

MILTON BABBITT

Philomel

New World Records 80466

In the ever more variegated landscape of American music, Milton Babbitt's position remain special in terms of both work and influence. One of the earliest American students of Arnold Schoenberg's "method of composition using twelve notes related only to one another," Babbitt published, beginning in the 1950s, a series of theoretical articles rigorously exploring and expanding that method's underpinnings and implications. When electronically synthesized sound became a practical possibility, he was one of its pioneers, and he was also a strong advocate of the importance of the university as a home for—and sponsor of—musical creative work. At the same time, in a steady stream of new works over nearly five decades (virtually all his pre-1947 music remains unpublished), Babbitt has offered performers and listeners a prodigious range of challenges and rewards, without ever abandoning the stringent ideals of logic and structural integrity inherent in his theoretical thought. His music has never sought to be—and never will be—"popular"; rather, it is an acquired taste—but a taste many have acquired, some through study of the theory behind it, many simply through practice in listening to it. Exercising ear and mind and heart in ways unlike any other composer, Babbitt has also earned a fervent following among performers, whose mastery has invariably been stretched and broadened by its intricacies.

Born in Philadelphia on May 10, 1916, Milton Babbitt was raised in Jackson, Mississippi, within a strongly musical family in which everyone played an instrument (his was the clarinet). At school, he showed himself expert at playing jazz and also composed popular songs. Although living far from metropolitan centers, he early became aware of the new music from Europe, of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. After graduating from high school at fifteen, he went to the University of Pennsylvania, planning to major in mathematics, but eventually ended up at New York University studying with Marion Bauer, who had recently published a book about the twentieth-century music that so interested him. Upon graduation, he studied privately with Roger Sessions and worked toward an M.F.A. in music at Princeton, where he was hired as an instructor in 1938. There he remained until his retirement in 1984, except for the war years, succeeding Sessions as Conant Professor of Music in 1960. Since 1971 he has taught composition at the Juilliard School. His awards, honorary degrees, and fellowships have been numerous, culminating in a 1982 Pulitzer Prize Special Citation for "his life's work as a distinguished and seminal American composer," a 1986 MacArthur fellowship, and a 1991 William Schuman Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

The works on this recording represent a period of slightly more than a decade, beginning in 1964 with Babbitt's third work employing synthesized sound, the dramatic scena *Philomel* and continuing with *Post-Partitions* for piano (1966), *Phonemena* for soprano and piano (1969) or soprano and synthesized tape (1975), and *Reflections* (1975) for piano and synthesized tape. Other products of this period were two major orchestral works, *Relata I* (1965) and *Relata II* (1968); *Correspondences* for string orchestra and synthesized tape (1967); and two string quartets (Nos. 3 and 4; 1970). Since 1980, Babbitt has again concentrated on works for live performers, including—to merely sample a list now exceeding forty titles—eight solo piano pieces; two more string quartets (1982, 1993); *Sheer Pluck* for guitar (1984); a piano concerto (1985); *Transfigured Notes* for string orchestra (1986); *Whirled Series* for alto saxophone and piano (1987); and *None but the Lonely Flute* for solo flute (1991).

PHILOMEL

Philomel was commissioned by the Ford Foundation as part of a program enabling solo performers to request pieces from composers of their choice. In this case, the performer was soprano Bethany Beardslee, who since 1950 had been the leading exponent of Babbitt's song "The Widow's Lament in Springtime," the cycle *Du*, and *Vision and Prayer*, a setting of Dylan Thomas that was Babbitt's first work for live performer and tape. The text of *Philomel*, written for the purpose by the distinguished American poet John Hollander, is based on the legend of Procne and Philomela, narrated most famously (and most gruesomely) in the sixth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In brief summary: King Tereus of Thrace, though married to Procne, ravished her sister Philomela and, to enforce her silence, cut out her tongue. But Philomela wove a tapestry depicting the crime and sent it to Procne; together they executed a hideous revenge, serving Tereus the limbs of his son Itys for dinner. When told what he had eaten, Tereus pursued the sisters into the forest. Just as he was about to overtake them, the gods transformed them into birds. In the earlier Greek sources, the tongueless Philomela became the swallow, who merely twitters and cannot truly sing, while Procne became the nightingale, but Ovid got this mixed up; since he is the source for most English writers, in Anglo-American literature--and in Hollander's poem--Philomel is the nightingale. (Tereus, too, became a bird, and on this there seems to be no disagreement: the hoopoe, which fouls its own nest.)

Hollander's text is in three sections. In the first, Philomel is fleeing through the forest, first keening wordlessly and then gradually forming words that play on the sounds in the names of Philomel and Tereus. Section Two, the "Echo Song," which takes place after the transformation, revives a traditional English verse form in which the final sounds of a question become in echo a mocking reply; as Philomel asks the various birds for help in grasping her new form, the echoing replies come from the recorded tape. The final section is strophic, with a refrain, and represents the nightingale's discovery of her voice, of her new powers. At the end, Hollander writes (see Selected Bibliography, below), "she reigns over a kingdom of song."

"For soprano, recorded soprano, and synthesized sound," reads the title page. On the tape, Beardslee's voice is now near, now far in the stereo spectrum, sometimes electronically enhanced, sometimes singing in chorus, sometimes echoing or harmonizing with the live soloist. The synthesized sounds, skillfully chosen to complement and reflect the singer's tonal colorings--this is, after all, a solo scena, a virtuoso showpiece--are delicate, glistening, elegant. The vocal part, which ranges from F# below middle C to B above the staff, also requires spoken pitches. Sometimes jagged and disjunct, at other points the line moves more smoothly; and in the final pages Philomel reaches all around her compass with confidence and mastery. The form of the music relates clearly to that of the texts, with articulative synthesized interludes at appropriate points.

Of Bethany Beardslee's first New York performance of *Philomel* (the premiere had taken place at Amherst College on February 13, 1964), Richard F. French wrote (see Selected Bibliography) that "this piece, for all of us who were there, will always be hers." He did not mean merely that, as her voice is indelibly and forever on the prerecorded tape, she was uniquely qualified to perform it: Spotlit alone on the stage in flashing gown, darting about or in repose, she realized the piece dramatically as well as vocally, an aspect of her performance that is only--but at least--implicit in

this recording.
—David Hamilton

David Hamilton, *editor of The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia, has written extensively about contemporary music in the pages of High Fidelity, Opus, The New York Times, and other publications. Mr. Hamilton studied with Milton Babbitt at Princeton University.*

PHONEMENA

Phonemena was originally written as an encore piece for Bethany Beardslee. Unlike *Vision and Prayer* and *Philomel*, which have distinguished poetic texts, *Phonemena* uses a text entirely made up of phonemes (the smallest sound units of speech). There are twenty-four consonant sounds and twelve vowels (these numbers are obviously not accidental), and almost every separate note or attack in the vocal part has a consonant or a vowel (in that order), or just a vowel. In a few places a vowel holds through from one note to the next, and in a single place near the end, for three notes. Twice there are pitchless phonemes, the second being the final sound of the piece. The vocal part covers two octaves, and range and leaps are salient features; in a few places the part is almost florid, with quick passagework in various articulations.

The work was written with the intention of synthesizing the "accompaniment." However, Babbitt customarily scores even his synthesizer work in traditional notation, and he had already prepared a kind of vocal score for study purposes. This proved to be practical for the piano, and Lynne Webber, who had learned it in this form, was given permission to perform it this way. Later the instrumental part was synthesized at the Columbia-Princeton Center. The piano version and the synthesized tape are meant to be musically identical in every respect except timbre. The work can now be performed in either version or, as here, both. The piece is dedicated "to all the Girl Singers I have Known"—a kind of thank-you note to the dozen or more women (beginning with Beardslee) who have taken up the challenge of Babbitt's difficult but effective writing for the female voice (notably in these works for soprano and tape).

POST-PARTITIONS

Babbitt has also had notable success with the piano and pianists. The pianoforte is, in its precision and clarity, an ideal instrument for his music. *Post-Partitions* for solo piano was written in 1966 for the pianist and composer Robert Helps for a projected concert honoring Roger Sessions' seventieth birthday. It is the sequel by nine years of *Partitions* for solo piano, and may be performed immediately after the earlier piece or on its own. In both works the keyboard is divided (partitioned) into four distinct registers, which are notated on four separate staves—like a piece for piano four hands, but to be played by two hands. The partitioning, or grouping and regrouping of the notes of the row, is organized with respect to the use of these registers.

Babbitt's titles are often puns referring to the technical organization of the material. *Post-Partitions* uses the same twelve-tone set as *Partitions*, but a different principle in parceling it out. This is typical of Babbitt: each work has its own operative principle, although the basic organizational premises of all are the same. An unusual feature of *Post-Partitions* relates to its dedication to Sessions: hidden

amid the twistings and turnings of the row material are quotes from Sessions' music, including the First Piano Sonata and a piece from *From My Diary* that Sessions dedicated to Babbitt.

REFLECTIONS

The number twelve has special properties—it combines two-ness or duple characteristics with three-ness or triple characteristics—and it is not surprising that Babbitt likes to work with arrangements of twelves. For example, in both *Post-Partitions* and *Reflections* (for piano and synthesized tape) there is a discrete scale of twelve dynamic values ranging from quintuple piano to quintuple forte, which with mezzo-forte and mezzo-piano add up to twelve units. The organization of rhythm—sound attacks and durations—is a little more complex, but the division of an even beat equally into doubles and triples produces Babbitt's characteristic rhythmic complexity within simplicity.

It is curious to note a contrast in feeling between the tape and the live piano in the two version of *Phonemena* and in *Reflections*. The live always sounds more difficult, more complex, because part of its effect is due to the physical effort of the performer to strike the right note in the right place. This effort, which does not exist in synthesized sound (the composer's effort in making the tape has long since been covered up), is an actual and easily perceived part of the performance and in part accounts for the striking effect of works using live performance with synthesized tape—a subgenre of new music that, contrary to expectations, has proved to be more important than pure electronic music on tape.

Reflections was written with the assistance of a grant from the Composers/Librettist Program of the National Endowment for the Arts; it was composed for the pianist Robert Miller (1930-1981), who made this first recording. The tape part was produced in 1975 on the Mark II Synthesizer at the Columbia-Princeton Center. The title, once again a Babbitt punning reference to the structure and content of the work, most obviously refers to the reflections and interchanges between the piano and the loudspeakers, but it also has to do with the organization of the twelve-tone material. This is set forth in three connected sections: Piano and tape exchange places in the first two, while in the third the basic musical and sonorous materials of both are superimposed.

Adapted from notes by Eric Salzman

PHILOMEL

Text by John Hollander

Text as set by composer

SECTION ONE

Tape

(Recorded Soprano)

(Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee)

Philomel

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Feeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Feeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!
I feel
Feel a million trees
And the heat of trees

Tape
Not true trees--

Philomel
Feel a million tears

Tape
Not true tears--
Not true trees--

Philomel
Is it Tereus I feel?

Tape
Not Tereus; not a true Tereus--

Philomel
Feel a million filaments;
Fear the tearing, the feeling
Trees, of ephemeral leaves

Trees tear,
And I bear
Families of tears--

I feel a million Philomels

Tape
Trees filled with mellowing
Felonous fame--

Philomel
I feel trees in my hair
And on the ground,
Honeymelons fouling
My knees and feet
Soundlessly in my
Flight through the forest;
I founder in quiet.

Here I find only

Miles of felted silence
Unwinding behind me,
Lost, lost in the wooded night.

Tape

Pillowing melody,
Honey unheard--

Philomel

My hooded voice, lost
Lost, as my first
Unhoneyed tongue;
Forced, as my last
Unfeathered defense
Fast-tangled in lust
Of these woods so dense.
Emptied, unfeeling and unfilled
By trees here where no birds have trilled--
Feeling killed
Philomel stilled
Her honey unfulfilled.

Tape

Feeling killed
Philomel stilled
Her honey unfulfilled

Philomel

What is that sound?
A voice found?
Broken, the bound
Of silence, beyond
Violence of human sound,
As if a new self
Could be founded on sound.
The trees are astounded!
What is this humming?
I am becoming
My own song . . .

SECTION TWO

Echo Song

Philomel

O Thrush in the woods I fly among,

Do you, too, talk with the forest's tongue?

Tape

Stung, stung, stung,
With the sting of becoming
I sing

Philomel

O Hawk in the high and widening sky,
What need I finally do to fly,
And see with your unclouded eye?

Tape

Die, die, die,

Philomel

Let the day of despairing
Be done
O Owl, the wild mirrow of the night,
What is the force of the forest's light?

Tape

Slight, slight, slight;

Philomel

With the slipping-away of
The sun
O sable Raven, call me back!
What color does my torn robe lack?

Tape

Black, black, black;

Philomel

As your blameless and long-
Dried blood
O bright Gull, aid me in my dream!
Above the riddled breaker's cream

Tape

Scream, scream, scream,

Philomel

For the shreds of your being;
Be shrill
The world's despair should not be heard!

Fear and terror not be stirred:
The Gods who made this hubbub erred!

Tape
Bird, bird, bird!

Philomel
You are bare of desire:
Be born
O green leaves! through your rustling lace
Ahead, I hear my own myth race.

Tape
Thrace, Thrace, Thrace!

Philomel
Pain is unchained,
There is change!
In the words of Thrace!

SECTION THREE

Philomel
Living, growing, changing, being in the hum always,
Of pain! The pain of slow change blows in our faces
Like unfelt winds that the spinning world makes in its
turning:
Life and feeling whirl on, below the threshold of
burning.

I burn in change.
Far, far I flew
To this wailing place
And now I range
(with tape)
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

If pain brush against the rushing wings of frightened
change,
Then feeling distills to a burning drop, and
transformation
Becomes intolerable. I have been defiled and felt my
tongue
Torn out: but more pain reigns in these woods I range
among.

I ache in change,
Though once I grew
At a slower pace.
And now I range
(with tape)
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

Pressed into one fell moment, my ghastly
transformation
Died like a fading scream: the ravisher and the chased
Turned into one at last: the voice Tereus shattered
Becomes the tiny voices of night that the God has
scattered.

I die in change.
Pain tore in two
Love's secret face.
(with tape)
And now I range
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace

Love's most hidden tongue throbbed in the barbarous
daylight:
Then all became pain in one great scream of silence,
fading
Finally, as all the voices of feeling died in the west
And pain alone remained with remembering in my
breast.

I screamed in change.
Now all I can do
Is bewail that chase
(with tape)
For now I range
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

Pain in the breast and the mind, fused into music!
Change
Bruising hurt silence even further! Now, in this glade,
Suffering is redeemed in song. Feeling takes wing:
High, high above, beyond the forests of horror I sing!

I sing in change
Now my song will range
Till the morning dew
Dampens its face:
Now my song will range
As once it flew
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

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BETHANY BEARDSLEE is one of the foremost interpreters of twentieth-century music and has premiered and recorded works by Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and many American composers. Besides the music of the present century, Ms. Beardslee is noted for her performances of music of the eighteenth century and earlier.

Numerous works were expressly written for **ROBERT MILLER** by such leading American composers as Milton Babbitt, George Crumb, Charles Wuorinen, and Mario Davidovsky. His concert appearances took him to the festivals of Tanglewood and Aspen, and to many other musical centers of North America. He recorded for Deutsche Grammophon (in conjunction with Acoustic Research), Columbia, Turnabout-Vox, and CRI. Robert Miller died November 30, 1981.

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Babbitt, Milton. *Words About Music*. Edited by Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Straus. Madison: University of Wisconsin: 1987.

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"Sounds and Words: Milton Babbitt at 60." Special issue of *Perspectives of New Music*, XIV-2/XV-1 (1976).

The majority of Babbitt's writings on music are extremely technical. A selection will be found in Boretz and Cone, eds., *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*. New York: Norton, 1972.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

All Set. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble; Arthur Weisberg, conductor. Nonesuch 79222-2.

An Elizabethan Sextette. Group for Contemporary Music; Harvey Sollberger, conductor. *Minute Waltz* (or $3/4 \pm 1/8$); *Partitions*; *It Takes Twelve to Tango*; *Playing for Time*; *About Time*. Alan Feinberg, piano. *Groupwise*. Group for Contemporary Music; Daniel Shulman, conductor. *Vision and Prayer*. Bethany Beardslee, soprano. CRI CD-521.

Canonical Form; Three Compositions; Duet; Lagniappe; Partitions; Semi-Simple Variations; Tableaux; Reflections.
Robert Taub, piano. Harmonia Mundi 905160.

Consortini. Griffin Music Ensemble; Stephen Mosko, conductor. GM 2032-CD.

Correspondences. Chicago Symphony Orchestra; James Levine, conductor. DG 431-698-2.

None but the Lonely Flute. Dorothy Stone, flute. New World 80456-2.

Piano Concerto. Alan Feinberg, piano; American Composers Orchestra; Charles Wuorinen, conductor. *The Head Of The Bed.* Judith Bettina, soprano; Parnassus; Anthony Korf, conductor. New World 80346-2.

Playing for Time; It Takes Twelve to Tango. Alan Feinberg, piano. Argo 436-925-2.

Relata I. Juilliard Orchestra; Paul Zukofsky, conductor. New World 80396-2.

Sextets; The Joy of More Sextets. Rolf Schulte, violin; Alan Feinberg, piano. New World 80364-2

Sheer Pluck (Composition for Guitar). David Starobin, guitar. Bridge BCD-9009.

String Quartet No. 3. Fine Arts Quartet. Music & Arts 707-1.

String Quartet No. 4. Juilliard String Quartet. CRI CD-587.

String Quartet No. 5. Composers Quartet. Music & Arts CD-606.

Producers: Sam Parkins, Thomas W. Mowrey (*Philomel*)

Associate producer: Elizabeth Ostrow (*Phonemena, Phonemena, Post-Partitions, Reflections*)

Engineers: Jerry Bruck, Marc J. Aubort (*Philomel*)

Tape editors: Noel Harrington, Randy Payne, Thomas W. Mowrey (*Philomel*)

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC

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Advisers on the project were Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Gunther Schuller, and Roger Sessions; the program committee consisted of David Epstein, Earl Kim, Donald Martino, and Seymour Shifrin. David Epstein was Director of the project; Leo Treitler was in charge of production and annotation; technical supervision was provided by Roy F. Allison and Robert Berkovitz.

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MILTON BABBITT (b. 1916) 80466-2
PHILOMEL

- 1 *Philomel* for soprano, recorded soprano, and synthesized sound (18:47)
(publ. Associated Music Publ.)
Bethany Beardslee, soprano
- 2 *Phonemena* for soprano and piano (4:57)
(publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)
Lynne Webber, soprano; Jerry Kuderna, piano
- 3 *Phonemena* for soprano and tape (4:13)
(publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)
Lynne Webber, soprano
- 4 *Post-Partitions* (3:31)
(publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)
Robert Miller, piano
- 5 *Reflections* for piano and synthesized tape (10:16)
(publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)
Robert Miller, piano

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
email: info@newworldrecords.org

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