

JOAN TOWER

New World Records 80470

The immediate impressions made by Joan Tower's music--bold contrasts, surprising subtleties, honesty of expression, imagination, sensitivity--derive from those same qualities in the composer. And she has one of the great infectious laughs of all time.

Born in New Rochelle, New York, September 6, 1938, Tower spent her childhood years in South America. She did her undergraduate studies at Bennington College and graduate work at Columbia University (from which she earned both M.A. and D.M.A. degrees). Her composition teachers included Chou Wen-chung and Otto Luening.

Many of her earliest works were composed for the Da Capo Chamber Players in New York, for which she served as pianist from 1969 to 1984. Stemming from that period are such widely performed compositions as *Platinum Spirals* (for solo violin), *Hexachords* (for solo flute), *Wings* (for solo clarinet), *Petroushskates*, and *Amazon I* (the two latter works for flute, violin, clarinet, cello, and piano). Other chamber works include *Clocks* (commissioned and recorded by guitarist Sharon Isbin, who plays on this disc) and *Fantasy...Harbor Lights* for clarinet and piano (commissioned by Richard Stoltzman).

Tower's first orchestral work, *Sequoia*, caught the attention of conductor Leonard Slatkin, who invited her to be composer in residence at the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra from 1985 to 1988. Since that time she has composed several works for orchestra, including *Silver Ladders* (which won the 1990 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition), *Music for Cello and Orchestra* (written for and dedicated to André Emelianoff and recorded by cellist Lynn Harrell), *Island Prelude* (for oboe and orchestra), several fanfares in the *Uncommon Woman* series, a Piano Concerto, and a Concerto for Orchestra (jointly commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra). Her orchestral works have been performed by symphony and ballet orchestras worldwide.

Recent works, besides those on this recording, include *Like a...an Engine* written for WNYC-FM and pianist Ursula Oppens; *Celebration* (dedicated to Hillary Rodham Clinton and conducted in 1993 at the White House by Tower); *Duets* (for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra); a Clarinet Quintet for David Shifrin and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center; and *Elegy* for Trombone and String Quartet (for John Swallow and the Cleveland Quartet, commissioned by the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival).

Known as a generous and compassionate colleague, Tower serves frequently as consultant, lecturer, panelist, and mentor to people and institutions in music and academia. She is currently Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where she has taught since 1972.

As a composer, Joan Tower prefers to let her music speak for itself. Articulate about music in general, and used to exploring compositions with her students at Bard College, she nevertheless resists explaining her own music; writing program notes "is torture for me," she says. What, after all, can words say that music can't express much better itself?

Clarity of expression has characterized Tower's compositions from the beginning. Whether written for orchestral forces, chamber ensembles, or solo instruments, her music speaks energetically and directly

to the listener. The integrity of Tower's works derives from her concerns for individual musical elements that motivate and energize the whole. Like a miniaturist, she works on small articulations and motives; even when they result in large compositions, small details resound clearly. In creating her sonic "pictures," she finds motivating factors in the details. Vivid effects in her music work well because they contribute to the integrity of the whole piece.

Frequently, a single tone--or a unison played by more than one instrument--will draw the ear into the beginning of a composition. Like a beam of light at the end of a tunnel, the initial sound will pull the listener through the passageway to enter Tower's world. In that tone, whether embellished (as it is in *Snow Dreams* and *Stepping Stones*) or steady and unadorned (*Très lent* and *Night Fields*), Tower reveals the germ from which the whole piece grows.

Imagery of light and movement come easily to mind with Tower's compositions, imagery that she encourages not only through the music, but also through her titles and her own comments (rare as they are) about the music. Her images grow from one into another, sometimes with subtle, seamless transitions, sometimes abruptly, with verve. In some cases--*Black Topaz*, for example--a specific image precedes composition; in other cases--*Night Fields*, *Snow Dreams*--the music itself, once created, suggests visual, physical responses.

In this recorded collection Tower's trademark qualities abound: rhythmic energy, colorful instrumentation, and fresh sonic textures, plus, in the newer works, an increasing lyricism and broadening emotional range. On this disc Tower's music does speak eloquently, and the wise annotator, following the composer's lead, will encourage less reading and more listening.

Night Fields (1994)
for String Quartet

Tower dedicated this string quartet, her first, "with affection and admiration" to the Muir Quartet, which premiered it in February 1994. Hancher Auditorium, the University of Iowa, and the Snowbird Institute for the Arts and Humanities commissioned this quartet; the commission was funded in part by Chamber Music America with funds from the Pew Charitable Trusts. After its first performance in Iowa, the Quartet took *Night Fields* on tour throughout the United States and Europe.

The title, according to Tower, "was conceived after the work was completed and provides an image or setting for some of the moods of the piece: a cold, windy night in a wheat field lit up by a bright, full moon, where waves of fast-moving colors ripple over the fields, occasionally settling on a patch of gold."

(Please note: With the exception of this recording, Bayla Keyes is second violin in the Muir Quartet.)

Snow Dreams (1983)
for Flute and Guitar

With the writing of *Snow Dreams* the composer entered into a relationship with flutist Carol Wincenc and guitarist Sharon Isbin that has produced other fine concert works--*Clocks* for solo guitar (1985) and

Concerto for Flute and Orchestra (1989). In dedicating *Snow Dreams* to them, Tower expressed her admiration for the "extraordinary artistry and virtuosic playing" of Wincenc and Isbin. The duo commissioned *Snow Dreams* through a grant from the Schubert Club of St. Paul and played it for the first time in April 1983. Since that time it has received performances by many duos.

The piece is a study in balancing the two disparate timbres and technical possibilities of the flute and guitar. Tower has brought them together cohesively, while celebrating their unique voices.

The title crystallized during composition, as the unfolding moods and images suggested the wondrous variety of snow. "There are many different images of snow, its forms and its movements," says Tower, "light snow flakes, pockets of swirls of snow, rounded drifts, long white plains of blankets of snow, light and heavy snowfalls, and so forth. Many of these images can be found in the piece if, in fact, they need to be found at all. The listener will determine that choice."

Black Topaz (1976)
for Piano and Six Instruments

The Group for Contemporary Music, with pianist Robert Miller, to whom the work is dedicated, premiered *Black Topaz* on November 15, 1976, at the Manhattan School of Music with composer Charles Wuorinen conducting. It was written on a commission from the Group for Contemporary Music, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

It is scored for piano, flute, B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, B-flat trumpet, tenor trombone, and percussion consisting of two marimbas, two vibraphones, and a range of temple blocks and tom-toms.

Black Topaz begins with a single small explosion of clarinet, trumpet, and tom-tom, like a miner's pick hitting ore. The changing colors of topaz, from gold to black, reflect in the harmonic changes from dissonance to consonance, as well as in the instrumental timbres. The central image of *Black Topaz* derives from one of Tower's own drawings. The virtuosic piano, the ebony gem of the title, is balanced by the other instrumental timbres as the work explores changing sound colors. Each ensemble instrument magnifies and extends the essence of the piano: the percussion battery supports and projects the piano's sharp articulation; tom-toms add depth to the sound; brass and woodwinds augment the piano's lyrical and harmonic nature; trumpet and trombone emphasize chordal strength and support.

Très lent (In memoriam Olivier Messiaen) (1994)
for Cello and Piano

This duet for cello and piano is written for, and dedicated to "my wonderfully musical friend," cellist André Emelianoff, who wrote the following note:

Some time ago, I asked Joan to write a cello work of modest length, half expecting to

hear, "Are you crazy? I'm booked for five years." To my utter surprise and delight, she said she had wanted to write such a piece for a long time. This slow piece is an homage to Olivier Messiaen, who died in 1992. It is, in particular, a tribute to his *Quartet for the End of Time* and its infinitely slow movements for cello, then violin. The connection to this music is particularly personal, as Joan and I have played numerous performances of the great work together.

In most of Joan's compositions, her "melodies" tend to be more intervallic arches, surrounded, even overwhelmed, by highly energized rhythmic and colorful material. In *Très lent* I sense a melody being born. Out of the opening D octaves grow embryonic intervals and a rhythmic motive: short-long-D (the only real Messiaen quote). The expansion and contraction of harmonic bands and pedal points, punctuated by embellishments and grace notes, create a profoundly expressive homage, entirely in Joan's own language. Joan and I premiered *Très lent* in New York City on May 8, 1994.

Known for the rhythmic energy with which she infuses her work, Tower demonstrates effectively in *Très lent* that such energy does not depend on a fast tempo. The forward motion of the tolling bells and piano *frissons* suggests an inner propulsion that is compelling even at the *sostenuto* tempo that she has indicated.

Stepping Stones: A Ballet (1993)

Two-Piano Version

I Introductions

II Meeting

III Alone

IV Interlude

V Love and Celebration

Stepping Stones was commissioned by the Milwaukee Ballet with funding from the Meet The Composer/Choreographer Project. That company performed the work for the first time in Milwaukee's Uihlein Hall in April 1993. Choreographer Kathryn Posin created a dance involving the struggles of six females, their alter egos, and six males. The celebration that ends the ballet signifies they have found a kind of unity. The title refers to the six stage platforms central to the choreography.

Reducing the color of the full orchestra score to a setting for two pianos clarifies some of the work's strengths: rushing upward scales sparkle under the pianists' fingers, the lush sounds of openly lyrical passages seem perfectly suited to the voluptuousness of two pianos, and the fanfares of the last movement celebrate the dancers' final unity with robust and percussive piano scoring.

—Sandra Hyslop

Sandra Hyslop is editor of *Symphony Magazine*.

DOUBLE EDGE, Edmund Niemann and Nurit Tilles, duo-pianists, was formed in 1978. They have performed in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Bulgaria,

Canada, and New Zealand. Among the many composers who have written works for Double Edge are David Borden, John Cage, David Lang, Meredith Monk, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and Kevin Volans. They have recorded for CRI, New Albion, Nonesuch, and Lovely Music.

EDMUND NIEMANN is a founding member of Parnassus and a longtime member of Steve Reich & Musicians. He has been guest artist with Speculum Musicae, the New Music Consort, the Group for Contemporary Music, the Da Capo Players, the New York New Music Ensemble, and The Mother Mallard Band. He is on the faculty of Sarah Lawrence College.

NURIT TILLES has performed and recorded for many years with Steve Reich & Musicians, Meredith Monk, and The Mother Mallard Band. She has appeared solo at Town Hall, The Knitting Factory, and The Great Hall at Cooper Union. Her recording of modern piano rags was produced by Rudi Blesh, and she recently wrote her first piece, *Raw Silk (A Rag)*.

ANDRÉ EMELIANOFF is currently (1994) solo cellist of the New York Chamber Symphony. Other solo appearances include with the Albany Symphony, the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, and the "Music Today" series. Mr. Emelianoff is also cellist of the Da Capo Chamber Players and the Aeolian Chamber Players. He is on the faculty at Bard College, the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival, The Juilliard School, is visiting Professor of Cello and Chamber Music at CCNY, and has conducted master classes at Arizona State University in Tucson. Mr. Emelianoff has commissioned works by Aaron Kernis, Joan Tower, Stephen Jaffe, George Perle, Shulamit Ran, and Richard Wernick. He has recorded for CRI, Delos, New World, Nonesuch and RCA.

SHARON ISBIN, guitarist, was the winner of the Toronto and Queen Sofia (Madrid) competitions and is the first guitarist ever to win the Munich Competition. She tours throughout the world as a recitalist and as soloist with many major orchestras, and has been Artistic Director and featured performer of Carnegie Hall's Guitarstream International Festival and the nationally acclaimed radio series "Guitarjam." Her numerous recordings for EMI/Virgin Classics, in styles ranging from Baroque to jazz fusion, have received many awards. Her latest is a collaboration with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra in the first-ever American guitar concerto recording featuring works written for her by John Corigliano, Lukas Foss, and Joseph Schwantner. Isbin, who has commissioned more concerti than any other guitarist, is the author of *The Acoustic Guitar Answer Book*, and is Director of the guitar departments of the Juilliard School and the Aspen Music Festival.

MUIR STRING QUARTET members are **Peter Zazofsky**, first violin, **Bayla Keyes**, second violin, **Steven Ansell**, viola, and **Michael Reynolds**, cello. They met at the Curtis Institute of Music, where they studied chamber music with Felix Galimir, Mischa Schneider (Budapest Quartet), Arnold Steinhardt and Michael Tree (Guarneri Quartet). They continued their studies at Yale University with Oscar Shumsky and Raphael Hillyer on an Edward R. Wardell Fellowship. The Muir Quartet has performed in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Detroit, Vancouver, Montreal, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Houston, Minneapolis, Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The Muir Quartet commissions works by composers such as Joan Tower, Richard Danielpour, and Richard Wilson. The quartet has recorded for ADDA/Qualiton and EMI, and is currently (1994) in residence at Boston University's School for the Arts.

CAROL WINCENC, flute, has commissioned flute concertos from Lukas Foss, Joan Tower, Christopher Rouse, Henryk Gorecki, and Tobias Picker. She is a frequent guest of major orchestras

and festivals throughout the United States. In addition, Ms. Wincenc has appeared with the London Symphony at the Barbican, the English Chamber Orchestra at the Aldeburgh Festival, and at the Budapest Spring Festival, the Duisburg Festival, and the Frankfurt Annual Music Festival. She has collaborated with such ensembles as the Tokyo, Guarneri, Emerson, and Cleveland quartets, and performs in a flute/harp duo with Nancy Allen.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Amazon. Da Capo Chamber Players. CRI CD 582.

Hexachords. Patricia Spencer, flute. CRI CD 582.

Island Prelude. Peter Bowman, oboe; Saint Louis Symphony; Leonard Slatkin, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79245-2-ZK.

Island Rhythms. The Louisville Orchestra; Lawrence Leighton Smith, conductor. Louisville LCD 006.

Petroushskates. Da Capo Chamber Players. CRI CD 582.

Sequoia. Saint Louis Symphony; Leonard Slatkin, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79245-2-ZK.

Wings. Robert Spring, clarinet. Summit Records DCD 124.

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BLACK TOPAZ

JOAN TOWER (b. 1938) 80470-2

1 *Night Fields* (1994) (15:37)

The Muir String Quartet: Bayla Keyes, first violin; Peter Zazofsky, second violin; Steven Ansell, viola; Michael Reynolds, cello

2 *Snow Dreams* (1983) (9:14)

Carol Wincenc, flute; Sharon Isbin, guitar

3 *Black Topaz* (1976) (13:09)

Laura Flax, clarinet; Patricia Spencer, flute; Jonathan Haas, Deborah Moore, percussion; Stephen Gosling, piano; Mike Powell, trombone; Chris Gekker, trumpet

4 *Très lent (In memoriam Olivier Messiaen)* (1994) (8:29)

André Emelianoff, cello; Joan Tower, piano

5 *Stepping Stones* (1993) (19:04)

Double Edge: Edmund Niemann and Nurit Tilles, duo-pianists

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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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