

Works by Martin Brody, Mario Davidovsky, Miriam Gideon, Rand Steiger, Chinary Ung
New World 80412-2

The compositional company kept on this recording reveals a broad spectrum of artistic sensibilities and musical techniques. Its members are equally oblivious to fashionable trends and sectarian dogma. Miriam Gideon, the elder member of the group, studied with the Russian composer Lazare Saminsky and then with Roger Sessions from 1934 to 1941. From the mid-1940s she began her own extensive teaching career. A generation younger, Mario Davidovsky, who had studied composition in his native Buenos Aires, began his American career at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, where he came in contact with Aaron Copland and Milton Babbitt. His compositional lineage converges with Gideon at this point, since she and Babbitt studied with Sessions at the same time. Davidovsky encountered Edgard Varèse, Bulent Arel, and Vladimir Ussachevsky in his early years on the faculty at Columbia University working with them and Babbitt in developing the techniques and idioms that would dominate electronic music during the following decade. Chinary Ung, a native Cambodian, studied with Chou Wen-Chung and Davidovsky at Columbia in the Sixties. Like Davidovsky, his musical training was already quite advanced by the time of his arrival in the United States. Ung also worked with an influential predecessor at Tanglewood, in *this* case, George Crumb. However, Ung's music—with its involvement of forthrightly Asian elements in a musical style that also directly engages contemporary American concert music techniques—defies any easy listing of influences.

My own compositional training in the Seventies reflected an admiration and assimilation of the modernist aesthetics exemplified by these composers, though refracted through an absorption with (and practice of) various American vernacular musics. Rand Steiger, the youngest composer represented here, has been the most active as a performer—both as a percussionist and conductor with the California EAR Unit and other ensembles. The powerful rhythmic animus of his music and its deft mastery of polyrhythms that motivate and articulate musical forms seem as much a reflection of his performance background as of his formal compositional studies with such composers as Mel Powell, Morton Subotnik, and Earle Brown.

This diversity of musical backgrounds and impulses seems somehow appropriate, given the instrumental range of *Aequalis* itself. The character of this instrumental ensemble is revealed both by the shared aspects and the idiosyncrasies of these pieces. All three trios were written for the ensemble; *Spiral* and *Trio in Memoriam* were commissioned for *Aequalis* by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

In each of the trios, the unusually varied timbral and articulative resources of the group are used to create large ensemble effects that are often reinforced by the long overlapping reverberations of various gongs, cymbals, and other metal instruments. Conversely each trio explores the capacities of the individual instruments, modifying one instrument's sonority with another's, "sculpting" each sound: whittling attacks, shading

timbres, reversing decays, and so forth. The ensuing composite sonorities, unlike those of any natural instrument, allow for a variety of innovative phrasing and articulative effects.

Aequalis's instrumentation offers a conventional and perennially promising role for the cello as *bel canto* instrument, the bearer of long lines and extended phrases. The Gideon sonata candidly investigates this approach, though each of the trios also asserts its own premise about the projection and inflection of long, lyrical lines for the cello. And all five works use their instrumental heterogeneity to project a sense of sonorous *depth*, of foreground and background detail in individual events and gestures.

This is especially apparent in the first two pieces, Ung's *Spiral* and the Davidovsky *Synchronism No. 6*. The former integrates musical materials from a broad variety of Asian musics, with vivid and breathtakingly colorful instrumentation that reads, ambiguously, as a simulation of the effects produced by Asian instruments, together with a contemplation and reimagination of Western new-musical resources. Davidovsky's *Synchronism No. 6*, a work that has spawned numerous imitations, bears its notoriety unpretentiously with wit and grace. It is an important contribution, and has been greatly admired because of its imaginative modeling of each sonorous possibility and its demonstration of ways to inflect, challenge, support, compress, or extend the materials presented by the natural instrument with its electronic counterpart, and vice versa.

Steiger's *Trio in Memoriam*, commemorating Paul Fromm, unfolds a progression of ensemble textures, beginning with an intervallic oscillation in an ensemble unison and continuing through a series of vivid and dramatic contrapuntal reconfigurations: an impassioned accompanied cello line, a polyrhythmic tutti, a long propulsive gesture in unison, and so forth. The congruence of texture and form delineates forceful sectional divisions within the context of a single movement to climax and closure.

Like Steiger's work, my *Commedia* is animated and articulated by instrumental and textural recombinations. However, *Commedia* presents a mercurial conversation among shifting *dramatis personae* rather than a gradual evolution of instrumental resources. Through much of the piece, one instrument (or duo) comments—sometimes supportively but just as often quizzically or antagonistically—on the behavior of the other duo (or single instrument).

More consistently than any other work here, the Gideon Sonata for Cello and Piano seems to use vocal music as its inspiration. Lyrical impulses underlie its shapes, in the upbeat figurations of the first movement, as well as in the more extended line of the second movement. The piece merits a place of pride in the cello literature—an exemplar of idiomatic instrumental writing, as the Davidovsky *Synchronism* (however stylistically different) is for the piano.

In realizing these five works, Aequalis has respected and responded to the individual premises and ambitions of each composer, and has, furthermore, enfolded each piece into the chamber music repertory. The performances recorded here represent intensive preparation, and the experience of each work played in repeated live

performances, in a wide range of contexts, as well. These performances have matured as the performers engaged in a dialectic not only with composition and the "idealized audiences" of composers' conceptions, but with a broad range of very diverse, very real audiences. —*MARTIN BRODY*

Martin Brody, Associate Professor at Wellesley College, has written extensively about contemporary American music. He is currently writing an opera based on the novella Heart of a Dog, by Mikhail Bulgakov.

AEQUALIS, founded in 1984, specializes in the performance of new American music. The group has commissioned sixteen works by prominent and emerging composers, creating a new repertoire for piano, cello, and percussion. One of these commissions, Chinary Ung's *Spiral* (included on this recording) was a First Prize winner at the Kennedy Center's 1989 Friedheim Award Competition. Each season Aequalis performs 50 concerts in over 35 states, featuring verbal presentations and eclectic programming designed for diverse audiences. The group has been heard nationally on WGBH's "Morning Pro Musica" and National Public Radio's "Performance Today," and internationally on the Voice of America.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

MARTIN BRODY:

Apparitions; Voices; Moments Musicaux. David Evans and Charles Fisk, piano; Joel Smirnoff, violin. CRI CD-594.

MARIO DAVIDOVSKY

Divertimento. Fred Sherry, cello; Riverside Symphony, George Rothman conducting. New World 80383-2.

Pennplay. Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. New World NW 306.

Scenes From Shir ha Shirim. Phyllis Bryn-Julson, soprano; Charles Walker and Frank Hoffmeister, tenors; Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. CRI SD-530.

MIRIAM GIDEON

A Miriam Gideon Retrospective. New World 80393-2.

Sonata. Robert Black, piano. CRI SD-481.

Sonnets from Shakespeare; Wing'd Hour. William Sharp, Baritone; Constantin Cassolas, tenor; PRISM Chamber Orchestra, Robert Black conducting. CRI SD-527.

RAND STEIGER

Hexadecathon. John Cerminaro, horn; California EAR unit, Stephen Mosko conducting. Crystal S-672.

Quintessence. California EAR Unit, Rand Steiger, conducting. New Albion NA-019.

CHINARY UNG

Mohori. Barbara Martin, soprano; Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg conducting. CRI SD-363.

Tall Wind, Khse Buon. Joan Heller, soprano; Marc Johnson, cello; Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg conducting. CRI SD-487.

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MARIO DAVIDOVSKY

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MIRIAM GIDEON

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Fred Bronstein has elected to perform on a Bösendorfer concert grand piano for *Spiral*, *Trio in Memoriam*, and *Commedia*. The piano was provided and serviced by Boston Organ and Piano Inc., Natick, Mass.

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1. *Chinary Ung*:

Spiral (14:07)

(publ. C.F. Peters Corp.)

2. *Mario Davidovsky*:

Synchronism No. 6 for Piano and Electronic Sounds (6:54)

(publ. E.B. Marks Music Corp.)

3. *Rand Steiger:*
Trio in Memoriam (13:38)
(publ. Leisure Planet Music)

Miriam Gideon:
Sonata for Cello and Piano
(publ. American Composers Alliance)
4. I. Agitato ma non troppo vivo (6:57)
5. II. Andante con moto (6:56)

6. *Martin Brody:*
Commedia (10:14) (© Martin Brody)

Aequalis
Fred Bronstein, piano
Elizabeth Mohr, cello
Michael Parola, percussion

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