

## DONALD ERB Drawing Down The Moon

New World Records 80457

A composer's style, like a crystal, is created over time--sometimes rapidly, more slowly in other cases. Both are formed from elements suspended in solution, as it were, and the combination of those elements determines the contour, mass, and structure of the final product. It was when Donald Erb was about 35 years old that, in his own words, he "heard things in my music that finally represented me." Shortly thereafter he articulated a philosophic esthetic around his newly crystallizing style. It is a non-academic American style, in which one can detect elements of jazz, electronic music, serialism, and traditional classical styles. When he was once asked what he wanted to achieve through his music he said, "I'd like my music to have the clarity of classical music, the passion of Romanticism, and the freedom of jazz." These three elements are the essence of Erb's music.

When Erb, who was born in 1927 in Youngstown, Ohio, was twelve years old, he was given the 78rpm Bluebird recording of tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins playing *Body and Soul*. (The recording had been made in 1933.) The music so impressed Erb that he bought other Thirties jazz recordings, including trumpeter Bunny Berigan's *I Can't Get Started* (1936). Hooked on the Big Band sound, Erb took lessons, and as a teenager played trumpet with a dance band several times a week throughout high school. He joined the Navy during World War II, hoping to attend the Navy's school of music. He was instead sent to Pearl Harbor as a radar operator, an occupation with a sound environment of high pitches and bleeps that may have set the stage for his forays into electronic music in the Sixties. Erb managed to play with a band aboard his ship, a tour of duty he celebrated by having his arm tattooed *USS Baltimore*. (The rebel in Erb later wished he hadn't had the tattoo removed, especially at academic meetings where he could register protest "by simply rolling up my sleeve.")

Erb continued as a professional jazz trumpeter after the war, attending Kent State University where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in trumpet (1950) and then began studying composition with his most important teacher, Marcel Dick, at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Dick, a well-known violist and proponent of Schoenberg's Second Viennese School, led Erb to write in the serial style. It was what most academic composers were doing at that time. Erb was not converted, however. "One day," he says, "I woke up and realized I did not *like* serial music" because its style contained unsolvable problems, such as "the lack of steady pulsation (a major omission) and the inability to deal with musical lines because of the concentration on intervals." He added, "Except for Berg, musical climaxes are short, too short to reflect human emotion." All this propelled Erb to think about jazz again, its immediacy, its vitality. The question was how to structure a coherent, personal compositional style out of the elements suspended in his own experience.

He earned a Master of Music degree in 1953 at the Cleveland Institute of Music and then studied briefly with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. It was during this period that Erb heard *Ionisation* by Edgard Varèse. When Varèse had been asked during a Juilliard seminar what *form* his music was in, the composer exploded: "What form has a crystal? Crystals assume thousands of forms!" This music, with its iconoclastic structuring of form and quasi-scientific approach to sound, opened up limitless new possibilities for Erb.

Erb earned a Doctorate in Music in 1964 at Indiana University, where he studied with Bernard Heiden. From the mid to late Sixties Erb, the Navy veteran, took part in anti-Vietnam War protests with, as he says, "a heavy heart." Back in Cleveland and serving as composer in residence in the joint music program of the Cleveland Institute and Case Western Reserve University, Erb also marched in the streets. He points with pride to that period's activities, as though to a row of medals. But he soon became disenchanted with the antiwar movement, and could not support it intellectually. For Erb, "movements, whether political or musical--Neo-Classicism, serialism--all were emotional cop-outs." He had personal reasons to disassociate himself from "movements," and having purged these elements, was ready to confront his own style.

In the spring of 1970, the Dallas Symphony presented the premiere of Erb's *The Seventh Trumpet* (1969) and recorded his *Symphony of Overtures* (1964), his doctoral dissertation. These and *Christmasmusic* (1967) were large, richly textured works that constituted a watershed for the composer, pointing to new directions his music would follow.

In 1971, Indiana University awarded Erb its Distinguished Alumnus Award; that same year an important influence on Erb appeared in the form of Stuart Dempster, the trombonist and composer who had staked out a singular niche for himself as a performer and improviser, and was investigating new sounds and techniques, especially with non-Western instruments. Dempster's Fulbright scholarship to Australia put him in contact with the didjeridu, which he incorporated into his own compositions in the mid-Seventies. Dempster's musical odyssey from classically trained orchestral musician to freelance pioneer helped to crystallize Erb's own style.

In 1976 Erb worked again with Dempster, this time on the *Trombone Concerto*, which received its premiere with Dempster and the Saint Louis Symphony. Among the current listing of Erb's compositions are twenty-two orchestral works dating from 1962, ten of which are concertos.

Erb continued teaching at Indiana University during the Eighties. His studio there reflected the iconoclasm of this classical composer, and was remarkable for the number and variety of Elvis Presley memorabilia it contained, including a portrait of the King on black velvet and a plastic statue!

The five wind ensemble and chamber music works on this disc date from 1971 to 1991; they represent Erb's mature style. All the music is hard-edged, scored for winds, brass and percussion, unmollified by strings. Improvisation, or at least its quality of spontaneity and unlimited choice, is evoked, and there are hints of jazz here and there. The ensemble pieces are developed with massive walls of sonority and crushing climaxes. Solo passages are pushed to instrumental boundaries. All pursue the limits of the player's capabilities in terms of range and technique.

*...and then toward the end...* (1971), for trombone and four-track prerecorded trombones, received its premiere by Dempster. The structure resembles a concertino in which the soloist is spotlighted in cadenzas, and the work contains a jazz-like trading of ideas between the live and taped trombones.

*Cenotaph (for E. V.)* (1979) is Erb's homage to Varèse. It is scored for symphonic band, and ends with the solo oboe playing an inversion of the oboe theme from the opening of Varèse's *Octandre*. A cenotaph is a memorial for someone buried elsewhere, and in discussing the work, Erb, who never met the composer, says, "I dealt with my admiration for Varèse's music and what it was about it that I loved."

Two elements contributed to the writing of *Woody* (1988): a visit to Cleveland by clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, and the death the previous year of Woody Herman at age 75. (Herman's bands were significant from the mid-Forties on; Stravinsky wrote the *Ebony Concerto* for Herman's Thundering Herd in 1945.) The soloist plays multiphonic "duets" in some passages of *Woody*.

Erb wrote the *Symphony for Winds* (1989) on commission from York High School in Elmhurst, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, whose music students had performed at a Chicago Symphony concert. It is scored for high school or college band. In it Erb uses the tones that spell the name BACH in German: B flat, A, C, B natural. (He wrote another school commission in 1994 for his alma mater, Lakewood High School in Lakewood, Illinois. Called *Fanfare in D*, Erb says, "The key was also my high school grade average.") The *Symphony* is in three movements in a fast-slow-fast format.

*Drawing Down the Moon* (1991) for piccolo and percussion is in four movements, each derived from a mystical source. The first movement ("Drawing Down the Moon") refers to rites in ancient Greece in which women cast spells. "Pointing the Bone," the second movement, refers to an esoteric practice among Australian aboriginals. The third, "Lilith," is about the female figure who in rabbinic legend is Adam's first wife and, when supplanted by Eve, becomes an evil spirit in medieval demonology. (Mothers, to protect their sleeping children from the spirit of Lilith, sang songs to them that were the genesis of the lullaby.) The final movement, "Demon Drummer," comes from a seventeenth-century tale of a jailed drummer whose drum is magically heard in other places.

The Cleveland Institute of Music awarded Erb an honorary doctorate in 1984, and in 1993 it added its Distinguished Alumni Award. Somehow it is difficult to square such formal academic honors with the iconoclastic personality of the maverick upon whom they have been conferred, an irony surely not wasted on the boy with the low high school grade average. Currently (late 1994), the composer is writing a violin concerto for Miriam Fried and the Grand Rapids Symphony with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and is composer in residence with the Saint Louis Symphony under the aegis of Meet The Composer. At 67, Erb continues to write music that exemplifies his ideals of classical clarity, Romantic passion, and jazz-like freedom in a style wholly his own.

—Howard Klein

Howard Klein is a pianist and Director of Artists and Repertory for New World Records.

DR. GARY CIEPLUCH is Director of Bands at Case Western Reserve University, conductor of the University Circle Wind Ensemble, and founder/conductor of the Cleveland Youth Wind Symphony. He received his Ph.D. in Conducting/Music Education/Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Dr. Ciepluch has conducted the works of Olivier Messiaen, Karel Husa, Donald Erb, and others. His current research and writing projects are concerned with band/wind ensemble music for high school performing ensembles, and he is co-author of *Best Music for High School Band/Wind Ensemble*.

STUART DEMPSTER studied performance and composition at San Francisco State College. He was principal trombone in the Oakland Symphony from 1962 through 1966, and since 1968 has been on the faculty of University of Washington. Mr. Dempster tours regularly as a soloist performing his own works as well as those of Luciano Berio, Donald Erb, Robert Erickson, and

others. He also performs with the Deep Listening Band. His book *The Modern Trombone: A Definition of Its Idioms* was published in 1979. He has recorded for Columbia, New Albion, and Nonesuch.

JAN GIPPO received a Double Masters Degree in Applied Flute and Wind Ensemble Conducting/Literature from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. He studied with Dorio Anthony Dwyer, Lois Schaefer, Julius Baker, and Walfred Kujala. He has been a flutist/piccoloist with the Saint Louis Symphony since 1972, and is founder and member of the Webster Wind Quintet and the Webster Chamber Players. Mr. Gippo is on the faculties of the University of Missouri at St. Louis, St. Louis University, and Webster University.

ROSS POWELL is co-founder of Voices of Change, the contemporary ensemble in residence at the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University. A student of Alberto Luconi at the University of Michigan and of D. Stanley Hasty at the Eastman School, Powell has introduced more than 120 new works with Voices of Change. As Head of the Orchestral Instruments Department at S.M.U. he works to bring music of living composers into the curriculum and to develop inter-art opportunities for students.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Aura II*. Lynn Harrell, cello. Albany Troy 092.

Concerto for Brass and Orchestra. Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin, conductor. New World 80415-2.

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra. Lynn Harrell, cello; Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin, conductor. New World 80415-2.

Concerto for Contrabassoon and Orchestra. Gregg Henegar, bassoon; The London Philharmonic, Harold Farberman, conductor. Leonarda LE 331.

*Five Red Hot Duets*. Bradford Buckley, Gregg Henegar, bassoons. Albany Troy 092.

*Ritual Observances*. Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin, conductor. New World 80415-2.

*St. Valentine's Day Brass Quintet*. Nashville Contemporary Brass Quintet. Pantheon PFN-2241.

String Quartet No. 2. Cavani Quartet. Albany Troy 092.

*The Watchman Fantasy*. Gregory Fulkerson, violin; Audrey Andrist, piano. Albany Troy 092.

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DRAWING DOWN THE MOON  
WIND MUSIC OF DONALD ERB

DONALD ERB (b. 1927) 80457-2

- 1 *...and then toward the end...* (1971) 8:29  
for trombone and tape  
Stuart Dempster, trombone
- 2 *Cenotaph (for Edgard Varèse)* (1979) 7:49  
for symphonic band  
University Circle Wind Ensemble; Gary Ciepluch, conductor
- 3 *Woody* (1988) 11:05  
for clarinet  
Ross Powell, clarinet
- 4 *Symphony for Winds* (1989) 10:05  
for college wind ensemble

- 5 University Circle Wind Ensemble; Gary Ciepluch, conductor  
*Drawing Down the Moon* (1991) 15:04  
for piccolo and percussion  
Jan Gippo, piccolo; Kirk Brundage, percussion

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