-1960s was the emancipation of composers from the rigorous serial style that had dominated the scene since World War II. In place of the formal abstractions of the post-Webern school (characterized by pointillistic textures, nonpropulsive rhythms, and, most important, melodic and harmonic materials derived exclusively from permutations of a twelve-tone row) many composers sought to create a new music more expressive of their individual personalities and more accessible to audiences for modern music, which were dwindling.

The American revolt against serialism took many forms. George Rochberg, for example, in 1965 announced his liberation from the twelve-tone style with two works (*Contra Mortem et Tempus*, for chamber ensemble, and *Music for the Magic Theater*, for small orchestra) that effectively mixed biting dissonance with lengthy quotations from the music of Mozart, Mahler, and other composers of the past; in more recent works, most notably the String Quartets Nos. 4-6 (1977-78), he has imitated the large-scale structures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with materials solely of his own making. George Crumb, like Rochberg a dedicated serialist in the 1950s, in 1963 began a series of chamber works in which specific arrangements of pitches play a role subordinate to theatrical gestures and exotic sound effects. For Joseph Schwantner, Stephen Albert, and a significant number of other composers born during World War II, wholehearted involvement with serialism ended with graduation from college, and for them the new "modern" style is an eclecticism that comfortably juxtaposes references to historical and ethnic musics with free atonality.

Eclecticism, paraphrase, and theatricality figure as well in the new music of Jacob Druckman and Michael Colgrass, but for them the path away from strict serialism has for the most part led to a sort of neo-Impressionism.

While it may lack programmatic implications as specific as those of the music of Debussy and Ravel, Druckman's and Colgrass's recent work bears striking resemblances to that of the turn-of-the-century Impressionists in orchestration and methods of construction. Like the tone poems of Debussy and Ravel, the works on this recording are made up of brilliantly colored sound modules arranged in purposeful sequence. Each musical gesture is complete in itself, made distinct from the others by sharp contrasts in volume, tempo, sonority, and direction of motion. As it passes by, an individual unit offers few clues to what will follow yet reveals countless reasons for being crafted and placed precisely as it is. As in the scores of Debussy and Ravel, in Colgrass's and Druckman's recent tone poems the threads that link one cell to the next are subtle but apparent, and in each instant of music the careful listener will hear amplifications or contradictions of some element of the antecedent phrases.

Also like that of the Impressionists, Colgrass's and Druckman's music strikes the ear as organic, not architectural, in design; no matter how striking the rich sonic images, they seem embryonic and fleeting, mere passing fancies in a stream-of-consciousness progression of ideas that flow from start to finish unimpeded by literal repetition or obvious development of thematic materials. In fact, however, these works are tightly organized, each one a meticulous exploration of germinal motives presented in the introductory measures. Although while a piece is playing the listener's attention will doubtless be drawn mainly to the sonic colorations and dynamic opposition of the various gestures, the integrity of the materials can be felt at all times. Perhaps more than anything else, it is these composers' ability to combine ear-catching surface activity with unshakably stable musical structures that marks Michael Colgrass and Jacob Druckman as two of the leading orchestral composers in America today.

Jacob Druckman was born in Philadelphia on June 26, 1928. During his adolescence he worked as a violinist in classical-music ensembles and as a trumpet player in jazz bands. Although he had been writing music since the age of fifteen, he did not begin serious study of composition until he was twenty-one, when he won a scholarship to Aaron Copland's summer class at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood in Massachusetts. The following fall he entered the Juilliard School of Music, where over the next five years he studied composition with Peter Mennin, Vincent Persichetti, and Bernard Wagenaar. In 1954 Druckman received a Fulbright Fellowship that enabled him to study composition with Tony Aubin at the École Normale de Musique in Paris. On returning to the United States in 1957 Druckman joined the faculty of the Juilliard School. He remained there until 1972, when he became director of the electronic-music studio at Brooklyn College. In 1976 Druckman was appointed professor of composition at the Yale University School of Music, and currently he serves as chairman of that school's composition department.

Druckman's early compositions are stamped with the influence of the orchestral style of Debussy, Ravel, Mahler, and Stravinsky. His involvement with serial techniques began when he entered Juilliard and continued essentially without interruption until 1966, the year he completed his final--and most--Webernesque work, the String Quartet No. 2, while simultaneously beginning his first experiments in electronic music. All but one of Druckman's electronic compositions (the 1971 *Synapse*, commissioned by the Nonesuch record company) are quasi-theatrical pieces that involve a dialogue of sorts between live performers and recorded sounds, and the two most recent examples are in essence narrative pieces that quote and comment on music of the past (the 1973 *Delizie contente che l'alme beate*, for woodwind quintet and tape, borrows both its title and its musical materials from an aria from Francesco Cavalli's 1649 opera *Il Giasone*; the 1977 *Animus IV*, for tenor, instrumental ensemble, and tape, is built around excerpts from art songs by Chabrier and Liszt). By 1972, when Druckman wrote his first piece for large orchestra, his interest in serial techniques had been entirely abandoned in favor of a new aesthetic that had as its basic ingredients dramatic gesture, an orchestral palette reminiscent of that of the turn-of-the-century colorists, and paraphrase--sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle--of older music.

The orchestral series began with *Windows*, which won the 1972 Pulitzer Prize. *Windows* features no direct quotations, but throughout its twenty-one-minute duration one can hear fleeting allusions to the music of Debussy, particularly the tone poem *Jeux*, with which it was paired in its premiere concerts by the Chicago Symphony. References to other composers are more easily noted in later works. Like *Delizie contente*, the 1975 *Lamia*, for soprano and orchestra, quotes at length from Cavalli's *Il Giasone*. Music from *Il Giasone* and two other operas that deal with the story of Jason and Medea (Charpentier's and Cherubini's) forms the thematic substance for Druckman's variations in the 1980 *Prism*. A single passage from Debussy's *Sirènes* appears three times in Druckman's 1976 *Mirage*. In the work recorded here, what the composer calls the "constant but shifting, shimmering melody from which all the music

springs" has at its cent the "Kaddish tune" from the third symphony of Leonard Bernstein, who commissioned *Aureole* on behalf of the New Philharmonic and conducted its premiere on June 9, 1979.

While the Kaddish melody indeed comes into focus during the course of *Aureole*, it serves a function more structural than dramatic. Only on a few occasions is it thrown into high relief; more often it is fragmented and incorporated into the music's larger unifying melody. This line, Druckman says, "accumulates a halo of echoes and refractions which at times spin off and assume a life of their own and at times return to the source." At certain points in the score, the conceit of the sonic halo, or aureole, around specific pitches is easily enough perceived. The first three notes of the melody, for example, are A, B flat, and A flat, sounded clearly in the opening measures by the marimba and vibraphone; just as the vibraphone introduces the B flat, however, the alto flute reiterates the initial A as the lower note of a sustained trill, and in the third measure, when vibraphone, clarinet, and bass clarinet introduce the A flat, a second clarinet enters to support the note of the alto flute. Thus the melodic fragment is instantaneously turned into a resonant tone cluster, on the dissolution of which the sequence is immediately repeated and expanded to include a fourth pitch.

But that important compositional device rarely calls attention to itself. As the piece grows, as the contrasts become bolder and faster paced, the listener's focus is drawn not so much to pitch structures as to sounds and gestures: spurts of dissonant brass, bubbles of woodwind, glassy chords and glissandos in the strings, percussive pitter patter, and so on. They fly by quickly—indeed, only the tone clusters in the strings near the end of the piece are repeated enough times to allow their makeup to be fully grasped on first hearing—and in their rapid succession they form a fascinating kaleidoscopic sonic image.

* * *

Like Druckman, Michael Colgrass had early experience in jazz, but his involvement was stronger and longer lasting, and references to various jazz styles dot the scores of both *Light Spirit* and *Deja Vu*.

Colgrass was born in Chicago on April 22, 1932. He began his music activities as a self-taught drummer in neighborhood jazz bands, and his formal musical education did not start until 1950, when he entered the University of Illinois at Urbana to study percussion with Paul Price and composition with Eugene Weigel. After serving for two years as a percussionist in the Seventh Army Band in Germany, he returned to the United States in 1956 and finished his bachelor's degree at the University of Illinois. He then moved to New York, where for the next ten years he earned his living as a freelance percussionist. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Colgrass continued his studies in composition, principally with Wallingford Riegger and Ben Weber. Most of his works from that period are for percussion instruments, but those pieces that involve pitch reflect the influence of his teachers and follow strict serialism.

Colgrass broke from the serialist tradition in 1966 with an orchestral work, *As Quiet As*, inspired by children's similes and featuring a theme from a Beethoven sonatina transformed into the styles of Haydn, Stravinsky, Webern, and Count Basie. Paraphrase figured in later pieces as well: the 1975 *Concertmasters*, for three violin soloists and orchestra, imitates concerto styles from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries; the 1976 *Best Wishes, U.S.A.*, for two choruses, jazz band, and orchestra, pays homage to a variety of indigenous American musical idioms; the 1978 *Flashbacks*, for brass quintet, is a musical autobiography that includes references not only to Western musics but also

to music of the Orient, which Colgrass has visited several times. The essence of Colgrass's style in recent years, however, is simply a free-flowing richly colored and sharply punctuated mixture of tonality and atonality.

Deja Vu, which won the 1978 Pulitzer Prize, was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic as part of a series of concertos for its principal players. Originally proposed as a concerto for the orchestra's timpanist, it quickly evolved into a showpiece for the orchestra's entire percussion section. It was premiered under the direction of Erich Leinsdorf on October 20, 1977, with Roland Kohloff, Walter Rosenberger, Elden Bailey, and Morris Lang as soloists.

The title refers both to Colgrass's recollections of his experiences as a performer--he says that with this commission he was "suddenly thrown back to my 'previous life,' that of percussionist and percussion composer"--and to the music's vague allusions to various historical styles.

Like *Aureole*, *Deja Vu* contains a single musical kernel from which the entire piece generates, but here the material is not a pitch series but a theme (heard initially in the vibraphone) that is treated to variation and development. As Colgrass explains:

This theme first appears in a serial form introduced at the beginning of the work by the four soloists, and then later in a purely rhythmic form on non-melodic percussion. From time to time the listener will hear the original classical version of the theme very clearly (as when it is played by the violas early in the work) and sometimes hidden (as when the strings play it slowly and softly under various musics in the percussion). At one point, the theme storms out in the brass in an almost romantic outburst...All of the music, no matter how abstract, emanates from this classical line, even the jazz.

Also as in *Aureole*, in *Deja Vu* one tends to notice the individual character and color of the various sections more than their thematic connections. Colgrass, too, is a master orchestrator, and here he has sought to create textures that enhance and embellish the often fragile sounds of the percussion instruments: a harp doubles the pitches of the toto-tom, string harmonics amplify the upper partials of the vibraphone, low pizzicatos echo soft taps on the timpani. "The idea is simple," Colgrass writes,

but it provides a way of glorifying the percussion sound and extending the effect of the instruments beyond their normal capacity. In this sense one might say that I use the orchestra the way a cook uses herbs--to heighten the subtle flavors of the various percussion instruments and make them more memorable.

Light Spirit, commissioned and premiered by the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble of New York in 1963, contains several of the elements of Colgrass's early style that *Deja Vu* attempts to recall, most notably the virtuosic writing for the two percussionists and the snatches of animated jazz; but whereas in the orchestral piece the jazz like passages are strictly notated, in the chamber work both the guitarist and the vibraphonist occasionally improvise. Although *Light Spirit* dates from near the end of Colgrass's serial period, it does not involve a strict use of serial technique. Colgrass writes:

I have two distinct sides to my personality: a serious unintelligent self and an intelligent unserious self. Then every so often, just by luck, I achieve a perfectly unique combination of these: a non-intelligent unserious self. In this state, I withdraw from all sense of responsibility and just enjoy writing pieces like *Light Spirit*.

—James Wierzbicki is music editor of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*.

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Michael Colgrass

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The Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, organized in 1880, is the second oldest major American symphony orchestra (only the New York Philharmonic is older). Rudolf Ganz, Vladimir Golschmann and Walter Susskind are among the Orchestra's distinguished music directors; since 1979, Leonard Slatkin has held the post. Beginning in the 1920s, the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra has made recordings for RCA Victor, Columbia, Capitol, Vox, Nonesuch and Telarc as well as the recording for New World of John Knowles Paine's, "Mass In D" (NW 262/263) with Gunther Schuller conducting.

Leonard Slatkin has been associated with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra since 1968 in a variety of capacities. He begins his fifth season as principal conductor and music director in the autumn of 1983. Born in Los Angeles in 1944 to musical parents (his father served 3 years as concertmaster of

the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra), he studied violin, piano, composition and conducting. After attending the Juilliard School, Mr. Slatkin gave his conducting debut with the Youth Orchestra of New York at Carnegie Hall in 1964. He attracted nationwide attention in 1974 when he conducted the New York Philharmonic as a substitute for Eiccardo Muti. Mr. Slatkin has also enjoyed a continuing association with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a guest conductor and has also led orchestras in Minneapolis and New Orleans. His European debut came in 1974 when he conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in place of Sir Adrian Boult.

Catherine Comet joined the Saint Louis Symphony in September 1981 as Exxon/Arts Endowment Conductor. Previously, she was conductor and music director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Symphony and Chamber Orchestras and conductor of the Ballet Company of the Theatre National de l'Opera de Paris. A native of France, Miss Comet studied at the Conservatoire National Superieur de Musique in Paris and at the Juilliard School in New York. Her principal teachers have included Igor Markevitch, Pierre Boulez and Jean Fournet. In 1968, she was a prize winner in the prestigious Dimitri Mitropoulos International contest for Orchestra Conductors and her guest appearances have included concerts with London's BBC Symphony Orchestra and Paris' Orchestre Philharmonique.

Richard Holmes joined the Saint Louis Symphony as Principal Timpanist in 1969; he was previously music director and conductor of the New York Youth Symphony Orchestra. Principal Percussionist Richard O'Donnell has been with the Orchestra sin 1959 and is presently director of the Saint Louis Percussion Quartet; he is a composer and film writer and designer of both standard and original percussion instruments. John Kasica attended the Juilliard School and joined the Orchestra in 1971; he currently plays all percussion instruments and is especially known as the Orchestra's mallet player. Thomas Stubbs also received his training at the Juilliard School and now teaches at the University of Missouri in St. Louis. He has been with the Saint Louis Symphony since 1970 and has also performed with the American Symphony, the Royal Ballet Orchestra and the Kansas City Philharmonic under guest conductor Leonard Bernstein.

Jacob Berg has been principal flutist with the Saint Louis Symphony since 1969. He received his musical training at the Curtis Institute and has performed with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony and the Buffalo Philharmonic.

Violist **Thomas Dumm** studied at the Curtis Institute; his first appointment was with the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell. He also served as principal violist with the Rochester Philharmonic and the Baltimore Symphony.

Guitarist **David Starobin** is a specialist in contemporary music; more than 100 compositions have been written for him, including works by Elliott Carter and David Del Tredici. He's appeared on more than 35 recordings and is currently teaching at the State University of New York at SUNY-Purchase.

1- **Michael Colgrass**

Deja Vu (16:58)

for percussion quartet and orchestra

Soloists: Richard Holmes, John Kasica, Richard O'Donnell, Thomas Stubbs. Saint Louis Symphony, Leonard Slatkin, Cond.

(publ. Carl Fischer, Inc.)

1- Jacob Druckman

Aureole (12:10)

Saint Louis Symphony, Leonard Slakin, cond.

(pub. Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.)

2- Michael Colgrass

Light Spirit (7:57)

Jacob Berg, flute; Thomas Dumm, viola; John Kasica, Richard O'Donnell, percussion; David Starobin, guitar; Catherine Comet, cond.

(publ. Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.)

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