

AN ARTHUR BERGER

New World Records 80360

RETROSPECTIVE

with GILBERT KALISH, piano

JOEL KROSNICK, cello

CHRISTOPHER OLDFATHER, piano

JOEL SMIRNOFF, violin

DAVID STAROBIN, guitar

Members of the Boehm Quintette

Arthur Berger is a stalwart of the American concert tradition. No popularizer, he has for some fifty years been producing sturdily crafted pieces that spring from the mixed lineage of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Copland. Yet the style is all his own. At times it readily appeals. Always it challenges.

Born in 1912 and raised in the Bronx, Berger first studied at City College and New York University, later at the Longy School of Music and at Harvard. He completed his formal education with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. From 1939 to 1943 he taught at Mills College and Brooklyn College, then began writing music criticism for the *New York Sun* and, principally, the *New York Herald-Tribune*. In 1953 Berger joined the faculty of Brandeis University; he has also taught at Harvard and the Juilliard School, and is currently on the faculty of the New England Conservatory.

Like many of his composer contemporaries, Berger has been an important and prolific writer. In addition to his stints as a journalist, he founded two quite different periodicals, each an outgrowth of the notion of a "little magazine" directed to a special public. The first, *The Musical Mercury*, was started in 1934 by Berger and Bernard Herrmann--the man later famous as a Hollywood film composer. Although *The Musical Mercury* included some articles about new works, it mostly explored European compositions of the past.

The journal with which Berger is most closely identified, however, is *Perspectives of New Music*, begun with Benjamin Boretz in 1962. Like Berger himself, *Perspectives* is sober, analytical, cerebral, and represents a frequently misunderstood wing of post-World War II music in America: the so-called academic serialists. For these composers, the public has been small and the response mixed. In 1958 Milton Babbitt's article "The Composer as Specialist" (which ran in *High Fidelity* as "Who Cares if You Listen?") thoughtfully explored the ramifications of music written "for, of, and by specialists," and as recently as 1987 Berger declared in the *Boston Review* that the number of listeners was irrelevant: "If Serialism's detractors mean that it has not become big-time box office, they should be reminded that there are other audiences, not at all negligible, besides the big one." In a country where creative artists must find a posture between individual inspiration and democratic ideals--where to many, the issue of audience size *does* matter--Babbitt and Berger's position is as much defensive as it is a declaration of principles. Yet their music, conceived for a small circle initiates, continues to flourish within its own realm. The pieces recorded here are evidence of why this is so.

In 1941, two years after returning from study with Boulanger, Berger wrote his *Quartet for Winds*, a charmingly playful work that is among his best known. Virgil Thomson has called it "one of the most satisfactory pieces for wind in the whole modern repertory." The quartet is dedicated to Aaron Copland, with whom Berger has been long associated. They were both members of the Young

Composers' Group (founded by Copland), which met informally in the early 1930s; Berger wrote one of the first major pieces of criticism about Copland's *Piano Variations* (published in *The Musical Mercury*, 1934), and he published the first book devoted to Copland's music, which has yet to be superseded by a full-length study of comparable analytical acuity. Not surprisingly, then, the quartet owes much to Copland. Wide-open and resonant, yet thoroughly economical, it employs spacious registral placement, enhanced by melodies built of large intervallic leaps. A particularly engaging rhythmic zest comes from a fusion of the forward-spinning energy of Bach (as in the opening of the first movement, which is built on a subject reminiscent of the C-minor Fugue in Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*) and the sinuous syncopation of jazz (as in the second oboe solo of the second movement). *Duo No. 1 for Violin and Piano* of 1948 is similarly under the spell of Copland. If the older American's *Piano Variations* have a "stony eloquence"—as Berger described them in his Copland book—so does this work, with its stern opening gestures and broadly drawn conclusion.

The other two duos further illustrate both the consistency and complexity of Berger's music. As a young man he had encountered Schoenberg's *Die glückliche Hand*, a crucial, formative experience. But by 1933 he had stopped composing, and when he resumed in the late thirties, he had spent time working with Boulanger in Paris and was responding to very different forces. As Berger recalled in a 1978 interview, "I was doing analysis and I was getting more and more interested in Stravinsky. And I knew that Boulanger was very close to Stravinsky. In my dissertation [at Harvard], I was going to defend Stravinsky's as the 'proper' direction, you see, as against Schoenberg's." Eventually, Berger reconciled the Viennese with the Russian/Parisian, and what resulted was a personal amalgam of elements from each. Wide registral placement and large intervallic spaces remain prominent, and tone centers are usually present. Yet a powerful new controlling principle has entered: systematic serialization.

Berger's *Duo for Cello and Piano* (1951), called "diatonic Webern" by Milton Babbitt, focuses on C major and shows a synthesis of traits from the *Quartet for Winds*: large melodic leaps, Baroque rhythm and counterpoint, and a dance-like lilt (found in the second movement of both works). Yet the texture has become leaner, more pointillistic, and the instruments so closely interwoven as to sound, at times, like a single resonating body. *The Duo for Oboe and Clarinet* (1952) intensifies these same traits. Isolated shots of color prevail. Repeated rhythmic units—often made up notes of the same value—are still present, yet they have been trimmed down to flickers of two or three notes. A clear tonal center reigns, especially in the beautiful, long-breathed transformation of the opening material in the final measures.

The *Trio for Guitar, Violin, and Piano* (1972) is the most recent composition represented here. In it, two piano pitches are "prepared," meaning that, in this case, screws are inserted between the strings to give a more percussive sound. The trio is most striking for the discontinuity of its sound surface; pointillism has now become paramount. While formidable, it also yields glimpses of the spontaneity within Berger's art. As he put it in 1978, "Some people are inspired by a good deal of advance preparation and organization. I don't do that very much...I have nothing against other ways, as long as they don't imprison you so that you cannot make discoveries as you go, because sometimes, you know, you find precious things *in* the creative process that you couldn't find *out* of it."

—Carol J. Oja

Carol J. Oja is assistant professor at the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College, New York.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Festschrift for Arthur Berger: *Perspectives of New Music*, 27, no. 1 (1978): Elaine Barkin, "Post Impressions: Arthur Berger's *Trio for Guitar, Violin, and Piano*"; Jane Coppock, "A conversation with Arthur Berger"; Pamela Jones, "A Bibliography of the Writings of Arthur Berger"; Robert Frederick Jones, "A List of Works by Arthur Berger": Sheila Silver, "Pitch and Registral Distribution in Arthur Berger's Music for Piano."
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- Perkins, John MacIvor. "Arthur Berger: the Composer as Mannerist." *Perspectives of New Music*, 5, no. 1 (1966), pp.75-92. Reprinted in *Perspectives on American Composers*, Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone, eds. New York: Norton, 1971.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

See also Selected Discography for 80308.

Duo No. 2 for Violin and Piano. Paul Zukofsky, violin; Gilbert Kalish, piano. Desto DC 6435-37.

Duo for Cello and Piano. Bernard Greenhouse, cello; Anthony Makas, piano. Columbia ML4846.

Five Pieces for Piano. Robert Miller, piano. New World 80308.

Polyphony. Louisville Orchestra, Robert Whitney conducting. Louisville LOU 58-4.

Quartet for Winds. Dorian Woodwind Quartet. Vox SVBX-5307.

Septet. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg conducting. New World 80308.

Three Pieces for Two Pianos. Paul Jacobs and Gilbert Kalish, pianos. Columbia ML6359; CRI 290.

The collage-print by Robert Motherwell (1987) used for the cover bears the inscription: "For Arthur Berger in memory of Paris, 1939," and contains a fragment of the published score (Boelke-Bomart) of the *Trio* on this recording (along with a fragment from an-early edition of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*). The painter and the composer had been fellow graduate students at Harvard, and when they were reunited in Paris in 1939, Berger suggested that Motherwell complete his doctorate with Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. Motherwell has since referred to this as "a most crucial external suggestion." In following it he placed himself within a burgeoning New York artistic and intellectual milieu that provided an opportunity for establishing himself in his current position as one of the most important artists of our time.

Gilbert Kalish, piano, has been internationally acclaimed as a chamber musician and soloist, appearing with mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani, the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, the Juilliard String Quartet, and the Boston Symphony, among many others. He is currently chairman of the faculty at Tanglewood Music Center and professor of music at S.U.N.Y. Stony Brook. Kalish's extensive discography of over seventy recordings includes three New World albums: violin sonatas by Arthur Foote and Mrs. H.H.A. Beach (80268); Arthur Berger's *Septet* (80308); and Ralph Shapey's *Kroslish Sonate* (80355).

Joel Krosnick, cellist of the Juilliard String Quartet, is highly regarded as a recitalist, soloist, chamber musician, and teacher. By commissioning and premiering new works for cello by such composers as

Elliott Carter, Donald Martino, Milton Babbitt, Ralph Shapey, and Charles Wuorinen, he has contributed much to the instrument's repertoire. He has given many master classes, and is a member of the Juilliard School and Tanglewood Music Center faculties. Krosnick has recorded on the CBS, CRI, Nonesuch, and Orion labels, and recorded Ralph Shapey's *Kroslish Sonata* for New World (80355).

Christopher Oldfather, piano, made his New York recital debut in 1986. He has appeared with the New York Philharmonic, Music Today, the Da Capo Chamber Players, and Collage. He holds music degrees from the New England Conservatory and Yale University, and was on the faculty at Yale and at Wesleyan University. Oldfather has given premieres of major works by Michael Tippett, Leonard Rosenman, and Nicholas Thorne, and has recorded for the CRI and GM labels.

Joel Smirnoff, second violinist of the Juilliard String Quartet, attended the University of Chicago and the Juilliard School. He studied with Lyn Egli, Harry Glickman, and Dorothy DeLay. A member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra for six years, he was also a member of the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago. Smirnoff won second prize in the 1983 Carnegie Hall International American Music Competition. He has recorded for the CBS, GM, and CRI labels.

David Starobin, guitar, is a specialist in contemporary guitar works, more than 150 of which have been composed for him. He is also founder and president of Bridge Records. Starobin is a member of Speculum Musical and the Theater Chamber Players of Kennedy Center, and participates frequently in the Marlboro Music Festival. He is a professor of music at S.U.N.Y. Purchase, Sarah Lawrence College, and Brooklyn College, and Associate in Performance at Columbia University. He appears on New World on Michael Colgrass' *Light Spirit* (80318).

The Boehm Quintette, named after the famous wind-instrument designer Theobald Boehm, was formed in 1968. The quintet has commissioned works from several American composers and created notable transcriptions for winds. The group give concerts frequently throughout the United States; its broadcast performances have been aired on National Public Radio. The Boehm Quintette has recorded for the Orion, Serenus, and GM labels. The personnel on this recording are Sheryl Henze, flute; Phyllis Lanini, oboe; Don Stewart, clarinet; and Robert Wagner, bassoon. Joseph Anderer is hornist for the group.

An Arthur Berger Retrospective

1- Duo No. 1 for Violin and Piano (14:03)

(publ. APNM)

Joel Smirnoff, violin

Christopher Oldfather, piano

Quartet for Winds

(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)

2- I. Allegro moderato (3:21)

3- II. Andante (3:49)

4- III. Allegro vivace e leggiermente (2:25)

Sheryl Henze, flute

Phyllis Lanini, oboe

Don Stewart, clarinet

Robert Wagner, bassoon
(members of the Boehm Quintette)

Duo for Cello and Piano
(publ. Galaxy Music Corp.)

5- I. (4:32)

6- II. (6:27)

Joel Krosnick, cello

Gilbert Kalish, piano

7- Duo for Oboe and Clarinet (9:27)

(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)

Phyllis Lanini, oboe

Don Stewart, clarinet

8- Trio for Guitar, Violin and Piano (10:00)

(publ. Boelke-Bomart, Inc.)

Joel Smirnoff, violin

David Starobin, guitar

Gilbert Kalish, piano

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