

Ned Rorem: Winter Pages, Bright Music
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These two quintets, composed six years apart in the 1980s, each respond to their commissioners' practical needs. Early in 1987 when flutist Marya Martin, cofounder of the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival, approached me about a piece for herself and her four colleagues—violinists Ida and Ani Kavafian, cellist Fred Sherry, and pianist André-Michel Schub—specifying that it last from 20 to 25 minutes, I was intrigued by the unprecedented mixture of instruments. When Marya added that an auspicious premiere would take place in Bridgehampton during July of 1988, with three more performances the following March at the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society in New York, the intrigue turned to ambition. I composed the 22-minute, five-movement work, in New York and Nantucket, between July and December 1987, and called it *Bright Music*.

What more can I say? The history, the *secret*, of how any such work comes to be is unfathomable, except by outside authorities who invariably provide canny but irrelevant exegeses. That creative process is like a placenta which has both shielded and coaxed the growth of the work; but once the work is delivered, the afterbirth is devoured and forgotten by the no-longer pregnant parent.

Composers nevertheless usually like to chat about their music. One will adopt an esthetic stance and tell you about Inspiration, emotional convictions, even sunsets. Another might gossip: Was he in love or otherwise ailing during the feat, and if so, did this affect the content? (People always want to know how such happy sounds can be penned by one so sad.) I, meanwhile, having reexamined the score as an objective critic might, will briefly give you a few tangible pointers:

I'm struck by how the composer of *Bright Music*—who insofar as he is known at all is known for vocal pieces which are spacious and non-repetitive has here constructed not from themes but from motives, fragments. *Fandango*, for example, which is actually a rondo, is built from a ritornello of four adjacent notes, E-D-G-F. The net effect is meant to evoke a rat in an ashcan, commencing with spasmodic flurries, starts and stops, then gusting into a raucous mazurka. *Pierrot* is a meditation on Picasso's early blue-period paintings, although this was decided *ex post facto*. *Dance-Song-Dance* is a scherzo based on a major triad, followed by a long lament based on the same triad in slow motion that returns to the scherzo, and whirls to a close. *Another Dream* is a series of solos by flute and strings that weave themselves slowly around the piano's 48-measure ostinato in 9/8. Finally, *Chopin* is the wisp of an echo of that composer's B-flat minor Piano Sonata.

After the piece was done, the only problem remaining was what to call it. Originally named *Chamber Music* (had the term ever been used specifically rather than generically as a title?), that seemed just too dull. Sylvia Goldstein came up with the present title—apt, since as I grow older my music grows more optimistic.

Many years earlier, in October of 1980, my old friend Charles Wadsworth and I had lunch at O'Neill's (eggs Benedict, chocolate truffles, espresso) to discuss the length, choice of instruments, degree of difficulty, fee, and deadline for the piece I had long been wishing he'd invite me to write, tailor-made for his Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Here, too, the color combination was unprecedented in catalogs of chamber music—and I knew the instrumentalists before I set pen to paper: Gervase de Peyer,

clarinet; Loren Glickman, bassoon; James Buswell, violin; Leslie Parnas, cello; and Charles himself on piano.

During the first cold weeks of 1981 I began writing the quintet in New York, completing it in Nantucket in late May. The suite of twelve pieces is a diary of the season, each entry leading to the next, reworking the same concerns which nevertheless shift their mood according to the weather. The whole represents a plateau from where, as the future grows narrower, the past seems more widely open to reinterpretation. Today I dwell autumnally —winterishly, even—upon my teen years in Chicago, where I wrote my first songs on American poetry, and upon my twenties in France where I continued to write songs on American poetry. This “dwelling” forms the core of *Winter Pages*.

My nonvocal works are songs without texts. Indeed, so firmly do I rely on the poor singer within me longing to get out that the music feels almost like verse without words. Yet, since nonvocal music can never contain a uniformly identifiable program (music is not literature), I often, like many another “impressionist,” take pains to suggest images through titles. A musical rose by any other name smells differently.

A Mirror is so named because the material backtracks at midpoint and rewinds itself in reverse. This very short curtain raiser plants the seeds for most of the succeeding sections. Whittier's *Snowbound* provides the canvas for the second movement on which the solo bassoon paints the scene: “The sun that brief December day/Rose cheerless over hills of gray, /And, darkly circled, gave at noon/A sadder light than waning moon.”

Three players—clarinet, violin, cello—evoke the opening lines of Hardy's *Birds At Winter Nightfall*: “Around the house the flakes fly faster/And all the berries now are gone....” *Paris* then is a waltz for clarinet and piano.

The fifth section revives Dorchester Avenue, near Chicago's 57th Street, which was home for me between the crucial ages of seven and seventeen, and where I learned the piano. *Hesitations*, the title for a trio of strings and piano, is made clear in the music, which jerks and pauses.

The long central seventh movement is a rondo for solo violin, supported and contradicted by the others. The title comes from Wilfred Owen's *Music*: “I have been urged by earnest violins/And drunk their mellow sorrows to the slake/Of all my sorrows and my thirsting sins./My heart has beaten for a brave drum's sake.”

Paul Goodman, the source for so many of my songs and an irreversible influence on my youth, closed his play *Stoplight* with these words: “...nothing to do but wait,/meantime the moments fly by like a snowstorm/and my time is slipping away.” These verses are illustrated by clarinet, bassoon, and piano, all skittering. The tenth movement paints the Rue des Saints-Pères, on which loomed one of the many hotels I once called home at five every morning....

Valse Oubliée, of course, is a title from Liszt.

Jean Cocteau, in his movie *Blood of a Poet*, incorporates the following stanza:

Ainsi partent souvent du college
Ces coups de poing faisant cracher du sang,
Ces coups de poing durs des boules de neige
Que donnent la beauté vite en passant.

I had already finished the penultimate soliloquy and called it *Cello Alone*, when I realized that Cocteau's phrase had worked its way into my subconscious and impelled the

composition. The cello then gathers the sounds from the preceding sections, weaves them together, and drifts—into a *Still Life*, wherein the five instrumentalists sing together in a quiet, formal ending.

The first performance (which contained a thirteenth movement, later cut) took place in Alice Tully Hall on February 14, 1982, and lasted some 36 minutes. —NED ROREM

THE BRIDGEHAMPTON CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL, founded in 1984 by artistic director and flutist Marya Martin, along with violinists Ani and Ida Kavafian, pianist André-Michel Schub, and cellist Fred Sherry, convenes each August to prepare and present six concerts. Each season the founding artists are joined by guest artists to make music in the picturesque environs of Long Island's East End. The combination of interesting programming, first-rate musicians, and the excellent acoustics of the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church has created a concert series that has drawn both loyal audience support and critical praise. Each summer the Festival highlights the work of a contemporary American composer. Over the past years, works of William Schuman, John Corigliano, David Diamond, Bruce Adolphe, and Ned Rorem have been performed. In 1981 the BCMF commissioned Rorem to write a chamber work for its founding members to help celebrate its fifth anniversary season. *Bright Music* was given its world premiere performance in Bridgehampton in August 1988, and its New York City premiere in March 1989 at Alice Tully Hall, at the invitation of Charles Wadsworth and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

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WINTER PAGES (29:39)

Todd Palmer, clarinet

Frank Morelli, bassoon

Ida Kavafian, violin

Fred Sherry, cello

Charles Wadsworth, piano

1 A Mirror (0:44)

2 The sun that brief December day (3:16)

3 Around the house the flakes fly faster (2:28)

- 4 Paris then (1:45)
- 5 Dorchester Avenue (1:40)
- 6 Hesitations (1:43)
- 7 Urged by earnest violins (7:06)
- 8 Moments fly by like a snowstorm (1:47)
- 9 Rue des Saints-Pères (1:21)
- 10 Valse Oubliée (1:52)
- 11 Stone Snowballs (2:58)
- 12 Still Life (2:31)

BRIGHT MUSIC (21:00)

Marya Martin, flute
Ani Kavafian, violin
Ida Kavafian, violin
Fred Sherry, cello
André-Michel Schub, piano

- 13 Fandango (3:53)
- 14 Pierrot (2:15)
- 15 Dance-Song-Dance (6:05)
- 16 Another Dream (7:43)
- 17 Chopin (0:54)

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