

GEORGE PERLE Complete Wind Quintets

New World Records 80359

One danger with "isms," Theodore Adorno wrote in his *Aesthetic Theory*, is that, initially, artists who follow the "ism" less religiously tend to be underrated in favor of those whose allegiance is more dramatic. Few composers better exemplify that phenomenon than George Perle, who for much of his career has stood in the shadow of the serialist composers with whom he is dubiously associated. Only gradually has the music world come to realize how individual his music is, what a flexible musical language he has developed, and how different that language is from serialism. Thus the 1986 Pulitzer Prize Perle received for one of the works on this record, the Wind Quintet No. 4, seemed not so much an award for an isolated achievement as an overdue tribute to someone who has upheld the highest musical standards for over a quarter-century.

Perle's divergence from mainstream twelve-tone music came early, through one of those happy "misunderstandings" on which so much historical progress depends. In 1937 he borrowed the score to Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*. Through it he discovered Schoenberg's twelve-tone system; but instead of regarding the row as an inviolable ordering of the twelve pitches, he considered it a modified scale that the composer could move around in at will. By the time he realized his mistake, he had discovered so many possibilities in his own, more flexible system that, as he said, "Schoenberg's idea of the series seemed so primitive compared to mine." Perle persevered in developing a "twelve-tone tonality," method of using the entire chromatic spectrum that corresponds closely to the major/minor system of traditional tonality. In recent years younger composers have been influenced by Perle's "misunderstanding" of the system, and have extended twelve-tone tonality to a larger body of work.

The differences between Perle's system and serial music may look abstruse on paper, but they are quite obvious to the ear. Clearly, his technique allows for a melodiousness foreign to serial music's angular, discontinuous lines. More remarkable is the way in which the music defuses a pernicious distinction between tonality and atonality by hovering ambiguously in between; it continually skirts reference to a particular tonal center. Perle's harmony glides between the simplest and most complex sonorities with unique fluidity. If serialism retains a vestige of romanticism's angst, Perle has invented a chromatic classicism in which opposites are seamlessly reconciled.

These quantities are nowhere more apparent than in Perle's wind quintets. This medium, so neglected by most composers (apparently, except for the German Tilo Medek, no one else has written so many of them since the early nineteenth century), seems well suited to Perle's language: the instruments' varied colors clarify his stratified harmonies, their staccato attacks nicely articulate his tempo structures, and their breathing requirements fit his classically proportioned phrases. Though each quintet has its own distinctive personality, Perle's conception of the genre is well defined. For example, the clarinet seems to be his preferred solo instrument, as witness extended solos in the Second and Third Quintets, and each quintet begins with a "winding-up" motive for that instrument, from which the succeeding movement is generated.

The First Quintet (1959) closely follows an eight-year period during which Perle wrote nothing he still acknowledges; at the time, he was teaching at the University of California at Davis. Though Berg and Bartok were the first composers with whom Perle felt strong affinities, this quintet's juxtaposed panels of sound, recurring in new combinations, seem distinctly Stravinskian, the second movement in particular calling to mind that composer's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. However, in the Second

Quintet, written only a year later, we are in another world. Its melting harmonies and evanescent melodies look to no other composer, but only to Perle's later music.

Rhythm in Perle's music, an aspect not often discussed by commentators, is largely a function of tempo relationships, and the quintets conveniently demonstrate four different stages of his tempo conception. The First suggests accelerando through decreasing duration values, following half-notes (listen particularly to the French horn) with dotted quarters, quarters, dotted eighths, and eighths. The Second experiments with the related idea of metric modulation, which is more clearly audible here than in the more heavily layered music of Elliott Carter. Except in the last movement, Perle limits his metronomic relationships to ratios of two to three.

Soon after writing the Second Quintet, Perle moved to the City University of New York (Queens College), where he taught until 1985. In the Third Quintet (1967) he expanded metric modulation to a more complex system in which tempos are related by ratios of four to five, four to seven, five to eight, etc. This is the quintet in which such relationships are most audible, especially in the final movement, where staccato, reiterated chords keep track of the fluid meter and tempo changes. This quintet also contains the most unusually textured movement of the group, the "Recitative," whose atmospheric chords appear and evaporate one note at a time.

For the record, the Fourth Quintet (1984) is the only one written strictly in Perle's system, though the system informs all of his writing, and the ear is hard put to tell the difference. The piece abandons the strictures of metric modulation for a freer conception of tempo with frequent *ritards* and *accelerandos*. Like so many late works of important composers, this quintet possesses a greater smoothness and cohesiveness of language than the earlier ones, for which some of the style's more picturesque idiosyncrasies have been sacrificed (one thinks of the late Beethoven sonatas, or Wagner's counterpoint in *Parsifal*). The work's most fascinating feature is possibly the a-rhythmically contrapuntal texture of the Scherzo (forever interrupted by the rabble-rousing horn), unique in the genre's literature. Symmetry on every level is an increasingly important aspect of Perle's late music, and the finale quotes heavily from the opening movement.

Less dramatic than that of Boulez, Wuorinen, or even Babbitt, Perle's music usually sounds simpler than it is. If his surfaces seem uncomplicated, one can listen *through* the texture to hear the background irregularities that keep the music interesting—a changing note in a held chord, a beat quietly dropped or added—much as one does in Mozart or Schubert. Repetition is common and never literal. Perle never writes down to an audience and never worries about "accessibility," but he is a firm believer that "a piece that 'makes sense' will reach one, at some intuitive level, even at first hearing." Such is certainly true of these quintets, which place Perle alongside Schoenberg, Nielsen, and Jolivet as composers who have raised the wind quintet above its utilitarian origins to make an enduring personal statement.

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann, *a composer and critic, is new-music columnist for The Village Voice.*

The Dorian Wind Quintet was founded in 1961 at the Tanglewood Festival under a Fromm Foundation grant. In addition to performing the standard repertoire, the quintet has premiered works for winds by such composers as Lee Hoiby, Lukas Foss, Morton Subotnick, and Jacob Druckman. George Perle's Pulitzer Prizewinning Quintet No. 4 was commissioned and premiered by the Dorian Quintet. The first wind quintet to appear at Carnegie Hall, in 1981, the Dorian Quintet has recorded for Vox, CRI, and Serenus.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(see also the bibliography in the liner notes to New World 80342.)

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Swift, Richard. "A Tonal Analogue: The Tone-Centered Music of George Perle," *Perspectives of New Music*, 21 (1982), pp. 257-84.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Ballade; Concertino; Serenade No. 3. Richard Goode, piano; Music Today Ensemble, Gerard Schwarz conducting. Nonesuch 9 79108.

Monody I. Samuel Baron, flute. CRI SD 212.

Pantomime, Interlude, and Fugue; Fantasy-Variations; Six New Etudes; Suite in C; Short Sonata. Michael Boriskin, piano. New World 80342.

Six Etudes. Bradford Gowen, piano. New World 80304.

Six Preludes. Robert Helps, piano. CRI SD 288.

String Quartet No. 5. Composers Quartet. Nonesuch 71280.

String Quartet No. 7. New York String Quartet. CRI SD 387.

String Quintet, Op. 35. Beaux Arts Quartet, with Walter Trampler, viola, CRI SD 148.

Three Movements for Orchestra. Royal Philharmonic, David Epstein conducting. CRI SD 331.

Toccat. Robert Miller, piano. CRI SD 306.

George Perle *Wind Quintets*

Wind Quintet No. 1

(publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

1- I. (2:35)

2- II. (5:30)

3- III. (2:49)

Wind Quintet No. 2

(publ. Boelke-Bomart, Inc.)

4- I. (4:50)

5- II. (3:48)

6- III. (2:27)

Wind Quintet No. 3

(publ. Boelke-Bomart, Inc.)

7- I. (Fantasia) (3:15)

8- II. Scherzo (3:43)

9- III. Recitative (2:44)

10- IV. Finale (3:50)

Wind Quintet No. 4

(Winner of the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for Music)

(publ. Galaxy Music Corp.)

11- Invention (2:38)

12- Scherzo (5:01)

13- Pastorale (5:44)
14- Finale (4:30)

The Dorian Wind Quintet
Elizabeth Mann, flute
Gerard Reuter, oboe
Jerry Kirkbride, clarinet
David Jolley, horn
Jane Taylor, bassoon

Julie Landsman, guest horn, on Quintets 2 and 3

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