

Works by George Perle, David Del Tredici, and Nicholas Thorne
New World 80380-2

The vastly divergent reactions to twelve-tone composition of George Perle, David Del Tredici and Nicholas Thorne are a vivid reflection not only of their different generations, but of the unfolding of musical style change in America. Perle, born in 1915 and educated here at a time when twelve-tone composition was little understood, felt the urge to revise Schoenberg's method so as to reconcile serial chromaticism with the hierarchical elements of tonal practice. The system he evolved, known as "twelve-tone tonality," has been the basis of most of his compositions until 1969, and all since. Del Tredici, born in 1937, studied at Princeton at a time when serialism had become dogma. Yet he eventually repudiated the technique and turned to a highly eccentric form of tonality. Thorne, born in 1953, gave little thought to twelve-tone composition. "It was the generation before me who had this monkey on its back," he says. Instead, Thorne came to maturity amid the welter of styles, from minimalism to neo-Romanticism, that characterized America during the 1970s. All three attitudes offer us invaluable insights into the composers and their music.

In some circles **George Perle** is known as a musicologist, particularly for his pathbreaking studies of Alban Berg. In other circles, he is viewed as a theorist, a coherent codifier and radical reviser of serial technique. But he insists that both these pursuits have been sidelines to composition, and his music belies the popular misconception that art conceived under the wing of academia need be abstruse or inaccessible. In fact, Perle's work, despite its rigorously systematic basis, avoids needless complexity in favor of clearly audible motivic recurrences and formal shapes. Instead of the angular, pointillistic lines of Milton Babbitt's music, in Perle's one finds a lyrical continuity of melody, a sensuousness of harmony, and a traditional sense of music grammar all well within the Classic-Romantic heritage.

Like Berg's music, Perle's seems informed by an intuitive, bittersweet nostalgia. But that influence has been tempered by a strict classicism; the Romantic gestures are distilled. Occasionally, Perle's works emphasize either the Classic or the Romantic side of his musical sensibility. His *Sonatina* (1986), written for the William Kapell Piano Competition as its assigned contemporary piece, is understandably of compact size and moderate difficulty. Its three movements—a waltz-like Allegretto, a terse, concise Molto adagio, and a witty, more virtuosic Allegro—all possess a Classic clarity of form, leanness of texture, and expressive restraint. By contrast, Perle's *Lyrical Intermezzo* (1987), inspired by Schumann's "character pieces" (and titled after Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, the source for *Dichterliebe*), is more Romantic in orientation. The opening Andante is lush, even bluesy, in its harmonic language, denser in its textures, and less reticent about its emotional content. But even though the sultry Andante returns nearly unchanged as the Postlude, elsewhere Perle tempers the Schumannesque rhetoric with a scherzando-like Grazioso, a lean, *secco* Rondolletto, and a concise set of variations. Thus even Perle's homage to German Romanticism remains far removed from Berg's Expressionism.

If Perle has shunned Expressionism, **David Del** Tredici has always embraced it. Beginning his career as a youthful piano prodigy, Del Tredici turned to composition only in 1958, during an encounter with Darius Milhaud at the Aspen Music festival. It was at Aspen that Del Tredici wrote his first work, *Soliloquy*, and it is, not surprisingly, in the angular, dissonant idiom of its era. Yet in its violent, Expressionistic gestures, abrupt juxtapositions of dynamic and registral extremes, and moments of soaring lyricism, it already contains strong signs of his quirky musical personality.

But no one hearing *Virtuoso Alice* (1984) for the first time would identify it as a work by the composer of *Soliloquy*. What happened in the intervening decades to so drastically alter Del Tredici's course? First, he felt suffocated by his rigorous training in serialism, an approach that increasingly seemed a stylistic dead end. Second, he discovered Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. These texts, which he began setting in 1968 and has hardly turned his back on since, cried out for a language that he felt only tonality could provide. Del Tredici's *Final Alice* (1976), scored for amplified soprano and an enormous post-Romantic orchestra, demonstrated dramatically this "new tonality," nineteenth-century in origin yet purposefully skewed.

It is this language that characterizes *Virtuoso Alice*, a grand fantasy well within the Romantic tradition of keyboard paraphrase. The childlike theme, a transcription of *Final Alice's* "Acrostic Song," is gradually submerged in ornamentation—delicate chromatic filigree reminiscent of Liszt's B-minor Sonata, thunderous arpeggios, persistent trills and arabesques. The ensuing fantasia is more rhapsodic, inspired by fragments of the theme's melodic and harmonic profile. And the concluding cadenza consists almost entirely of a deliciously perverse postponement of the final cadence. Yet for all its historical references, no one could mistake *Virtuoso Alice* for Liszt: its obsessive repetition and hyper-expressive climaxes are as distorted as Wonderland itself.

If Del Tredici had to throw off what he felt to be the bonds of serialism, for **Nicholas Thorne** those constraints never existed. Born in Copenhagen in 1953, Thorne came to the United States in 1963, and eventually studied composition with William Thomas McKinley and Gunther Schuller. From his earliest years Thorne's musical experience was broad: he played guitar and piano, studied improvisation with Pat Metheny, and performed in rock bands and jazz ensembles. He grew up embracing a wide range of music, and this eclectic open-mindedness—to tonality and atonality, to vernacular and cultivated traditions, to simplicity and complexity—characterized all his work.

In 1980, during his second summer at Tanglewood, Thorne achieved compositional maturity. His *Three Love Songs* (1980), written in an impulsive, nearly improvisatory manner, shun the sentimental lyricism suggested by the title. The first song is a strident version of Bartókian night music, hovering around a few persistent pitches; the second consists of nearly static arpeggios that shift almost imperceptibly; the third, with its hollow, parallel fourths and fifths, recalls the bells of Debussy's *Sunken Cathedral*.

But it is the expansive, one-movement Piano Sonata (1980) that best reveals Thorne's personality. The Sonata is a vast, panoramic canvas, initially so rhapsodic as to appear

almost incoherent. Yet its fragmentation is deliberate: in a schizophrenic, dream-like manner, Thorne juxtaposes seemingly unrelated material—delicate modal lyricism, obsessively reiterated cluster, cascading arpeggios, austere two-part counterpoint. There is something confessional about this Sonata, as if it consisted of half-remembered images from a remote and private past; such an impression is confirmed by the profusion of expressive indications (such as “blind, overwhelming rage” and “distant, immeasurable sadness”) that cover the score. Very gradually, Thorne's once fragmentary material begins, as with Sibelius, to develop and cohere, revealing an unsuspected motivic unity. A fugue that concludes with a thunderous pedalpoint may seem climactic, but the subsequent return of a static, nearly inaudible triadic passage is what ultimately confirms the implicit D-major tonality and binds the entire work together. Thorne himself views this Sonata, dedicated “To My Father,” as an exorcism of repressed parental conflicts and memories. It is no less an emotional catharsis for the listener. —*K. Robert Schwarz*

K. Robert Schwarz is a freelance contributor to The New York Times, High Fidelity, and other publications.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

George Perle

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.

Toccata. Robert Miller, piano. CRI SD 306.

Wind Quintets Nos. 1-4. The Dorian Wind Quintet. New World 80359-2.

David Del Tredici

Acrostic Song for solo guitar. David Starobin, guitar. Bridge 2004.

Final Alice. Barbara Hendricks, voice; Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti conducting. London LDR-71018.

I Hear An Army; Night Conjure-Verse; Scherzo; Syzygy. Phyllis Bryn-Julson, voice, Composers quartet (in *Army*); Benita Valente and Mary Burgess, voices, Marlboro Festival Ensemble, David Del Tredici conducting (in *Night*); Robert Helps and David Del Trdici, piano four hands (in *Scherzo*); Phyllis Bryn-Julson, voice, Festival Chamber Orchestra, Richard Dufallo conduction (in *Syzygy*). CRI ACS-6004.

In Memory of a Summer Day. Phyllis Bryn-Julson, voice; St. Louis Chamber Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin conducting. Nonesuch 79043.

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George Perle

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David Del Tredici

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Nicholas Thorne

Schuller, Gunther. "Nicholas Thorne." Brochure published by Edition Wilhelm Hansen/Chester Music, New York, n.d.

Michael Boriskin, a native New Yorker, has worked closely with many composers. Performing a repertoire of both standard and contemporary works, Boriskin has appeared with major orchestras on three continents. His concert schedule has taken him to the Kennedy Center, the Smithsonian Institution, Lincoln Center, and the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, and he has broadcast for the BBC, RIAS/Berlin, and Southwest German Radio. He has also performed under the auspices of the First New York International Festival of the Arts, the New York Philharmonic (in its Ensembles series), and overseas for the United States Information Agency. Boriskin can be heard on Newport Classic Records, Musical Heritage Society, and on other New World Records.

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Michael Boriskin, piano

David Del Tredici

1. *Soliloquy* (7:08) (publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)

George Perle

Sonatina (publ. Galaxy Music Corp.)

2. I. Allegretto (2:16)

3. II. Molto adagio (1:22)

4. III. Allegro (1:36)

Nicholas Thorne

Three Love Songs (publ. Northlight Music, New York)

5. I. Searing, pointed lyricism. With great intensity (2:34)

6. II. Gently, with flow (2:57)

7. III. Hallowed, rarified. From the spirit (2:29)

David Del Tredici

8. *Virtuoso Alice* (12:52) (publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)

George Perle

Lyric Intermezzo (publ. Galaxy Music Corp.)

9. I. Andante (2:53)

10. II. Grazioso (4:10)

11. III. Rondoletto (3:39)

12. IV. Fantasy variations (3:13)

13. V. Postlude (3:12)

Nicholas Thorne

14. Piano Sonata (19:56) (publ. Margun Music, Inc.) (In one movement)

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