

Works by John Cage, Lou Harrison, Christopher Rouse, Eugene Kurtz, Irwin Bazelon,  
J. Verplanck  
New World 80382-2

by Eric Salzman

Rhythm is the starting point. Along with the sound of the human voice, the music of rhythm is as old as music itself. The sound of a woodpecker is a drum tattoo. The great apes drum, as well as vocalize. The human infant is cradled by the mother's heartbeat even before birth. Drums and percussion have always been an essential part of music and life throughout the world, except in Western art music of the past few centuries. Only in recent years has the percussion ensemble taken its rightful place along with the more familiar string, wind, and brass ensembles in Western music. The new percussion music has roots in three fairly distinct places: non-Western music, mostly Asian; jazz and related Afro-Latin forms; and the experimental music movements, both pre- and post-World War II. All of these influences are represented on this album. In the 1930s and again in the 1970s, the American avant-garde turned its attention from pure experimentation to more accessible forms of music-making and, at the same time, opened itself to non-Western—especially Eastern—influence. Led by the Californian Henry Cowell and his West Coast disciples John Cage and Lou Harrison, this underground, orientalizing avantgarde of the Thirties and Forties has long-term links with the minimalists and post-modernists of more recent vintage.

**John Cage** was born in Los Angeles in 1912 and studied with Cowell, Arnold Schoenberg, and Adolph Weiss; Edgard Varèse was also a major influence, particularly in the area of percussion music. After 1937 Cage worked at the Cornish School in Seattle, accompanying dance classes and beginning a systematic study of rhythm as the basis for a new-music style. This period in Cage's life is well represented by the four *Imaginary Landscapes*, *Double Music* with Lou Harrison, the three *Constructions*, and his prepared piano works, all essentially percussion music. The *Third Construction*, for four percussion players, is in many ways the climax of this early period of Cage's work. The instrumentation includes wooden rattles from India and Indochina, tin cans of various sizes, tom-toms, claves, suspended Chinese cymbal, maracas, teponaxtle (a log or split drum of pre-Columbian origin), cowbells, lion's roar and bass-drum roar (instruments in which a string or cord is pulled against a drum skin, making it “roar”), tambourine, quijudas (a Latin rattle originally made from the jawbone of an ass), cricket callers (sections of bamboo with grooves cut in them), conch shell, tacks in a tin can, and a wooden ratchet. With this array of unusual instruments, Cage creates a crisp, articulated rhythmic sound that evokes non-Western music but is also highly rationalized in its mathematical and numerical precision; coloristic and dramatic elements make a significant appearance only later on, and never really deflect the basic rhythmic impulse, which is highly patterned and precise.

**Eugene Kurtz** was born in 1923 in Atlanta and was graduated from the Eastman School of Music in 1949. He then studied in France with Honegger, Milhaud, and most importantly, with Schoenberg's disciple Max Deutsch. Kurtz has made his home in Paris

for many years, but has returned on different occasions to teach at American universities, including the University of Michigan, the Eastman School of Music, and, most recently, the Hartt School of Music. He describes the discovery of Charles Ives's music as a turning point for him, and there is a jazz influence in his work as well. Nevertheless, the composer's twelve-tone background and his long residence in Europe have helped produce music that is close to European serialism. The title of this work informs us that it is conceived as the embodiment of a rational ideal—*logo* as idea, or mind. *Logo I*, scored for clarinet, piano, and percussion quartet, was commissioned by Radio France and premiered on October 27, 1979, at the French Radio. (A second version of the work, *Logo II*, is scored for clarinet and piano.) Kurtz says of the work that “each of the two movements, ‘Introduction’ and ‘Breakdown’, seems to be a sort of ‘logo’ in itself. Each one of them seems to represent or characterize precise, and perhaps contradictory, ways of thinking....The title ‘Breakdown’ comes from an obscure and supposedly frenetic American dance of the 19th century. Nothing remains of the dance but its name, so I felt completely free to deal with the rhythmic element according to my own fancy.”

**John (Billy) Verplanck** is a composer, arranger, and trombonist who has worked extensively in jazz and commercial music. Born in Norwalk, Connecticut, in 1930, he was almost entirely self-taught. Early in his career, he performed with and made arrangements for Tommy Dorsey and Charlie Spivak. His list of songs and instrumentals includes “Chicken Boogie,” “Pot Luck Blues,” “Just Sick Blues,” “Jumpin’ at the Left Bank,” and many others. *Petite Suite*, for percussion quartet, is in two movements, and is dedicated to Richard Brown. The first movement, “One for Al” (Cohn), is marked “moderate fast, swing feel.” The second movement, “For Marlene” (VerPlanck), is marked “Soft, Dark, Intense, Free.” The work is scored for various combinations of pitched mallet instruments: vibraphones, marimbas, xylophones, and bells. The two short movements evoke contrasting moods within a lush, jazzy texture.

**Irwin Bazon**, born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1922, was graduated from DePaul University and studied with Darius Milhaud at Mills College. He has lived in New York since 1948. His music is wide-ranging and eclectic, with a strong jazz influence. *Fourscore*, for percussion quartet, was commissioned by the University of Wisconsin—River Falls and first performed in 1985. It subsequently became the first movement of a three-movement work for percussion quartet and orchestra, written for the Continuum Percussion Quartet. Bazon says that “as in all of my music, prominence of musical line is determined by dynamics, impact accents, phrasing, color, contrast, and the general character of the music.” This work contains elements related to serialism, but a certain kind of jazz-derived improvisational manner gives it a very different flavor than is usually provided by serial music.

**Christopher Rouse**, born in Baltimore in 1949, studied at Oberlin, with Karel Husa and Robert Palmer at Cornell, and with George Crumb. He has taught at the University of Michigan and at Eastman, where he organized what is said to be the first accredited rock-and-roll course in a major American music school. He has been composer-in-residence for the Baltimore Symphony, and his work is widely performed by major American orchestras. Rouse's strongly rhythmic and coloristic music has connections with the so-

called minimalists, with non-Western music, and with American composers of the Thirties. *Ku-Ka-Ilimoku* is an incarnation of the Hawaiian god Ku as the god of war, and the piece is a kind of war dance made out of a counterpoint of cross accents. The four percussionists play a wide variety of instruments, including log drums, congo, bongo, a ringing metal plate, and a wooden plank which is whaked with a hammer. Rouse specifies twelve different kinds of sticks or mallets for hitting all these instruments. He is also quite precise about such matters as accents, and where to hit the instrument. The work, written in 1978, was commissioned by the Syracuse Symphony Percussion Ensemble.

**Lou Harrison**, born in 1917 in Portland, Oregon, was brought up in northern California, where he studied with Henry Cowell, taught at Mills College, and worked with John Cage. Like Cage, he studied with Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles and moved to New York, where he lived and worked for a number of years. Harrison taught at Black Mountain College, and has worked extensively with modern dancers. In 1954 he returned to California to live, working as a fire fighter and in an animal hospital to support himself, and returning to his earlier interests in non-Western and world culture and music. His *Concerto for the Violin with Percussion Orchestra*, which is also entitled *Koncerto por la violono kun percuta orkestra*—(in esperanto, expressing the world-view inherent in the work)—is inscribed 1959-1940. This odd method of dating is probably meant to suggest that the work, reflecting his interest in world music and percussion, was conceived early on, but was completed later, after Harrison had turned away from twelve-tone serialism and revived those earlier concerns. It was first performed in New York's Town Hall in 1959 by the violinist Anahid Ajemian, to whom it is dedicated. There are five players in the orchestra, and a curious variety of percussion instruments: suspended lengths of plumber's pipe, flowerpots, wind chimes, triangles, automobile brake drums, temple blocks, sistra (a kind of metal rattle), coffee cans, maracas, suspended cymbals, coil chimes from the inside of an old-fashioned chiming clock, gongs, large tam-tam, and a contrabass laid on its back and played with rod beaters. Sometimes this percussion work is rhythmic and incisive, but often it is delicately and coloristically scored, in the manner of a gamelan. Against this textured wall of sound, the violin stands out in high relief as intensely melodic—although it is often rhythmic and coloristic as well. “East meets West” is very much the theme of his musical discourse. —*Eric Salzman*

*Eric Salzman, composer and writer, is known for his music theater works. He is cofounder and artistic director of the American Music Theater Festival.*

**THE PERCUSSION QUARTET** was formed in the fall of 1987 by Gabriel Dionne, J. Riely Francis, Christopher Rose, and Richard Skains, all students or former students of Richard Brown at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. Its purpose is to present works for percussion that are intimate and engaging in ways that are possible only with a small ensemble. During May of 1989 the group participated in the Concert Artist Guild's 38th International New York Competition, the first percussion quartet chosen to perform at this event.

## **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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## **OTHER PERCUSSION RECORDINGS ON NEW WORLD**

*Pulse* (New World 80319-2). Works by John Cage, Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, Ruth Crawford Seeger. New Music Consort.

*Double Music* (New World 80330-2).

Works by John Cage, John Cage and Lou Harrison, Lukas Foss, Harvey Sollberger. New Music Consort.

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### **John Cage:**

1. Third Construction (11:10) (publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)

### **Eugene Kurtz:**

*Logo I* (14:30) (publ. Editions Jobert)

2. Introduction and Breakdown

Richard Nunemaker, clarinet; David Nale, piano; David Colson, conductor.

**J. (Billy) VerPlanck:**

*Petite Suite* (5:45) (publ. Mounted Music, a division of Mounted Records, Inc.)

3. One for Al (2:13)

4. For Marlene (3:28)

**Irwin Bazon:**

5. *Fourscore* (8:44) (publ. C. F. Peters)

**Christopher Rouse:**

6. *Ku-Ka-Ilimoku* (5:27) (publ. Universal Editions)

**Lou Harrison:**

Concerto for the Violin with Percussion Orchestra (20:12) (publ. Universal Editions)

7. I. Allegro, maestoso (8:18)

8. II. Largo, cantabile (7:26)

9. III. Allegro, vigoroso, poco presto (4:18)

Janna Lower, violin; David Colson, percussion; Richard Brown, conductor

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