

**Olly Wilson: Sinfonia — John Harbison: Symphony No. 1
New World 80331-2**

John Harbison was born in 1938 in Orange, New Jersey. His father, a Princeton history professor, was an amateur composer in both serious and pop styles. John studied violin and piano and pursued jazz obsessively. Though already a prize-winning composer at fifteen, he received little encouragement from Walter Piston (New World Records NW 286, 302), with whom he studied at Harvard. Rather than abandon his ambitions, he broadened his activities, playing more jazz and conducting. He spent a summer at Tanglewood, and after Harvard he studied composition with Boris Blacher in Berlin and conducting with Dean Dixon in Salzburg, where he took a first prize.

For graduate school Harbison determined to study with Roger Sessions (New World Records 80296-2, NW 302, NW 307, NW 320, 80345-2), whose Third Symphony, commissioned by the Boston Symphony for its 75th anniversary, had greatly impressed him during his Harvard years. Sessions was then on the Princeton faculty so there Harbison went. His teachers also included Milton Babbitt (80346-2, 80364-2) and Earl Kim (80237-2). He has taught at Harvard, Brandeis, Reed, and, since 1969, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a conductor he enriched Boston's concert life with adventurous programming for the Cantata Singers or such new-music ensembles as Collage. Like many composers who hold an academic job, Harbison composes most intensely in the summer generally preferring to work on a farm belonging to his wife's mother in Token Creek, Wisconsin.

Harbison's music draws together gestures and ideas from musical worlds that reflect such favorite composers as Robert Schumann and Heinrich Schütz, the songs of George Gershwin, and the hieratic qualities of Igor Stravinsky. His work has always been expressive, though never with a heart-on-sleeve emoting of personal angst, a mode that simply does not interest him. He much prefers to write music that suggests the catharsis of ritual, and in this respect he resembles Stravinsky, perhaps most clearly in his chamber opera *Full Moon in March*. Recently Harbison has shown an interest in recapturing such historical genres as the formal set of variations (as in his Variations for violin, clarinet, and piano) or the piano quintet.

The Symphony No. 1 comes naturally in this progression, being cast in four discrete movements following a two-hundred-year tradition of symphonic writing rather than the symphony-in-one-movement form that is quite frequently encountered these days. Commissioned by the Boston Symphony for its centennial (and first performed under the direction of Seiji Ozawa in March, 1984), the symphony was begun in June 1980 in Token Creek, where Harbison was finishing a song cycle in Italian, *Motetti di Montale*. He worked on the symphony along with the piano quintet during a residency at the American Academy in Rome and completed it in Token Creek in August the following summer. He has remarked, "Just as it felt very right to be working on Italian songs in the Midwest, it was natural to work on this American-accented piece in Italy. I have always found the view from the distance to be clearest."

The first movement originated in a dream in which Harbison saw many acquaintances, few of them musicians, performing, mainly on metal instruments, in a room used as a bar during intermissions at Boston's Symphony Hall.

When I woke up I was haunted by the metallic harmonies; but it took a while to realize that they were in the public domain—that the “composer” was an inhabitant of my subconscious. As with previous “dream ideas” I felt able to get very close to what I had heard, and recognized the idea as one I was waiting for. This first idea permeates the whole piece: I thought of it as being like a forge.

A woodwind refrain and later a slow melody for violins and horn lead into the main body of the movement, marked *Camminando* (“at a walking pace”), which moves in a spare, mostly two-part texture (a long nervous tune over a steady bass) that reduces to a single part near its culmination.

The second movement is brief and evanescent. Its textures are much denser than those of the first movement, but its airy impulse seems to pass like a cloud.

Harbison senses the echo of songs by Gershwin and Schumann, which he had been playing while working on the symphony, in the opening of the third movement. The planned mood of the movement, a pastorale, was sidetracked when an unexplained interval, a low sixth, kept appearing. Eventually he says, “I perceived the interval to be the concluding sonority in Seymour Shifrin's *in Eius Memoriam*, which I had conducted with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players shortly before beginning the symphony. It had become an image for loss whose significance had to be acknowledged to complete the piece. This is done in two ways: first, in the stormy course taken by the movement, finally by a brief citation of the Shifrin piece near the close.”

The last movement is shaped in the Baroque manner, with a ritornello and various episodes, while a double-time pulse accumulates rhythmic energy to the end. Drawing on various sources past and present, popular and classical, John Harbison's symphony is distinctively American and at the same time part of the grand tradition.

Like Harbison's work, the *Sinfonia* of Olly Wilson (born 1937 in St. Louis) was commissioned by the Boston Symphony for its centennial. It, too, is a multi-movement symphonic score that acknowledges past traditions while being of the American present. Composed in 1983-84, the *Sinfonia* received its premiere in Boston's Symphony Hall in October 1984 with Seiji Ozawa conducting.

Following early musical studies in St. Louis and receiving a bachelor's degree from Washington University, Wilson pursued graduate work at the universities of Illinois and Iowa. His composition teachers included Robert Wykes, Robert Kelley, and Phillip Bezanson. He has played both piano and double bass in jazz groups and has been a member of the bass section of several orchestras.

In 1967 Wilson returned to the University of Illinois to study electronic music at the Studio for Experimental Music. This work bore fruit almost at once in his composition *Cetus*, which won first prize in the first international competition for electronic composition sponsored by Dartmouth College. Wilson has continued to work in electronic mediums, though not to the exclusion of other kinds of composition. *Voices*, commissioned for the 1970 Festival of Contemporary Music at Tanglewood, was premiered by the Berkshire Music Center Orchestra under Gunther Schuller and later repeated by the Boston Symphony under Seiji Ozawa.

After teaching at Florida A&M University and at Oberlin, Wilson joined the music department of the University of California at Berkeley in 1970. In addition to his activity as a composer, he is a keen student of African music and has published several scholarly articles on African and Afro- American music, notably in the journal *The Black Perspective in Music*.

Olly Wilson's works include most of the standard chamber-music forms (string quartet, duo sonata, woodwind quintet, piano trio, and so on) as well as unique instrumental combinations, sometimes with electronic sounds. His orchestral works have been performed by many of the major symphony orchestras in this country.

Although he makes use of avant-garde techniques, Wilson is not a doctrinaire composer. The *Sinfonia* grows organically from its opening motive, B-flat followed by B-natural in the lower octave, played by plucked strings. This is extended in the next measure by a return to the upper B-flat, this time in an aggressive rhythm that will mark many future appearances. The figure provides much of the unifying sound of the piece in the form of major sevenths or minor seconds. Wilson has noted that the first movement evolves somewhat like "waves; each of which starts as an undeveloped motive that gradually becomes an extended musical idea before it is interrupted by the beginning of a new idea." After the successive waves build to the major climax of the movement, the solo clarinet offers a poignant coda.

The second movement is an elegy in memory of the composer's father, Olly Wilson, Sr., and his friend, the extraordinarily gifted young conductor Calvin Simmons, both of whom died during 1982- 83. The expressive force of the two principal melodic ideas is immediately evident; the second of them reinterprets an excerpt from a work of Wilson's that Calvin Simmons premiered in 1981.

The third movement is a stylized dance. One idea, featuring an angular melodic line in high strings and woodwinds, alternates with a second, characterized by rhythmic figures in strings, brass, and percussion. The climax reveals the music's source in traditional blues. —Steven Ledbetter

Steven Ledbetter is musci and program annotator of the Boston Symphony. His research interests include American musical theater and the orchestra music of the second New England School, particularly George Chadwick.

SEIJI OZAWA became the thirteenth music director the Boston Symphony in the fall of 1973. He was born in China in 1935 to Japanese parents, and graduated from the Toho School of Music in Tokyo with prizes in composition and conducting. Mr. Ozawa came to international attention when he won first prize at the conductors competition at Besançon, France. In 1970 he became artistic director of the Berkshire Music Festival. He has served as music director of the Ravinia Festival, the Toronto Symphony, and the San Francisco Symphony.

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, founded in 1881, has numbered Karl Muck, Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, Erich Leinsdorf, William Steinberg, and (currently) Seiji Ozawa among its illustrious music directors. It has championed contemporary music throughout its history, both in performances and in recordings. The Boston Symphony with Seiji Ozawa is also heard on *The Music of Charles Tomlinson Griffes* (80273-2), Roger Sessions' *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (80296-2), and Peter Lieberson's Piano Concerto featuring Peter Serkin (80325-2).

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

JOHN HARBISON

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Confinement. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble; Arthur Weisberg conducting. Nonesuch 71221.

The Flight Into Egypt. Roberta Anderson, soprano; Sanford Sylvan, baritone; The Cantata Singers and ensemble, David

Hoose conducting. New World Records 80395-2.

The Flower-Fed Buffaloes. David Evitts, baritone; Emmanuel Chorus; Speculum Musicae; John Harbison conducting.

Nonesuch 71366.

Four Songs of Solitude. Michelle Makarski, violin. New World Records 80391-2.
Full Moon in March. Various artists; Boston Musica Viva. CRI S-454. Piano Concerto.
Robert Miller, piano; American
Composers Orchestra; Gunther Schuller conducting. CRI S-440.

OLLY WILSON

Akwan. Richard Bunker, piano and electric piano; Baltimore Symphony; Paul Freeman
conducting. Columbia 33434.
Echoes. Phillip Rehfeldt, clarinet; tape. CRI S-367.
In Memoriam—Martin Luther King. Oberlin College Choir; tape; Robert Fountain
conducting. Oberlin College Records
Vol. 19. *Piano Pieces*. Natalie Hinderas, piano; tape. Desto 7102/3.
Piece for Four. Robert Willoughby, flute; Gene Young, trumpet; Joseph Schwartz, piano;
Bertram Turetzky, double bass.
CRI S-264.
Sometimes. William Brown, tenor; tape. New World Records 80423-2.

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OLLY WILSON: SINFONIA — JOHN HARBISON: SYMPHONY NO. 1

Boston Symphony Orchestra • Seiji Ozawa, music director & conductor

OLLY WILSON: Sinfonia (Publ. GunMar Music inc.)

I. Moderato (9:48)

II. Largo—*Elegy for Olly Wilson Sr.* and Calvin Simmons (8:55)

III. Allegro (5:07)

JOHN HARBISON: Symphony No. 1 (Publ. AMP Inc.)

I. Drammatico (9:05)

II. Allegro sfumato (2:02)

III. Paesaggio: andante (7:06)

IV. Tempo giusto (5:27)

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
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