

Nashville's cultural landscape is richer than the pop-culture mythologists would suggest. The capital of Tennessee is indeed the capital of Country-Western music, as well as the home of the Grand Ole Opry, which opened its doors in 1925, and an employer of country-music players in the numerous studios that support its booming recording industry. And yes, the cowboy hats are there, but there are also academic mortarboards and ecclesiastical caps of various kinds. Vanderbilt University, a major research center founded by Commodore Vanderbilt in 1873, holds a high distinction among academic institutions in the South. Fisk University, founded in 1865, and whose Fisk Jubilee Singers first concertized outside Nashville in 1871 to raise construction funds for the new Negro college, has likewise maintained a high reputation. Nashville is the seat of major publishing houses for the Methodist and Baptist churches. There is a Catholic cathedral there as well, and there are museums, a symphony orchestra, an opera company, and a full-scale reproduction of the Parthenon.

Composer Michael Kurek, whose music is on this disc, has what might be called a genetic attraction to this city. Kurek was born and raised in Nashville, and is now an associate professor of composition at Vanderbilt University. Like Nashville itself, he is cosmopolitan, fitting comfortably into the stimulating intellectual and cultural milieu characterized by the cultural organizations that typify most American cities.

His mother was a commercial artist and, working in an impressionist style, illustrated a number of children's books in addition to caring for her son and three daughters. The art studio was at home, and paintings filled the house. Watching her work, young Michael absorbed his mother's love of visual art and French styles, and he later pursued studies in art history. His father's collection of recordings--spiced with many Maria Callas performances--provided the sonic background. Michael remembers "lying on the floor gazing at lamplight through a translucent red record, while its companion disc played Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata on the stereo, or listening to my sister practice Schubert on the piano." Michael sang alto in the boy's choir at his parochial school, often in Latin.

Later, in public high school, Michael, who was then taking piano lessons, joined the marching band as a drummer. He learned to play all the percussion instruments with some skill, as indicated by the fact that he auditioned for and won a percussion position in Tennessee's All-State Orchestra. It was now clear to him that he wanted to be a musician and a composer. He majored in music theory as an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, writing freely atonal music while studying with John Anthony Lennon. At Knoxville, Michael joined the University of Tennessee Percussion Ensemble and in 1975 toured the Soviet Union and Great Britain with that group. The impressions gathered by the 20-year-old were mixed. There was the generally depressing political climate of the Soviet Union, some very conservative music, and a ballet performance of *Les Sylphides*. In England, Michael heard the London Symphony play Beethoven's Seventh Symphony in the Royal Albert Hall, a memorable experience. Travel was not new to Kurek, who had visited New York and Washington, but the new perspectives gained from traveling abroad were for the young Tennessean the key values of the tour.

In 1978, his undergraduate degree in hand, Kurek enrolled at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, earning a master's degree in 1981 and in 1985, a Doctor of Musical Arts in composition. During these years Kurek won a number of awards for composition, including a Broadcast Music Inc. Student Composer Award in 1977-78 and a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American

Academy of Arts and Letters in 1983. He was also a composition fellow at Tanglewood, studying with Hans Werner Henze, where he got to know Leonard Bernstein.

It was at Michigan that Kurek's tonal compositional style coalesced, and his musical perspectives were challenged. Leslie Bassett, Kurek's teacher, had himself studied at Michigan with Ross Lee Finney. He also had lessons with Nadia Boulanger and Roberto Gerhard, and had studied electronic music with Mario Davidovsky. Bassett was, in Kurek's words, "my primary mentor, an important force in my training. He looked at every note, the counterpoint, nothing escaped his notice. He was a great teacher and wonderful role model and is loved by many of his former students." Bassett gave Kurek his technical training. Kurek also studied composition with William Albright.

It was William Bolcom and his music, however, which provided sand to Kurek's oyster, and Kurek's reaction was to fashion his own style by more clearly defining his own musical goals. Bolcom's music, in the forefront of Post-Modernism, challenged Kurek "in aesthetic ways." Not the first to lose his sense of direction in an eclectic topography, Kurek experienced aesthetic vertigo on listening to this music, and he rejected it. "For me," Kurek explains, "there is a certain distance that Post-Modern tonal composers create between themselves and their music by changing styles within the same composition. Hearing it is like involuntarily 'channel surfing' through television programs with someone else flicking the remote control. While Bolcom's own craft is strong, I worried that some modern composers lacked the ability to write good tonal music and, in order to have a style, they resorted to 'changing the channels.' My leap of faith, my *credo*, is to believe in a single style, to try to use one coherent method of composing within one context, and write music that justifies using a traditional aesthetic, rather like a latter-day Samuel Barber, whose neo-Romanticism was in place prior to the Romantic revival."

Kurek's involvement with the music community takes him beyond Vanderbilt to the Nashville Symphony, where Kurek is program annotator for half of the regular season's concerts. The Symphony's conductor, Kenneth Schermerhorn, performed Kurek's Concerto for Harp and Orchestra at the opening concert of its fiftieth season in 1995. As a result of that performance, Kurek was nominated for a Nashville Music Award. These are given in all categories of classical and popular music, and are for Nashville-based musicians. As one might expect, the nominating process is dominated by the names of commercial musicians, and the *lingua franca* of the process reflects the commercial side of Nashville's music street. When Vanderbilt was informed of Kurek's nomination, the secretary taking the call was told it was in a category "as an outstanding songwriter." She was then asked, in the event Kurek won an award, "which of his greatest hits should we play while he walks up to the stage?" Even more gratifying to the composer perhaps was being named recipient of the 1994 American Academy of Arts and Letters Academy Award, the organization's premier annual award, which "recognizes and honors lifetime achievement and acknowledges the composer who has arrived at his or her own voice."

The four works on this disc were written between 1989 and 1995. Kurek's *oeuvre* contains a relatively small number of compositions, dating from 1981. Some composers, like prudent gardeners, weed and thin out what they have already written; Kurek has eliminated the body of his work written prior to that date. The surviving music includes the large orchestra works, *Door to the River* (1981), and *Chimera* (1985), which have been performed by various orchestras. His compositions also include two choral works and two string quartets, the first dating from 1983 and premiered at Tanglewood that year; *Nocturne* (1988) for mixed chamber ensemble; and *Five Songs* (1982) for soprano and piano.

The following notes on the compositions were written by the composer for this recording:

The String Quartet No. 2 (1994-95), in one movement, began as a study for the first movement of my Symphony No. 1 for large orchestra. I conceived the music primarily in terms of its emotional scenario, the dramatic shape of which evolves through the movement independent of its rondo form. While I generally consider “programs” inadequate to describe the expressive aspect of music, I often wonder how music--mere wisps of fleeting sound in the air--can seem to give voice, therapeutically or vicariously, to our deepest spiritual longings, our most tender emotions, and our most inexpressible biological tensions. This mystery compels me to face ever anew the blank music page--as though trying again and again to say more clearly what cannot be said in words. Most of the second quartet was written at the MacDowell Colony, following by eleven years my first quartet, which was composed and received its première at Tanglewood.

The Sonata for Viola and Harp (1989), in one movement, represents my earliest motions toward a more tonal language of long breaths (in this case involving a fairly clear sonata form), as well as a study in harp writing prior to the harp concerto. The work was performed at the 1990 World Harp Congress in Paris, and was published in 1992 by Don Henry/International Music Service in New York. The score bears a dedication to my wife, Laurie.

*Matisse Impressions* (1991), for wind-piano sextet, was commissioned by the Tennessee Music Teachers Association and consists of two movements titled after paintings by Henri Matisse. “Paysage Marocain Tangier” (Tangier Landscape) and “Fenêtre a Collioure” (Open Window at Collioure) from 1905 portray, respectively, a lush but dark tropical forest and a vivid view of sailboats through a flower-adorned window. Given the opportunity to write for woodwind quintet, a medium I believe must be handled carefully to avoid sounding stereotypically hyperactive, I decided first to add piano so the winds could be treated more soloistically, and second, to have a bit of fun by experimenting with a musical language that pays *hommage* to Matisse’s musical contemporaries--*bon appétit!*

Concerto for Harp and Orchestra (1993-94) consists of three movements in a moderate/slow/fast scheme, subtitled respectively, “Starry Night,” “Remembrance,” and “Essence,” based on poetic programs I invented (and with which I will not distract the listener). Suffice it to say that the moods of the three movements are “mysterious,” “warm,” and “frantic.” To accommodate various performance situations, I prepared the Concerto simultaneously in two versions, one for full orchestra and one for chamber ensemble (to which extra strings have been added for this recording). Both versions have the same harp part and were published by Lyon & Healy Harps, Inc. (Chicago). The first two movements of the Concerto were performed at the 1993 World Harp Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark, by the harpist in this recording, Mario Falcao, to whom the work is dedicated. Falcao was harpist for the premières of both versions of the Concerto, in 1994 for the chamber version at the Soka International Harp Festival in Japan, and in 1995 for the large orchestra version with the Nashville Symphony.

—Howard Klein

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

Harpist **Mario Falcao** has concertized throughout the U.S. and Europe, in South America, Japan, China, South Africa, and Israel. He won the first prize for contemporary music at the Fifth International Harp Contest in Jerusalem, and he regularly commissions and premières new works for the harp. He has recorded on a variety of labels, is a founding member and board member of the World Harp Congress, and has served as chair of the National Board of Directors of the American Harp Society. He received the Diploma in harp from the National Conservatory in Lisbon and a Master's degree in harp from the Eastman School of Music. He serves on the faculties of the State University of New York College at Fredonia and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Kenneth Schermerhorn** has been conductor of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra since 1983. A graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, he has pursued a conducting career that includes serving as assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein and as conductor of the New Jersey Symphony (1963-1968), the Milwaukee Symphony (1968-1980), the American Ballet Theatre (1952-67 and 1982-84), and the Hong Kong Philharmonic (1984-1989).

Violist **John Kochanowski** studied at the Interlochen Arts Academy and The Juilliard School, where his principal teachers were Walter Trampler and Robert Mann. He also studied at the Academia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, with Bruno Giuranna. From 1971 to 1987 he was the violist and a founding member of the Concord String Quartet, joining the Blair String Quartet in 1987.

The **Blair Woodwind Quintet**, founded in 1971 and based in Nashville, Tennessee, at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music, consists of artists who are also on call in Nashville's busy recording industry, and who are all current or former members of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra.

The **Blair String Quartet** has performed in a wide range of American venues, including the Library of Congress, the Kennedy Center, and the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. The ensemble's residencies have included the Aspen Music Festival and the Sedona Chamber Music Festival. The Quartet has commissioned and premièreed a number of works, and have recorded the works of Mendelssohn, Debussy, Ginastera, Harris, Piston, and Virgil Thomson.

Producer: Michael Kurek

Sonata for Viola and Harp, *Matisse Impressions*, and String Quartet No. 2 were recorded at the Recital Hall of the Blair School of Music, 1995.

Concerto for Harp and Orchestra was recorded at Javelina Recording Studios, Nashville, 1996.

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Assistant engineer: Glenn Spinner

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String Quartet No. 2, *Matisse Impressions*, and Concerto for Harp and Orchestra were mixed at Javelina Recording Studios, Nashville. Sonata for Viola and Harp was mixed at Blair School of Music Recital Hall, Nashville

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**MICHAEL KUREK** (b. 1955) 80497-2

1 String Quartet No. 2 (19:49)

The Blair String Quartet: Christian Teal, Cornelia Heard, violins; John Kochanowski, viola; Grace Mihi Bahng, cello.

2 Sonata for Viola and Harp (publ. Don Henry Music Co.) (13:34)

John Kochanowski, viola; Mario Falcao, harp.

*Matisse Impressions*

3 i. Tangier Landscape (8:16)

4 ii. Open Window at Collioure (8:00)

The Blair Woodwind Quintet: Jane Kirchner, flute; Bobby Taylor, oboe; Cassandra Lee, clarinet; Cynthia Estill, bassoon; Leslie Norton, horn; James Helton, piano.

Concerto for Harp and Orchestra (publ. Lyon & Healy Harps, Inc.)

5 i. Starry Night (7:38)

6 ii. Remembrance (5:29)

7 iii. Essence (6:00)

Mario Falcao, harp; Norma Rogers, flute, piccolo; Bobby Taylor, oboe; Leslie Norton, horn; Sam Bacco, percussion; William Wiggins, timpani; Charlene Harb, piano/celesta; Mary Kathryn Vanosdale, violin solos; Gerald Greer, Kristi Seehafer, Janet Askey, Joann Cruthirds, Laura Ross, Craig Hunting, violins; Shu Zheng Yang, Bruce Christensen, violas; Bradley Mansell, Julia Tanner, cellos; Gary Lawrence, double bass; Kenneth Schermerhorn, conductor.

All compositions BMI.

**Michael Kurek is the winner of a 1994 Recording Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which has made possible the recording of String Quartet No. 2.**

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