

Wes York, who was born in Portland, Maine, in 1949, has had a varied, if all-American, musical background. He grew up in Connecticut, "Ives country," as York puts it, "complete with bandstand in the middle of the green and my playing the carillon at church." In his early twenties he was a singer, pianist and guitarist in various rock and folk music bands, during this period writing some seventy-five songs. He then worked as an actor and composer in residence for the New England Repertory Theater. His professional training as composer came next, at the Longy School of Music, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the New England Conservatory of Music, where his principal teacher was Robert Cogan. He has worked as a sound engineer, studied computer music, performed percussion in a new music group, and written on music theory. Along with his interests in popular and concert music, he counts the Early Music which he heard performed throughout his years in Boston as a principal influence on his work.

Such a musical pedigree in a young composer is no longer surprising in postmodern America. But in a robustly maximalist age that gladly permits the fusion of unrelated styles and the flaunting of eclecticism, York's music stands out as reductive, elliptical, elusive, implying diversity rather than spelling it out. It is a music that is unusual in its reconciliation of what had previously seemed two incompatible forms of Minimalism: the propulsive, harmony-and-rhythm driven sort pioneered by Philip Glass and Steve Reich, and the more mysterious and intangible ways of Morton Feldman. Although drawn to dramatic contexts and texts from divergent multicultural sources, York searches out, in his music, the elemental connections between word and tone, and tone and structure, that go beyond style.

An example of what York calls his interest in balancing things that go places with things that don't can readily be found in *Three Native Songs*. York's 1985 setting of song texts from the Teton Sioux, taken from a 1918 Smithsonian publication, makes no reference to Native American music, but rather approaches the poetry's bizarre and psychedelic imagery from his own perspective. In the first, for instance, the circular nature of the poem is mirrored in a large-scale harmonic structure that operates around a circle of thirds, while the dramatic character of the poem's blowing and roaring wind is conveyed in a more goal-directed step-like melody line for the soprano, with its descriptive ever-flowing melismas. Likewise, in the second song, York employs a technique he likens to "Bach backwards," where there is no strong harmonic movement in the accompaniment, while a noticeable sense of directional pull is felt in the vocal line.

Directionality and non-directionality don't, of course, really balance — their different expectations are irreconcilable. But with the third of the *Native Songs*, we find that York's music strives not so much to achieve that impossible balancing act, but rather a transcendence of any such expectations altogether. Here the vocal lines—archaic in their intertwining hiccapping motion but modern in their songlike qualities—seem to reach their rapturous conclusion, partly because a listener can now throw off all those expectations.

Also taken from the Teton Sioux, *My Heart Is Different* contains something analogous to the earlier cycle in the way an almost pop ballad-style melodic line hovers above a spare and static

piano accompaniment. The occasion for the music is different--it was written for the 1989 film *Hearing Voices*, directed by Sharon Greytak. The film was described by York as an emotional rite of passage for a woman model who is photographed first only as body parts--hands, say, or feet--but who eventually becomes whole thanks to an unusual relationship with a man. York wrote the music without seeing the film, but with specific scenes in mind. This song accompanies a love scene.

Reminiscence 2, written in 1986, is the one work in the collection that does not have any extra-musical connotations. "The Reminiscences are a series of works that reach back to styles of previous musical eras, not to reproduce those styles, but to transform them," York writes. *Reminiscence 2* does not recall a specific composer or style but, being vaguely neoclassical and utilizing a symmetrical octotonic scale, it is a general harkening back to the first half of our century as viewed through York's sensibilities.

Songs From the Levertov Scores, written in 1986, further demonstrates York's intuitive approach to texts. He writes: "Poet Denise Levertov has suggested in *The Poet in the World* that her poetry, as seen on the page, is a notation of specific sonic effects. For example, line breaks and indentations represent different amounts of pause. And indeed as I began composing I had the sense that the music had already been begun for me. So, as I worked, I attempted to appropriate her existing 'score.' And yet, any musical setting of a poem makes something new, and at times the music that evolved made demands of its own--repetitions and bursts of nonsense syllables, for example."

In these settings the accompaniment plays a more or less traditional role of setting mood and movement, not directing harmonic cadence. Meanwhile the vocal line conveys an emotional direction that is less rigorously spelled out in the text, especially at the end of the last song, where it reclaims the jubilant vocalizing of the first song; its jubilation is hard-won however, and not tinged with the pathos of the experience. *Music for Strings* returns to the film *Hearing Voices*, and is a variation on *My Heart Is Different*. Written for solo piano with the sustain pedal to be held down throughout, it is a contemplative piece that was intended for a long wordless sequence in the film. "I had in mind evoking the sound of the pantaleon, a precursor to the piano, which was somewhat like a gigantic dulcimer," York writes.

In *Two Songs on a Poem of Su Tung P'o*, York says that he was once again drawn to a text ambiguous in its evocations, and it is this ambiguity that York both respects and transcends in "The Southern Room Over the River." This time he does so by setting the poem twice in two different manners: one rhapsodic, one mournful. Drawing an analogy to Monet's series of paintings of the same scene, York says that each song reflects the poem in a different light. And here one particularly notices that favored technique whereby York, who is always exchanging the expected musical roles, assigns the poem's colorful imagery to the accompaniment, leaving the actual text setting in the vocal line more abstract. The result is a sort of mysterious half-light--just right for the poem's "No longer know, where." That is the ongoing attraction in all of York's music, a music that leaves the listener no longer knowing where--and finding it a moodily rich place to be.

—Mark Swed

Mark Swed is a critic who writes for The Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times and several music magazines. He is also working on a biography of John Cage for Poseidon Press.

Three Native Songs

1.

where
the wind
is blowing
the wind
is roaring
I stand
westward
the wind
is blowing
the wind
is roaring
I stand
by Teal Duck

2.

someone
somewhere
is speaking
from the north
a sacred stone nation
is speaking
you will hear
someone
somewhere
is speaking
by Bear Necklace

3.

today
is mine (I claimed)
(to) a man
a voice
I sent
you grant me
this day
is mine (I claimed)
(to) a man
a voice
I sent
now here
(he) is
by Shell Necklace

My Heart is Different

My heart
is different

behold me
my heart
is different
I have shown it
from the north
a wind
comes to get me.
From the Teton Sioux

Songs from the Levertov Scores

1. The Presence

To the house on the grassy hill
where rams rub their horns against the porch

and your bare feet on the floors of silence
speak in rhymed stanzas to the furniture,

solemn chests of draws and heavy chairs
blinking in the sun you have let in!

Before I enter the rooms of your solitude
in my living form, trailing my shadow,

I shall have come unseen. Upstairs and down with you
and out across road and rocks to the river

to drink the cold spray. You will believe
a bird flew by the window, a wandering bee

buzzed in the hallway, a wind
rippled the bronze grasses. Or will you

know who it is?

2. Remembering

How I woke to the color-tone
as of peach-juice
dulcet bells were
tolling.

And how my pleasure
was in the strength of my back,
in my noble shoulders, the cool
smooth flesh cylinders of my arms.
How I seemed a woman tall and
full-rounded, ready
to step into daylight sound as a bell

but continued to awake
further, and found myself
myself, smaller,
not thin but thinner, nervous,
who hurries without animal calm.
And how the sweet
blur of the bells

lapsed, and ceased,
and it was not morning.

3. Stepping Westward
What is green in me
darkens, muscadine.

If woman is inconstant,
good, I am faithful to

ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now

is a time of ripening.
If her part

is to be true,
a north star,

good, I hold steady
in the black sky

and vanish by day,
yet burn there

in blue or above
quilts of cloud.

There is no savor
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be
what, woman,

and who, myself,
I am, a shadow

that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out

on a thread of wonder.
If I bear burdens

They begin to be remembered
as gifts, goods, a basket

of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me

in fragrance. I can
ease as I go.

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Two Songs on a Poem of Su Tung P'o

The Southern Room Over the River
Room prepared, incense burned
Close shutters, close eyelids
Patterns of quilt, waves of river
Gauze curtain, mist.

Dream, then awake.
No longer know, where.
Open western window, watch waves
Stretching on and on, horizon.

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York, Wes. "For John Cage." The Music of Morton Feldman. Excelsior Press, forthcoming.
York, Wes. "Form and Process in Two Pages by Philip Glass." Sonus, Spring 1981.
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Wes York

Three Native Songs

- 1- Where the Wind Is (4:42)
- 2- Someone Somewhere (2:40)
- 3- Today Is Mine (3:28)

Nancy Armstrong, soprano; Sanford Sylvan, baritone; Susan Downey and Peggy Friedland, flutes; Jeffrey Fischer and James Russell Smith, percussion; Reed Woodhouse, piano; Charles Fussell, conductor

4- My Heart Is Different (4:17)
Susan Botti, soprano; David Buechner, piano
5- Reminiscence 2 (5:37)
Julie Darling Fredericks, flute; Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Kathleen Supove, piano
Songs From the Levertov Scores
6- The Presence (3:43)
7- Remembering (2:41)
8- Stepping Westward (5:05)
Susan Botti, soprano; Marimolin: Sharan Leventhal, violin; Nancy Zeltsman, marimba
9- Music for Strings (4:47)
David Buechner, piano
Two Songs On a Poem of Su Tung P'o
10- Lament (5:25)
11- Ode (4:56)
Bruce Lancaster, tenor; David Ripley, bass; Henry Weinberger, piano

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