

Charles Wuorinen: Chamber Works
New World 80385-2

by Tim Page

Goethe once defined chamber music as a discourse between reasonable individuals. Charles Wuorinen is unimpressed. “That seems rather restrictive to me,” he said with a laugh, during a recent interview. “My idea of chamber music is both much simpler and much broader than that: It is music written one instrument to a part. It sounds to me as though Goethe expected a more intimate, higher level of discourse from chamber music than what one might find in an orchestral work intended for public performance. That’s often the case, but I see no reason to exclude broad gestures.”

Here, then, are three chamber works, broad and intimate by turn, written one instrument to a part, by Charles Wuorinen. The earliest of these, the *Fast Fantasy* for cello and piano, was composed in 1979. The Third String Quartet was completed in 1987 and the Sonata for Violin and Piano was written the following year.

Wuorinen, born in New York in 1938, is one of America’s most distinguished composers; he has received honors ranging from the Pulitzer Prize to a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. A member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, he has composed more than 185 works and is one of the most widely performed of living composers. Wuorinen was composer-in-residence and New Music Adviser with the San Francisco Symphony from 1984 to 1989. Also noted as a conductor and pianist, he has appeared with the orchestras of Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Boston, and Los Angeles, among others.

Several critics have suggested that Wuorinen’s idiom has become more readily accessible in recent years; Wuorinen himself prefers to say that he has “clarified” his style. “From my vantage point, it is a little difficult to say what’s happened—I’ve just kept on scribbling. But if there have been changes in my work, they have been in the direction of a greater connectedness with older musical traditions...what one might describe as the “pre-revolutionary” tradition of Western music. I don’t think that I’ve become more conservative, but my harmonic language is now more clearly grounded in what I call “pitch centrality”—I don’t want to use the word “tonality” because it’s dangerous and usually misleading. And my use of rhythm is more periodic, more regular, more intimately related to the background pulse than it used to be—which is a long, complicated, and rather pompous way of saying that the beat is clearer.”

Wuorinen’s music, early and late, demands extraordinary virtuosity from its player. “I’ve been spoiled in that I’ve always been close to many fine musicians and my habit has been to address them specifically,” Wuorinen said. “If I had grown up in a place where the performers were less skillful, I might have been forced to accommodate. The music I like most from the past is music that is multi-dimensional—elaborately textured, dense with events—and such music is likely to be difficult to play.”

Once a fluent, erudite author of program notes, Wuorinen rarely provides them today. “I just don't know what to write anymore,” he said. “In olden times, when I had a specific compositional method to describe, program notes served a purpose. I had something definite to *say*, you know, even though it seemed pretty technical to some members of the audience. Now my methods are more general, my solutions more intuitive and local, my preliminary material sparser and sparser, so it is difficult for me to draw any communicable conclusion about what it is that I've done.”

“Besides, program notes can do more harm than good,” he continued, “I've heard it said that Milton Babbitt's music would never have generated the kind of hostility that it did if he had explained it as the ‘yearnings of a passionate soul,’ or something like that. Moreover, to describe the methods that a composer used to create a piece may have absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of the piece as a musical experience. There is often a profound difference between what a composition really is and what we think it is when we are making it.”

Wuorinen allows that the *Fast Fantasy* is “just what the title implies: a fantasy based on a big lump of notes, intuitively rhythmized, with some qualities of recitative.” Like most other celebrated musical fantasies, this one is essentially rhapsodic in form and abounds in pyrotechnical display. From the opening flourish (built around an insistently repeated F note passed, rapid-fire, from instrument to instrument) through the hushed, sustained song-like central section, this is a work of charm and unfettered imagination. Particularly effective are the last few bars, when cello and piano join forces to create rich, gonging, multitextured chords that resound with the authority of conclusion. Yet there is one final surprise in store: As the chords are on the verge of dying out, the cello suddenly scampers off blithely, for an unexpectedly light-hearted ending. The *Fast Fantasy* is dedicated to Fred Sherry.

The Third String Quartet, based on a fragment of Gregorian chant is set down in one long, closely argued movement that, for all of its textural variety, seems supremely unified, as if it were the result of a single impulse. “The piece moves deliberately, without haste,” Andrew Porter observed in *The New Yorker*. “One can hear everything happen. An eighth-note pulse moves through flexible periods, barred (for convenience of playing, not for downbeats) in a variety of metres. Structure is defined by returns to G which is then treated as the starting point for new explorations of motifs derived from the chant fragment. Canons, imitations, augmentations are audible.” The Third String Quartet was commissioned by Dartmouth College for the 25th anniversary of the Hopkins Center.

Finally, the Violin Sonata is a bracing, uninhibited romp—as flashy and exciting as anything Paganini ever wrote, yet maintaining Wuorinen's customary structural integrity. For all of the Sonata's complex chords, steadily shifting time signatures, and wiry, angular melodies that utilize the entire range of the two instruments, there is scarcely a superfluous gesture in the entire work. Indeed, it is constructed with a taut economy of means that never seems parsimonious. The Sonata is dedicated to Benjamin Hudson and Garrick Ohlsson.

Taken individually, these are vital, engaging compositions, fashioned with impeccable skill by a master craftsman, characterized by a bristling intellectual energy that does not preclude lyricism. Collectively, they represent one of the most distinguished achievements in recent chamber music. —*Tim Page*

Tim Page is the chief classical music critic for Newsday and the host of a radio program on WNYC-FM in New York. His books include The Glenn Gould Reader (1984) and Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson (1988).

Since his victory at the 1970 Chopin Competition in Warsaw, GARRICK OHLSSON, pianist, has been internationally acclaimed as a recitalist and orchestral soloist. He has performed and recorded a wide spectrum of piano literature, including the complete sonatas of Carl Maria von Weber, Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 1, and Wuorinen's Third Piano Concerto, a work which was written for him. Ohlsson is a frequent guest artist with the Group for Contemporary Music.

THE GROUP FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC is the oldest new music ensemble in America. Founded in 1962 by composers Harvey Sollberger and Charles Wuorinen, the Group has premiered hundreds of new works and has been a leader in developing a cadre of highly skilled performers.

FRED SHERRY, cellist, is Artistic Director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and a founding member of TASHI. Equally at home with the music of Monteverdi, Mozart, and the moderns, Sherry appears with major symphony orchestras and at chamber music festivals throughout the world. He recently premiered Wuorinen's *Five* (Concerto for Amplified Cello and Orchestra) with the New York City Ballet.

BENJAMIN HUDSON's remarkable versatility has led to international recognition on both period and modern violin. He performs regularly as an orchestral soloist in the United States and Europe and has appeared with conductors James Levine, Pierre Boulez and Gerard Schwarz. Hudson is also concertmaster of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the Grande Bande, and Joshua Rifkin's Bach Ensemble.

CAROL ZEAVIN, violinist, has performed with the Tanglewood and Aspen Festival Orchestras, and is a member of Speculum Musicae, Orpheus, the New York Chamber Symphony, and the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra.

LOIS MARTIN, violist, has toured throughout Europe and North and South America, and is a member of the Atlantic String Quartet, the Gabrieli Trio, Chamber Music Plus, and the New York Chamber Symphony.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

A Reliquary for Igor Stravinsky. London Sinfonietta, Oliver Knussen, conductor. Deutsche Grammophon 47068.

A Winter's Tale. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Koch International Classics CD 7272.

Album Leaf. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.Koch International Classics CD 7272.

The Golden Dance. San Francisco Symphony, Herbert Blomstedt, conductor.
Elektra/Nonesuch 79185-2.

New York Notes. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.Koch International Classics CD 7272.

Percussion Symphony.New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, Charles Wuorinen, conductor.
Elektra/Nonesuch 79150.

String Sextet. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.Koch International Classics CD 7272.

Third Piano Concerto. Garrick Ohlsson, piano; San Francisco Symphony, Herbert Blomstedt, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79185-2.

Twang. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.Koch International Classics CD 7272.

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Charles Wuorinen

1. Sonata for Violin and Piano (22:03)

Benjamin Hudson, violin; Garrick Ohlsson, piano

2. Third String Quartet (29:12)

Benjamin Hudson, violin; Carol Zeavin, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Fred Sherry, cello

3. *Fast Fantasy* (15:47)

Fred Sherry, cello; Charles Wuorinen, piano

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