

**William Bolcom/Symphony No.4**  
**New World Records 80356**

William Bolcom claims three American idols: Charles Ives, Scott Joplin, and Geroge Gershwin. Lucky are they, since Bolcom's generous notion of idolatry--encompassing as it does performance, scholarship, and composition--takes most active forms. Bolcom regularly performs Ives's songs with his wife, the mezzo-soprano Joan Morris. For Joplin, Bolcom's research led to the rediscovery of the opera *Treemonisha*, while his piano recordings were a fundamental part of the ragtime revival of the 1970s. And Bolcom has recorded the complete piano works of Gershwin.

Mere friends are also fortunate. For Eubie Blake, Bolcom co-authored *Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake*. To honor one teacher, Darius Milhaud, he recorded *Saudades do Brasil*. To honor another, the poet Theodore Roethke, Bolcom has set seven poems in his song cycle *Open House* (1975) as well as "The Rose," the text used in the second movement of the Fourth Symphony. Bolcom's collaboration with the poet Arnold Weinstein, which began in the early 1960s with the opera *Dynamite Tonite*, has extended over twenty-five years. But Bolcom's most important collaborator is his wife. As a performing duo, Bolcom and Morris present music ranging from Mozart to American parlor and music-hall songs, and have recorded more than a dozen albums. Much of Bolcom's vocal music takes into account the special qualities of Morris's voice. (When possible, he prefers to compose with specific performers in mind.)

Bolcom, who was born on May 26, 1938, in Seattle, trained at the University of Washington (where Roethke taught) and Stanford University, as well as with Milhaud. He has taught at Queens College, Yale, New York University, and, since 1973, the University of Michigan. In the 1987-88 season he became composer-in-residence at the Detroit Symphony. Concerning his works, he says, "I hope to embrace an enormous emotional range in my music: from the sublime to the ridiculous, often both at once, and everywhere in between." He has written four symphonies, concertos for piano and for violin, chamber and solo instrumental music, and the mammoth setting of the forty-six *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* by William Blake, nearly thirty years in the composing.

In the early 1960s Bolcom worked with improvisational theater groups. Between 1965 and 1967 he wrote four "session pieces," all concerning matters of ensemble and group dynamics and influenced by his theater experience. Session I was composed in Paris and New York during the spring of 1965 at the request of Luciano Berio, for his *Domaine Musical Ensemble* in Berlin that summer. Bolcom remembers the instrumentalist as being extraordinary musicians "who could do anything."

Like a jam session, the work is divided into short sections: Warmup, Session I, Discussion, SessionII, Interlude, Solos, Chorale, and Final Session. Unlike a jam session, it is carefully notated, allowing a certain latitude of pitch and speed but within a precise structural framework. Though a twelve-tone row lies behind the composition, Bolcom mainly engages in "spotlighting" groups of intervals to give these "confrontation-like games" their particular character.

The world of the Fourth Symphony is a place where words and music meet. Roethke's stunning poem, so evocative of sights and sounds, had long appealed to Bolcom, but he "felt the setting would need a counterbalancing movement, structured musically in its own way as much as Roethke's long, quadrapartite poem is." A commission from the Saint Louis Symphony allowed him to set "The 2 Rose," as the second movement of this symphony, in 1986. The orchestra gave the premiere performance under the direction of Leonard Slatkin on March 13, 1987.

Bolcom balanced the two movements by conceiving them as complementary halves of a diptych: the first movement is instrumental, the second vocal; the first is energetic, the second increasingly meditative; the first recalls the craggy mountains of Roethke's (and Bolcom's) Northwest, the second recalls the sea. Yet the first is only half as long as the second and, in spite of its weight, sounds "intentionally like an immense upbeat."

For the structure of the first movement, "Soundscape," Bolcom deliberately chose to create another parallel with the poem. "The binary shape of 'Soundscape' is akin to the feeling of two-plus-two in the four sections of 'The Rose.'" He also notes that the opening of the first movement is less thematic than textural, "often with extractable melody but with the texture integrated closely to it."

Knowing that Joan Morris would be his soloist, Bolcom let the poem take center stage in the second movement. "Joan understands poetry and projects what it means," he explains. With one small change in the fourth stanza--"As if another man appeared" became "As if another had appeared" [see text]--he removed any reference to the narrator's gender.

The four sections of the poem are of approximately equal length, but made up of stanzas of varying size, "some with crescendoes of short lines, lists of memories (Roethke was very conscious of the building of poetry by the careful building of lines, each balancing the other, hewn out of rock, as if by a stonemason), others with long, deep vowel-rhymes." The sounds described in the third section posed the greatest challenge to a setter of texts. Bolcom responded with stylized sounds of the environment over which the text is largely spoken. Eventually the music drops out so that one may, in Roethke's words, "think of American sounds in this silence."

Bolcom considers the overall shape of the symphony to be "like a reverse wedge, in that it starts with high energy and progresses in stages toward a deep calm." The calm at the end, reflecting the narrator's inner peace, is cradled by the exquisite arrival of the key of C major, long prepared and long awaited, a spotlighting of pitches that concerns Bolcom still, twenty years after Session I. —*Susan Feder*

Currently Director of Promotions at G. Schirmer, Inc., *Susan Feder* was Editorial Coordinator of The New Grove Dictionary of American Music.

*The Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra*, the second-oldest major symphony orchestra in America, was organized in 1880. Rudolf Ganz, Vladimir Golschmann, and Walter Susskind are among the orchestra's distinguished past music directors. The Saint Louis Symphony has recorded for RCA Victor, Angel, Columbia, Capitol, Vox, Nonesuch, and Telarc, as well as two releases for New World Records: John Knowles Paine's Mass in D

(NW 262/263) and an album of works by Michael Colgrass and Jacob Druckman (NW 318).

*Leonard Slatkin's* association with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra dates from 1968; his appointment as music director and conductor came in 1979. Slatkin made his conducting debut with the Youth Orchestra of New York at Carnegie Hall in 1966, and his European debut in 1974 with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He conducts major orchestras and opera companies throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia, and has enjoyed a continuing association with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a guest conductor. Slatkin has recorded extensively with the Saint Louis Symphony and with other orchestras.

*Joan Morris* studied speech and voice with Clifford Jackson and Frederica Schmitz-Svevo and at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. She has been performing with her husband and accompanist, William Bolcom, since 1972, specializing in American popular song from the late nineteenth century to the present, including music of Gershwin, Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, Kern, Lieber and Stoller, and cabaret songs by Bolcom have recorded fourteen albums together, one of which earned Morris a Grammy nomination. Since 1981, she has taught at the University of Michigan.

American poet *Theodore Roethke* (1908-1963) won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 for *The Waking*. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, which includes "The Rose," was published posthumously in 1966. Bolcom describes Roethke's early style in "The Rose" as "an avantgarde, almost stream-of-consciousness 'Freudian' style; later he was to become more and more classically oriented, using such ancient poetic forms as the sestina and villanelle." In Roethke's home town of Saginaw, Michigan, there is still a Roethke's Florist.

### **The Rose**

Theodore Roethke

I  
There are those to whom place is unimportant,  
But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,  
Is important-  
Where the hawks sway out into the wind,  
Without a single wingbeat,  
And the eagles sail low over the fir trees,  
And the gulls cry against the crows  
In the curved harbors,  
And the tide rises up against the grass  
Nibbled by ship and rabbits.  
A time for watching the tide,  
For the heron's hieratic fishing,  
For the sleepy cries of the towhee,  
The morning birds gone, the twittering ditches,

But still the flash of the kingfisher, the wingbeat of the scoter.  
The sun a ball of fire coming down over the water,  
The last geese crossing against the reflected afterlight,  
The moon retreating into a vague cloudshape  
To the cries of the owl, the eerie whooper.  
The old log subsides with the lessening waves,  
And there is silence.  
I sway outside myself  
Into the darkening currents,  
Into the small spillage of driftwood,  
The waters swirling past the tiny headlands.  
Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment  
While on a far point of the rocks  
The light heightened, And below, in a mist out of nowhere,  
The first rain gathered?

## II

As when a ship sails with a light wind-  
The waves less than the ripples made by rising fish,  
The lacelike wrinkles of the wake widening, thinning out,  
Sliding away from the traveler's eye,  
The prow pitching easily up and down,  
The whole ship rolling slightly sideways, The stern high, dipping like a child's boat in a pond-  
Our motion continues.  
But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,  
Stays,  
Stays in its true place,  
Flowering out of the dark,  
Widening at high noon, face upward,  
A single wild rose, struggling out of the white embrace of the morning-glory,  
Out of the briary hedge, the tangle of matted underbrush,  
Beyond the clover, the ragged hay,  
Beyond the sea pine, the oak, the windtipped madrona,  
Moving with the waves, the undulating driftwood,  
Where the slow creek wind down to the black sand of the shore  
With its thick grassy scum and crabs scuttling back into their glistening craters.  
An I think of roses, roses,  
White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses,  
And my father standing astride the cement benches,  
Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, the Mrs. Russells, and his own elaborate hybrids,  
And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself.  
What need for heaven, the, With that man, and those roses?

### III

What do they tell us, sound and silence?  
I think of American sounds in this silence:  
On the banks of the  
Tombstone, the windharps having their say,  
The thrush singing alone, that easy bird,  
The killdeer whistling away from me,  
The mimetic chortling of the catbird  
Down in the corner of the garden, among the raggedy lilacs,  
The bobolink skirring from a broken fencepost,  
The bluebird, lover of holes in old wood, lifting its light song,  
And that thin cry, like a needle piercing the ear, the insistent cicada,  
And the ticking of snow around oil drums in the Dakotas,  
The thin whine of telephone wires in the wind of a Michigan winter,  
The shriek of nails as old shingles are ripped from the top of a roof,  
The bulldozer backing away, the hiss of the sandblaster,  
And the deep chorus of horns coming up from the streets in early morning.  
I return to the twittering of swallows above water,  
And that sound, that single sound,  
When the mind remembers all,  
And gently the light enters the sleeping soul,  
A sound so thin it could not woo a bird,  
Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire.  
I think of a rock singing, and light making its own silence,  
At the edge of a ripening meadow, in early summer,  
The moon lolling in the close elm, a shimmer of silver,  
Or that lonely time before the breaking of morning  
When the slow freight winds along the edge of the ravaged hillside,  
And the wind tries the shape of a tree,  
While the moon lingers,  
And a drop of rain water hangs at the tip of a leaf  
Shifting in the awakening sunlight  
Like the eye of a new-caught fish.

### IV

I live with the rocks, their weeds,  
Their filmy fringes of green, their harsh  
Edges, their holes  
Cut by the sea-slime, far from the crash of the long swell,  
The oily, tar-laden walls  
Of the toppling waves,  
Where the salmon ease their way into the kelp beds,  
And the sea rearranges itself among the small islands.  
Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,  
Among the half-dead trees,  
I came upon the true ease of myself,

As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,\*  
And I stood outside myself,  
Beyond becoming and perishing,  
A something wholly other,  
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,  
And yet was still.  
And I rejoiced in being what I was:  
In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,  
In the bird beyond the bough, the single one  
With all the air to greet him as he flies,  
The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;  
And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,  
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,  
Gathering to itself sound and silence-  
Mine and the sea-wind's.

\*The text sung is "As if another had appeared..." (see notes). "The Rose" from The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke by Theodore Roethke.

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**William Bolcom**  
Symphony No. 4  
Session I

Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra Leonard Slatkin Music Director and Conductor Joan Morris Mezzo-Soprano

Producer: Elizabeth Ostrow Recording engineer: William Hoekstra  
Digital technician and editor: E. Amelia Rogers, Soundmirror, Inc.  
Recorded on Sony PCM 1610 Recorded March 20 and 22, 1987, at Powell Symphony Hall, Saint Louis  
Cover design: Bob Defrin

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Black Host. William Albright, organ; Sydney Hodkinson, percussion; tape. Nonesuch H-71260.

Black Max: The Cabaret Songs of Arnold Weinstein and William Bolcom. Joan Morris, mezzosoprano; William Bolcom, piano. RCA HRC 1-5477.

Lime Jello. Joan Morris, mezzo-soprano; William Bolcom, piano. RCA Red Seal AMLI-5830.

Open House; Commedia. Paul Sperry, tenor; St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Dennis Russell Davies conducting. Nonesuch 71324.

Piano Concerto. William Bolcom, piano; Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Sydney Hodkinson conducting. Pantheon PFN 2041.  
Second Sonata; Duo Fantasy; Graceful Ghost. Sergiu Luca, violin; William Bolcom, piano. Nonesuch 79058.  
Three Ghost Rags. Paul Jacobs, piano. Nonesuch 779006.  
Twelve New Etudes. Marc-Andre Hamelin, piano. New World NW 354.  
Whisper Moon. Aeolian Chamber Players, Lewis Kaplan conducting. Folkways 33903.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bolcom, William. Introduction to *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth-Century Music*, by George Rochberg. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.  
---- and Robert Kimball. *Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake*. New York: Viking, 1973.  
Clarkson, Austin. "William Bolcom." In *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. London and New York: Macmillan, 1986.  
Freed, Richard. "Fourth Symphony, William Bolcom." *Saint Louis Symphony Program Book*, March 13-15, 1987.  
Rockwell, John. "Music, Every Which Way." *New York Times Magazine*, August 16, 1987, p. 32.

1- Session 1 (9:49)  
(publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

Jacob Berg, flute/alto flute; Jan Gippo, piccolo; Peter Bowman, oboe; Barbara Herr, English horn; George Berry, bassoon; Timothy Myers, trombone; Thomas Dumm, viola; John Sant'Ambrogio, cello; Richard O'Donnell, percussion;

Symphony No. 4  
(publ. E. B. Marks Music Corp.)

2- I. Soundscape (12:48)  
3- II. The Rose (24:34)

Joan Morris, mezzo-soprano

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