

**First Program In Standard Time**  
**THE NEW YORK**

**New World Records 80418**

**COMPOSERS ORCHESTRA**

**Music by ANTHONY BRAXTON,  
ROBIN HOLCOMB, WAYNE HORVITZ,  
LENNY PICKETT, BOBBY PREVITE, ELLIOTT SHARP**

If a name could tell us everything about its subject, the New York Composers Orchestra would be self-explanatory: an ensemble of New York City musicians who have organized to play orchestral renditions of their own compositions. Of course, nothing's ever that simple. For one thing, since they initiated the project in 1986, the NYCO's co-directors--keyboardists Wayne Horvitz and Robin Holcomb--split their time between New York and Seattle. Secondly, although the 1990 debut recording by the NYCO concentrated on original works by band members (Marty Ehrlich, Doug Wieselmann, Holcomb and Horvitz), this new recording reflects the NYCO's extended reach with pieces by Lenny Pickett, Elliott Sharp, and Anthony Braxton, as well as band member Bobby Previte. So while the Orchestra records in New York remains closely tied to that scene, and continues to be a vehicle of expression for its own members, it has in fact become an enterprise with a wide musical purview.

"I organized the Orchestra as an antidote to the other things I was doing," Horvitz explains, by which he means the more "avant-garde" projects of the teeming "Downtown"/Kitchen/Knitting Factory circle of musicians and bands that includes John Zorn, Tim Berne, Bill Frisell, Horvitz's own group The President, and many others. "I wanted to see what I could do with something more conservative," he says.

Again, "conservative" is too narrow a characterization for this adventuresome 15-member big band and its daring repertoire. In the context of the improvised and new-music realms where many of the players are often heard, a tightly arranged and conducted orchestral setting might imply a retreat to values of an earlier era. But any aggregation that brings the music of Elliott Sharp and Anthony Braxton to the listening public is hardly on a reactionary course. Indeed, given the economic climate of the early 1990s, which puts daunting constraints on every large-scale music project and makes composers increasingly dependent upon the grants-and-commissions game, any artist who pursues an orchestral vision and provides an outlet for contemporary writing is making a progressive, if not radical, departure.

The NYCO's explosive, outward-bound potential is fully evident as soon as the band launches into the thorny lines of Anthony Braxton's, "92 + (30, 32, 139) + (108c, 108d)," which was directed by Marty Ehrlich. Like Cecil Taylor, Braxton is one of the most restless and probing architects of modern music, absorbed with the possibilities of sound and its implications for culture and consciousness. Although he has written extensively for large ensembles, precious few of those works have been recorded. Braxton may have a reputation for writing extremely difficult music, but for all its complexity--the rhythmic breakdowns, the pointillistic instrumental scrambles, the tangled ensemble webs--"#92" also swings like mad.

For immediate contrast, the Orchestra next wafts through Robin Holcomb's "First Program in Standard Time," an extended four-part composition that is marked by an almost anti-

"Downtown" pastoral sensibility. Known (but not widely recorded) as a composer of new music before she began singing her intriguing quasi-pop songs (on two albums for Elektra), Holcomb writes with a keen sense of mood and a subtle sense of humor.

As if resolving the dramatic contrast between Braxton's frenetic swing and Holcomb's gently abstracted temperament, Wayne Horvitz's "New Waltz" dances lightly into adventuresome territory. Vincent Chancey's French horn and Doug Wieselman's tenor sax tease out the subtle references to John Coltrane's "Afro Blue."

Like Anthony Braxton, experimental guitarist Elliott Sharp is a complex composer who crops up as a performer in too many guises to enumerate, but whose extended pieces are also seldom heard, or even attempted in orchestral settings such as this. His "Skew" urges the NYCO musicians into a cannily devised but almost anarchic-sounding pastiche of instrumental chirping, frantic ensemble outbursts over an irregular heartbeat, and a "skewed" gamelan-like interlude.

In the wake of Elliott Sharp's music almost anything could sound moderate. But perhaps Horvitz's reference to doing "something more conservative" has something to do with an unabashed willingness to sing. If so, the NYCO is gloriously guilty on another count--Lenny Pickett's "Dance Music for Composers Orchestra" is firmly in the pocket and echoes both Ellington and the brass bands of New Orleans. A reed player who first made his mark on popular music as a founder of the funky Oakland band Tower of Power, Pickett is a master at merging accessible rhythms with knotty arrangements.

Horvitz's "Paper Money," which was recorded during the sessions for the first NYCO album, has yet another sort of momentum. Its even pulse is governed by an almost clocklike cadence, with the instrumental balances shifting mysteriously as the implied second-hand ticks eccentrically through the composition's nine minutes.

The two remaining pieces again demonstrate the NYCO's adaptability to contrasting individual composing styles. Bobby Previte, the NYCO's percussionist, and a prolific recording artist in his own right, recently composed an album of music for the Moscow Circus, and his feel for dynamics and dramatic development makes his contribution, "Valerie, explain Pollock," a musical short story, with tension building from a whispered opening through a dense, improvised climax to a breathless denouement. And the final number, Horvitz's "Nica's Day" (the title alludes to Thelonious Monk and his close friend, Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, as well as Horvitz and Holcomb's daughter, Nica) is a spirited romp in the tradition of Basie and Mingus.

Given the crowded schedules of its members, the NYCO can be little more than a side project (and, Horvitz notes, "a logistical nightmare" to organize). But even in its transient existence it has become an invaluable vehicle for the advancement of contemporary composition.

—Derk Richardson

*Derk Richardson is a Bay Area freelance writer who reviews music for the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the Express, and other publications.*

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The New York Composers Orchestra:

Cleave E. Guyton, Jr.: alto saxophone, flute  
Robert DeBellis: alto and soprano saxophones  
Doug Wieselmann: tenor saxophone, clarinet  
Marty Ehrlich: tenor, alto and soprano saxophones, clarinet, bass clarinet  
Sam Furnace: baritone saxophone  
Ray Anderson: trombone  
Art Baron: trombone  
Vincent Chancey: French horn  
Eddie Allen: trumpet  
Steven Bernstein: trumpet, flugelhorn  
Jack Walrath: trumpet  
Robin Holcomb: piano  
Wayne Horvitz: keyboards  
Lindsey Horner: bass  
Bobby Previte: drums

On "Paper Money":

Doug Wieselmann: tenor saxophone, clarinet  
Marty Ehrlich: alto saxophone, clarinet  
Butch Morris: cornet  
Ray Anderson: tuba, trombone  
Art Baron: trombone, didjeridu  
Vincent Chancey: French horn  
Robin Holcomb: piano  
Wayne Horvitz: keyboards  
Bobby Previte: drums, marimba

Producers: Wayne Horvitz and Hans Wendi  
Executive producer: Arthur Moorhead  
Engineer: James Farber

All compositions except "Paper Money" recorded at Clinton Recording Studios, New York City, January 1992

Assist engineers: Jackie Brown and Lewis Dean

All compositions except "Paper Money" mixed at River Sound, New York City, February 1992

Assistant engineer: Brian Sperber

"Paper Money" recorded at Power Station, New York City, January 1990

Assistant engineer: Aaron Kropf

"Paper Money" mixed at Skyline Studios, New York City, November 1991

Assistant engineer: David Schiffman

Mastered at New York Digital Recording, Inc. by James Farber and Paul Zinman

Design: Stephen Byram Art: Karen Caldicott

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92 + (30, 32, 139) + (108c, 108d)

For Creative Orchestra (1979)

(Anthony Braxton, Synthesis Music/BMI)

Directed by Marty Ehrlich

Soloists:

Marty Ehrlich: alto saxophone

Ray Anderson: trombone

Robin Holcomb: piano

Jack Walrath, Eddie Allen, Steven Bernstein: trumpets

2- First Program In Standard Time

(Robin Holcomb, Other Room Music/ASCAP)

Soloists:

Part 1:

Vincent Chancey: French horn

Marty Ehrlich: tenor saxophone

Part 2:

Doug Wieselmann: tenor saxophone

Part 3:

Doug Wieselmann: tenor saxophone

Steven Bernstein: trumpet

Part 4:

Marty Ehrlich: tenor saxophone

Jack Walrath: trumpet

3 New Waltz

(Wayne Horvitz, Other Room Music/ASCAP)

Soloists:

Wayne Horvitz: piano

Vincent Chancey: French horn

Doug Wieselmann: tenor saxophone

4 Skew

(Elliott Sharp, Zoar Music/BMI)

Soloists:

Wayne Horvitz: ring modulated prepared piano

Bobby Previte: drums

5 Dance Music For Composers Orchestra

(Lenny Pickett, Lenny Pickett Music/ASCAP)

Soloists:

Ray Anderson: trombone

Bobby Previte: drums

6 Paper Money

(Wayne Horvitz, Other Room Music/ASCAP)

Soloists:

Butch Morris: cornet

Wayne Horvitz: synthesizer

Bobby Previte: drums

7 Valerie, explain Pollock.  
(Bobby Previte, Cave of the Winds Music/BMI)

Soloists:

All

8 Nica's Day  
(Wayne Horvitz, Other Room Music/BMI)

Soloists:

Art Baron: trombone

Sam Furnace: baritone saxophone

Ray Anderson: trombone

Wayne Horvitz and Robin Holcomb appear courtesy of Elektra Nonesuch  
Ray Anderson and Bobby Previte appear courtesy of Gramavision

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