

Works by John Cage, John Harbison, Stephen Hartke, Yehudi Wyner
New World 80391-2

Modern music—especially American music, with its tendency to invite various traditions to share the same compositional space—can be a generous art, an art which welcomes inclusivity. Here are works by John Cage (born 1912), Yehudi Wyner (born 1929), John Harbison (born 1938), and Stephen Hartke (born 1952)—four American composers from different generations with different sensibilities, representing very different approaches to writing for the violin. Yet however much these works represent various facets of American violin music, each in its own way provides an example of the American habit of musical absorption and transformation.

John Cage and Yehudi Wyner, for instance, exemplify two extremes in American music. Cage's *Six Melodies* is non-imposing music, emotionally uninflected, unpredictable. It is without dramatic gestures, intentionally small of scale and gentle of sound. Wyner's *Concert Duo*, by contrast, is a substantial score, full of nuanced drama, calculated expressivity, and classical reference.

Both are works typical of their time—the Fifties—and typical of American composers' ability to absorb French musical influences and then transform them into something radically different. With Cage that means a high regard for Erik Satie, immediately apparent in *Six Melodies*. Written in 1950, shortly after Cage had returned from an extended visit to Paris where he had studied Satie's scores, these half dozen aphoristic pieces reveal wisps of restrained Satiesque melody that go nowhere. They are also indicative of Cage's early interests in both Zen thought and chance operations, this being the time when he famously pronounced: “The responsibility of the artist consists in perfecting his work so that it may become attractively disinteresting.”

Cage thus asks that the violinist play without vibrato and with minimum weight on the bow, creating simultaneously disinterested, yet very beautiful, sound. What is more innovative in the score, however, is Cage's way of finding violin equivalents of the percussion music he had been writing over the previous dozen years. The music is organized not by pitch, but by rhythmic durational structures—each of the six melodies having the same rhythmic structure of 3 1/2, 3 1/2, 4, 4, 3, 4—like his percussion music. Set in contrast to the clear, bell-like piano utterances, the violin part focuses a listener's attention on the actual sounds made by playing the instrument, including extraneous noises such as the sound of horsehair on string in the many passages of soft harmonics.

If Cage's desire was to take an already cool French music and make it more dispassionate still, Wyner's seems to be just the opposite. A composer who came out of the Gallic-inspired American neoclassical tradition, Wyner began opening up his style to a greater variety of dramatic expression with *Concert Duo*, completed in 1957. Indeed, he cannily stage manages the drama as much through his written directions to the performers as through his intricate violin writing, with suggestions like the one that the violin “sneak in before the downbeat of the bar.”

Presented in two movements, *Concert Duo* suggests a kind of theatrical dialogue between violin and piano on the subject of romanticism versus classicism. One hears this from the start, as the violin plays syncopated, repeated Bs, followed by a slow-moving line against a more detached, staccato piano. Ideas are traded back and forth, but the repeated note motive, with its insistent hinting at jazz, always serves to raise the emotional temperature. These repeated notes return in the second movement, emerging from the slow, rhapsodic music, and then work into a powerful climax, where Wyner urges more and more from the players, asking for “maximum power” and “top speed.”

Harbison's *Four Songs of Solitude* and Hartke's *Oh Them Rats Is Mean in My Kitchen* also suggest a duality between an introspective music and a more open one. Both works, moreover, almost ask to be considered jointly, since they were written in the same year, 1985, by composers who happen to have been born in the same town, Orange, New Jersey. Both works explore only pure violin sound, Harbison's being for the instrument alone, Hartke's for a violin duo.

Four Songs was written as a present for the composer's wife, the violinist Rose Mary Harbison, and, like Cage's *Six Melodies*, it consists of brief individual pieces of songlike character and somewhat lonely temperament. As Cage has long done, Harbison here contemplates the relationship of music to composer, performer, and listener. In a brief program note, he suggests that *Four Song* explores three kinds of solitude: that of the composer, “in a landscape of his own invention”; that of the performer, “onstage or in the practice room”; and that of the listener, “confronted with seemingly private references.”

Harbison's expression of solitude, however, never ignores the diverse musical culture of modern life. He has instead synthesized the diversity of influences into his own language. And so while *Four Songs* exploits both a big-concert violin technique and the sound of a Bach solo violin suite, the inspiration can still be unmistakably American, as in the folklike rhymes upon which the second song is based.

Where Harbison transforms folk roots into refined and solitary music, Hartke, in *Oh Them Rats*, has created a more raucous, blues-influenced work. The impetus for *Oh Them Rats* is the rhythm of the opening line from Blind Lemon Jefferson's *Maltese Cate Blues*, which struck Hartke when he heard it in a recording by Tennessee blues singer Sleepy John Estes. But Hartke grafts this vernacular style onto the resonant classical violin technique, and he amplifies the effect by doubling the instrument.

A full statement of Jefferson's generative rhythm is not heard until the final three bars of the Hartke score, and all of *Oh Them Rats* is a dramatic progression leading up to that climactic final revelation. Working through accretion, Hartke divides the score into four sections, each descriptive of its part of the title. The first, “Oh,” opens with the first violin wailing in its highest register and gradually lowering to the range of the human voice. “Them Rats” features a swaggering second violin and lots of pizzicato scurrying, with the violins pitting complex rhythms against each other. The bluesy “Is Mean” has the tempo instructions “Just minding your own business” and “scampering,” and it leads

to the real blues, "In My Kitchen." The work is dedicated to Michelle Makarski and Ronald Copes. —*Mark Swed*

Mark Swed, a New York-based music critic whose writing appears in the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and other publications, is writing a biography of John Cage.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

John Cage *Atlas Enclipticalis with Winter Music*. The New Performance Group, John Cage conducting. Mode 3/6.

Indeterminacy. John Cage, narrator; David Tudor, piano. Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40804/5.

Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano. Joshua Pierce, piano. Wergo 60156-50.

Third Construction in Metal. Continuum Percussion Quartet. New World Records 80382-2.

John Harbison Concerto for Double Brass Choir and Orchestra. Los Angeles Philharmonic, André Previn conducting.

The Flight Into Egypt. Roberta Anderson, soprano; Sanford Sylvan, baritone; Cantata Singers and Ensemble, David Hoose conducting; *The Natural World*. Janice Felty, mezzo-soprano; Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, John Harbison conducting. New World Records 80395-2.

Mirabai Songs. Dawn Upshaw, soprano; Orchestra of St. Luke's, David Zinman conducting. Nonesuch 79187.

Samuel Chapter. Susan Larson, soprano; Collage, John Harbison conducting. *Ulysses' Bow*. Pittsburgh Symphony, André Previn conducting. Nonesuch 79129.

Symphony No. 1. Boston Symphony, Seiji Ozawa conducting. New World Records 80331-2.

Stephen Hartke *Caoine; Inglesia Abandonada*. Ronald Copes, violin; Lisa Stidham, soprano. Orion 84470.

Night Rubrics. Angela Schwartz, cello. New World 80461-2.

Yehudi Wyner *Intermezzi for Piano Quartet*. Cantilena Chamber Players. ProArte CCD-120.

Passage 1. Musical Elements; Daniel Asia conducting. CRI SD-550.

Three Short Fantasies for Piano. Alan Miller, piano. CRI S-306.

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John Cage

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Yehudi Wyner

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Michelle Makarski has appeared as a featured participant at the Carmel Bach, Kneisel Hall, and Marlboro Festivals. She has appeared on tour with Music from Marlboro and in broadcast on National Public Radio, Radio of the Suisse Romande, Italian Radio and Television, and the BBC. She was winner of the 1981 Alberto Curci Competition in Naples and in 1982 became the only American prize winner in the history of the Carl Flesch International Competition. As concerto soloist she has performed with numerous orchestras, including the Atlanta Symphony, the American Symphony Orchestra, the Scarlatti Orchestra of the RAI and the Royal Philharmonic. A native of Michigan, Makarski attended the Interlochen Arts Academy and the University of Michigan. Among her teachers have been Angel Reyes, Mischa Mischakoff and Paul Makanowitzky. She currently resides in Santa Barbara, California.

Brent McMunn, pianist, performs throughout the United States and has toured Southeast Asia. He has appeared both as soloist and in chamber music on the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Chamber Music, New Music, and Music Under Grand Series, and for six summers served as pianist for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Institute. He has participated in numerous radio broadcasts and has recorded for Orion and Cambria Records. McMunn is on the staff of the Los Angeles Music Center Opera and is principal coach for the opera program at California State University, Long Beach.

Ronald Copes, violinist, has appeared as a featured performer in the Marlboro, Bermuda, Colorado, and Kneisel Hall Festivals, and has toured extensively with Music from Marlboro ensembles and the Los Angeles Piano Quartet. He has recorded for radio and television broadcast, as well as for Orion, CRI, Klavier Musical Heritage, and Pickwick Records. Copes has won prizes in several competitions, including the Merriweather Post and the Concours International d'execution Musicale in Geneva. He is professor of violin at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The Carnegie Hall International American Music Competitions were created to focus attention on the large repertoire of recital music written by American composers since 1900. By rewarding distinguished performers of this repertoire, the competitions were designed to interest performers, students, and teachers in this music; by presenting the first-prize winners (and the winning programs) in public appearances and concert tours, it is hoped that audiences and managers will come to regard this music as part of the standard repertoire, a literature still dominated by pre-twentieth-century European music. Since 1981 the Competition has been sponsored by Carnegie Hall, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. It was formerly known as the Kennedy Center/Rockefeller

Foundation International Competition for Excellence in the Performance of American Music. This is the tenth album in the series of recordings by the first prize-winners, presenting selected repertoire from the program that is not otherwise available on disc. The judges for the preliminary rounds of the 1989 Competition for Violinists were Maryvonne Le Dizes- Richard, Randall Hodgkinson, Henry Meyer, Rolf Schulte, and Marcus Thompson. The semifinal and final rounds, held at Carnegie Hall in New York, were judged by Maurice Abravanel, Robert Davidovici, Jonathan Feldman, Gregory Fulkerson, Ida Kavafian, Sylvia Rosenberg, and Michael Steinberg. The second prize winner was Victor Schultz, and David Wolf won third prize.

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Michelle Makarski, violin

Brent McMunn, piano (Cage, Wyner)

Ronald Copes, violin (Hartke)

John Harbison:

Four Songs of Solitude (publ. AMP, Inc.)

1. I. (3:37)

2. II. (2:45)

3. III. (3:43)

4. IV. (4:18)

John Cage:

Six Melodies for Violin and Keyboard (piano) (publ. C.F. Peters Corp.)

5. 1. (2:30)

6. 2. (1:40)

7. 3. (1:47)

8. 4. (2:40)

9. 5. (1:35)

10. 6. (2:10)

Stephen Hartke:

Oh Them Rats is Mean in My Kitchen (publ. MMB Music)

11. 1. Oh (3:04)

12. 2. Them Rats (2:25)

13. 3. Is Mean (3:36)

14. 4. In My Kitchen (5:58)

Yehudi Wyner:

Concert Duo for Violin and Piano (publ. AMP, Inc.)

15. I. (9:09)
16. II. (10:27)

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