

CHARLES WUORINEN
The Winds

New World Records 80517

With an interview in mind for one's insert note (or in a usage favoring analogue, liner note), I met with Charles Wuorinen on an appallingly humid July afternoon in the composer's Manhattan home. As Wuorinen will tell us in his own echt terms, contemporary culture teeters at a peculiarly pungent abyss. For the annotator's modest part, an equally pungent opportunity lurks within in the timing of a CD's release. Relative to Bosnia and holes in the ozone shield, the dimensions of the tempest a composer's remarks detail are perhaps those of a teacup. Yet some teacups are Sèvres and others, styrofoam--if, that is, high art is the measure, or exists at all as an *ironic* term in upscale company.

As a candidate for high office, he'd be a disaster: Charles Wuorinen speaks his mind. As a spokesman for an embattled esthetic, however, no one expresses himself more incisively or indeed bluntly, and I'd be a fool indeed to discourage an eloquent partisan from coming out swinging. (I am reminded in no remote way of Clytus Gottwald's valediction, the event the dissolution in 1990 of his new-music vocal ensemble, the Schola Cantorum: "The 'gang of stars,' as [Mauricio] Kagel once good-humoredly called us, decided to retire . . . after thirty years of performing . . . not just because we are getting on . . . but also because a new era in composition has appeared. Reality and potential [do] not correlate any more; the two vectors, once convergent, now continually diverge along their paths into the future . . . ")

As to motivation, some few months ago (as I write), the critic Richard Taruskin in *The New York Times* assailed Donald Martino as one of a group of composers, among whom Wuorinen figures large, as molesters of impressionable youth. And I don't exaggerate by much. With Taruskin's hot-dog attack as foundation, I began by asking Wuorinen to respond, as I now see it, in rather too broad terms to a dialectic a quarter-mile long in the tooth: the medieval town-&-gown battles translating to our present needs as the Uptown-Downtown Divide, an urban distinction referring both literally and figuratively to New York City, and in the broader sense to academia's austerities versus easy-access, pop-tinctured art music. (The reader is advised to accept one's *academia* application in its original, DWEM [Dead White European Male]-saturated configuration rather than its latter-day, deconstructionist-blather phase.) Charles Wuorinen here takes over in an anything but valedictory tone:

"There's much [in your question] that needs to be addressed. First is the absurdity of these kinds of classifications. What they really come down to, I think, is *not* an opposition of methods or esthetic points of view. The 'Downtown' is amateur music making--composition--and has no *artistic* aspirations that one can discern. The emphasis falls rather on extra-musical aspects, especially contemporary political associations to be mined for fun and profit. Uptown music, so-called (if indeed these categories still exist), is *not* characterized by any consistency of stylistic or methodological approach, but rather the continuance of a tradition of culture and high art, an attempt to make statements of lasting value. What we understand in a general way as Downtown is fundamentally populist and addresses an audience with no particular training or interest in music. Uptown wants at least to aspire to a musically literate audience--to an intelligent response. So much for categories.

"When a critic like Richard Taruskin issues a broadside in *The New York Times* against a particular composer, in this case Donald Martino, he does so in an effort to discredit not only Martino and his work but also a broad field of music which can be regarded as somewhat similar. In attacking the idea of composers transmitting their knowledge and skills to interested students, he is actually following an agenda which, for me, is extremely old-fashioned. It reminds me of no one so much as the late Paul Henry Lang, who was similarly motivated forty or fifty years ago to try to discredit composers and composition, especially in a university environment. The piece in the *Times* of course does not address this directly, but rather in the guise of mock horror at the damage done to young students by Martino and others. He's writing for a newspaper, and so it looks like criticism. It's not.

"In the course of such an article, Taruskin makes frequent use, as others have done, of a term--serialism. The word's meaning has always escaped me. I think for such writers, it's music that goes bloop-bleep or isn't in C major, or something like that. I'm not really sure. Even if one wanted to be charitable--oh, they mean some kind of 12-tone music maybe--that term too is almost without meaning. My own work, for example, which is grounded in a 12-tone system, is nevertheless pitch-centric and can be construed on occasion as—not diatonic, of course—but *almost* tonal. In a similar vein, one might say that *Tristan's* first-act prelude, the subject of so much theoretical investigation (mostly to no purpose) can be regarded as a tonal piece, as Wagner probably thought of it, and equally well as a strange kind of 12-tone piece with its 12-note set lurking in a background that one never quite hears. These are not terribly important matters, except to professional theorists--a very small population, after all.

"These kinds of discussions--these attacks--are carried on now by gossip and impression. You've no doubt heard the claim, from composers as well with axes to grind, that Milton Babbitt--and even I! -reigned supreme in the fifties, forcing everyone to write music they really didn't want to, till the liberating breath of rock-and-roll freed everyone. I was twenty in 1958, and so couldn't have accomplished much of what I've been accused of. But even Babbitt, who's considerably older than I, was very much regarded as a subversive to whom no right-thinking composer ought to pay attention. It was only when Stravinsky became--ostentatiously--a 12-tone composer in the late fifties and early sixties and turned to Milton for occasional advice that the illusion of Babbitt the serial dictator took shape. It's all nonsense, it never happened.

[*In installing Taruskin's rant as one's interview's hinge, I mentioned an article of similar bent in The Village Voice in which critic Kyle Gann holds that in academia, as an instance of irrelevance, a work's availability to analysis determines its significance.*]

"As regards this business of analysis as an approach to composition, in my experience the teaching of composition is short on methodology and long on a student's interests, however misguided or ill-informed they may be, and has little to do with synthetic reconstructions. I suspect that what this critic is fantasizing over is a recovered memory (as they say) of an attitude that prevailed for a short time in Princeton--I never had anything to do with it, myself--in the sixties, maybe the fifties as well, in which certain composers liked to declare in advance what they proposed to do. This is sometimes entertaining shoptalk and sometimes embarrassing, and in the event led to pieces that often sounded a lot better described than heard. But I think it's preposterous, irresponsible, and damaging to make judgments about what goes on in two thousand or so composition studios, especially in this social climate, when the dumbing-down process continues apace with the good, old-fashioned American

hatred of the arts and the life of the mind seemingly in the ascendant. A responsible practitioner of musical composition or indeed of any of the arts ought to be saying that the lowest common denominator is *not* the goal and that nothing worthwhile is free, certainly not in the arts. To pander to an indifferent and often illiterate public in hope of gaining some kind of temporary notoriety is extremely undignified, and above all, destructive toward what shreds of our culture remain.

"The environment is poisonous. I very much regret that so many people on the musical scene have jumped with such enthusiasm onto the populist bandwagon. What's at issue here is not an exclusive high art--hidden mysteries to which only the select few are admitted--versus a healthy, broad culture enjoyable by all, which is how we usually see this proposition painted. It's no such thing. Rather it's the difference between quality and mediocrity; the difference between an art indistinguishable from entertainment--that is to say, something that can be enjoyed without any commitment to the source--and an art that aspires to what art traditionally does in a society: to elevate, to inspire, to illuminate, to increase understanding, to sharpen perception, and so on.

"The issue for me is simple. The notion of high art is easily reconciled with democracy. Just make sure that all who want one can afford the price of a ticket. But *never* say that it's art's responsibility to justify itself to people who don't care about it, who have no desire for it. It's fine to be evangelical and declare, Here's an artistic product, whether it be the hundred-billionth performance of a Verdi opera or a new work by a composer no one's heard of. To go out into the world and interest people in art is a fine and noble calling, but this must *never* be an occasion for the dumbing-down of the work, of compromising the art itself. People should instead be invited to spend a certain amount of time and effort at learning something about the music or whatever else it is the artistic occasion offers.

"We ask *nothing* of our publics. And I say *publics* because there are so many different groupings--by age, geography, education, intelligence, capacity for experience, and so forth. We ask nothing from any of them, and as a result they give nothing back. There is an unwillingness on the part of composers, performers, authors, poets, painters to ask something of the public--to say to them, 'I present you with something which represents my best effort, which attempts to encapsulate my experience as a maker. Now it's up to you to put in at least some effort to respond to it intelligently.' Failing this, we have an art essentially inseparable from entertainment. *Except* that it demands charitable support. One of my great problems with populist music is that it attempts to make use of pop materials (with which I have no problem), but then demands support. The question I ask is this: If such music is so direct in its appeal, so well suited to the egalitarian estate, why are its composers and performers not out there in the arena making a commercial success of it? *Real* pop musicians do that. Whether or not it sells sets the value of their work. It's an honest criterion. What I find objectionable is the hypocrisy of wanting it both ways--wanting whatever shreds of prestige composing still retains on the one hand and the desiring of mass-market success on the other.

"I find it hard to understand the obvious hatred of thought behind so many of the objections to what I think of as real music. The cliché about theoretical, unfathomable music goes back to a nineteenth-century Romantic convention, perhaps as part of the PR apparatus of market-savvy composers of that time. The notion that to reveal thought, to be in obvious command of one's materials is somehow bad is of course a reflection of the anti-intellectualism of American society. It takes a particularly intense form at the moment. The notion of 'think, bad; feel, good' is pernicious. It separates a unified phenomenon into two discrete parts. It's useful to recall that Bach was praised

as 'learned,' as *not* a bad thing.

"When I look back on [the pieces on the present CD], which are all of course different one from the next and cover a wide span of time, what strikes me most is the way in which they adumbrate a kind of progress I've tried to make as consciously as I can since I began writing music. When I looked around the scene in my early twenties, I saw a kind of institutional avant-garde as a set of prevailing attitudes in Europe and America: that the natural state of music is one of perpetual revolution emphasizing the discontinuities with music of the more distant past and that each new work must redefine composition's terms. Now it seemed to me, even as a very young man, that this state of affairs could not possibly persist permanently. One cannot remain forever in a state of crisis. Revolutions are not revolutions if they go on forever. The gulf between old and new music perhaps had been exaggerated. I regretted also the absence in a fragmented and pluralistic compositional environment (as it was then and still remains) of a coherent set of professional standards. Throughout the history of every culture, such standards have been the norm. Ours is the first to have abandoned norms and agreed-upon standards. This poses a particular strain upon the individual artist, who, when he gets over reveling in his or her alleged freedom, begins to discover a need for coherence and coordinates--principles, standards.

"In the absence of a common practice, agreed-upon standards and the like, what I thought I had to do was develop my own conventions. And so I did and began to embody them in my compositional method. Later, I began to function freely without thinking about them. This was close to forty years ago. Each of this disc's three works represents a kind of increase in fluidity, if you will. They are, as I hope all my work is, equally rigorous, but I suggest that their surfaces can be perceived as—how shall I put it?—more and more connected to a continuity of a personal tradition as one gets closer to the present. As with all of my work, I'm still affectionately disposed toward these pieces, but what I do now is very unlike even the most recent of them."

A work fairly radiating the exuberance of youthful intelligence, the single-movement Duo for Violin and Piano (1965) opens to an angular display of elemental-gestural energy that soon transforms to a melodic passage which, in its turn, falls away into keenly etched reflections on itself. A meditative passage far simpler in outlook and character follows, though this too is not without its contrasting moments of disruptive energy. Throughout, owing perhaps to virtuoso demands, the violin's assigned lyricisms read as near-to-playful in character, as--again perhaps--a retrospective nod to the instrument's vast and athletic literature.

Dedicated to Leonard Hindell, the remarkably seductive *Bassoon Variations* of 1971-2, "accompanied" (Wuorinen's term) by harp and timpani, are, again, based on a 12-tone plan. With bassoon in the foreground stating melodic developments, harp and timpani provide coloristic depths to the principal's lyrical, often elegiac part. *Bassoon Variations* ends in a display of reversals of early-on materials, the final passage devolving to a wholly transparent epigram on the music's spirit and intentions.

A work of sprightly and at times aggressive demeanor, yet again with its tender moments, *The Winds* (1977), written for Anthony Korf's chamber ensemble, Parnassus, exemplifies what composer-theorist Jeffrey Kresky calls Wuorinen's "New York style," its "characteristic perhaps [owing] much to Varèse . . .," one significant reflection that of *Density 21.5*, Varèse's piece for solo flute, which,

after a terse fanfare, hovers distantly at *The Winds'* outset as a "declamatory gesture" and very likely, homage. "For Wuorinen, [*The Winds'*] gestural simplicity seems to represent a streamlining . . . of what used to be denser and less differentiated--perhaps reminiscent of Babbitt and, for that matter, Bach."

In attending to the disc's three offerings, one cannot help but recall--indeed, to find oneself haunted by--Wuorinen's thoughts on tonality and, rather more combatively, the culture's dumbing-down vis-à-vis the listener's role and obligations. *Role* of course suggests participation, and, if only between the ears, that's what one must do with good music. (*Good music!*--a hopelessly snooty, cobwebbed expression one hauls down from a trunk in the attic and attempts to resuscitate in a parallel, if tepid, display of feistiness.) Howard Stokar, Wuorinen's manager, includes this quote by critic Michael Steinberg in the composer's bio that I must repeat here. Describing him as "'maximalist' through and through," says Steinberg, Wuorinen writes "music dense with notes, with events, with cross reference and allusion. He has never thought that there must be something wrong with a piece that reaches its listeners at first encounter (if indeed that attitude is not altogether a myth in the minds of more populist musicians and critics), but he does believe in writing music that challenges performers and listeners to do better than they knew they could, that reveals its riches gradually rather than all at once, that rewards attention and effort. In other words, the musical contact between composer and listener is a two-way street . . . Charles Wuorinen is not about to join the ranks of the born-again tonalists or of those who, forgetting that the Romantic movement was about adventure, not retreat, presume to call themselves neo-Romantics."

Born in 1938 in New York City, **Charles Wuorinen** is the recipient of more prizes, grants, fellowships, and commissions than these notes could possibly attempt to repeat without collapsing from their weight. In any event, the vastness includes a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship and, in 1970, a Pulitzer for the electro-acoustic *Time's Encomium*, a Nonesuch Records commission, which led to the infamous dustup at Columbia U; the issue, Wuorinen's denied tenure; musicologists in black trunks; composers in white. Paying little heed at the time to the actual events, I do remember Wuorinen's willingness to speak his mind.

Charles Wuorinen began writing music rather late in infancy--age five. The catalog (at the moment) boasts in the neighborhood of 200 mature works. An accomplished conductor and pianist, and primarily an autodidact, Wuorinen studied glancingly with Otto Luening, Jack Beeson, and Vladimir Ussachevsky. As a particularly significant mark of honor, his widow allowed the composer the use of her husband's last sketches for Wuorinen's *A Reliquary for Igor Stravinsky*.

—Mike Silverton

Mike Silverton *writes about music on recording for Fanfare and The Absolute Sound. He is at present applying the finishing coat to a long comic poem, Airship Destiny, a Narrative in Vers Atroce, with Magic-Lantern Slides by Irving Washington. His first book of poems, Battery Park, was published by Russell Edson's Thing Press in 1966.*

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

A Reliquary for Igor Stravinsky. London Sinfonietta, Oliver Knussen, conductor. Deutsche Grammophon 47 068.

A Winter's Tale. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Koch International Classics CD 7272.
Album Leaf. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Koch International Classics CD 7272.
Fast Fantasy. Fred Sherry, cello; Charles Wuorinen, piano. New World 80385-2.
The Golden Dance. San Francisco Symphony, Herbert Blomstedt, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79185-2.
New York Notes. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Koch International Classics CD 7272.
Percussion Symphony. New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, Charles Wuorinen, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79150.
Sonata for Violin and Piano. Benjamin Hudson, violin; Garrick Ohlsson, piano. New World 80385-2.
String Sextet. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Koch International Classics CD 7272.
Third Piano Concerto. Garrick Ohlsson, piano; San Francisco Symphony, Herbert Blomstedt, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79185-2.
Third String Quartet. Group for Contemporary Music. New World 80385-2.
Twang. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Koch International Classics CD 7272.

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Burbank, Richard. *Charles Wuorinen: A Bio-Bibliography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994.
Kresky, Jeffrey. "The Recent Music of Charles Wuorinen." *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 25, Nos. 1 and 2, Winter 1987 and Summer 1987.
Wuorinen, Charles. *Simple Composition*. Longman, Inc., 1979. Reprinted 1995 by C. F. Peters.

Producer: Sam Parkins (*Bassoon Variations*); Elizabeth Ostrow (*The Winds*)
Associate producer: Elizabeth Ostrow (*Bassoon Variations*)
Engineer: Marc Aubort (Duo for Violin and piano); Stan Tonkel (*Bassoon Variations*); Paul Goodman (*The Winds*)
Assisting engineers: Tom Brown, John Cue (*The Winds*)
Mixing engineer: Paul Goodman (*The Winds*)
Tape editors: Noel Harrington, Randy Payne (*Bassoon Variations*); Don Van Gordon, Soundwave Recording Studios (*The Winds*)
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THE WINDS

CHARLES WUORINEN (b. 1938) 80517-2

1 Duo for Violin and Piano (14:57)

Paul Zukofsky, violin; Charles Wuorinen, piano

2 *Bassoon Variations* (11:55)

Donald MacCourt, bassoon; Susan Jolles, harp; Gordon Gottlieb, timpani

3 *The Winds* (15:00)

Parnassus: Keith Underwood, piccolo; Rie Schmidt, flute; Gerard Reuter, oboe; Stephen Hart, clarinet; Dennis Smylie, clarinet, bass clarinet, contrabass clarinet; Steven Dibner, bassoon; David Wakefield, horn; Raymond Mase, trumpet; Ronald Borrer, trombone; David Braynard, tuba; Cyrus Stevens, Carol Zeavin, violins; Judy Geist, viola; Chris Finckel, violoncello; Joseph Tamosaitis, Donald Palma, contrabass; Edmund Niemann, piano; Glen Velez, James Preiss, percussion; Anthony Korf, conductor

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