

## JAMES PRIMOSCH

### Icons

New World Records 80523

With all its evident modernity, the music of James Primosch is reassuringly old-fashioned in some of its aspects. The practice of appending such words as "Thanks be to God" to a completed score is an unfamiliar one among contemporary musicians: you have to go back to composers like Haydn to find it habitually and unselfconsciously applied. And that, in Primosch, is only the outward sign of certain fundamental qualities in the music itself. Along with its passion for clarity of thought and sheer beauty of sound, his work is manifestly concerned with ethical and cultural values of a very traditional kind, and with establishing a viable symbiosis connecting equally traditional musical elements—hymnody, for example, and the language of African-American popular music—with all the proliferating techniques available to a composer at the end of the twentieth century.

Primosch expresses his aim concisely in a statement in the catalog for the 1996 Pew Fellowships in the Arts:

I seek to serve the play of gesture and memory by harnessing diverse energies. These spring from a variety of sources: the traditions of the European-American musical heritage; the expanded resources afforded by electronic media; and my own experiences as a performer, including work as an advocate for contemporary music, as a liturgical musician and as a jazz pianist.

At the heart of my work is a spiritual impulse. The music is rooted in contemplation and solitude, but comes to life in the community of performers and listeners, when the air is set in motion as an act of praise to the Creator.

A native of Cleveland, Primosch studied at Cleveland State University and at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University. His principal composition teachers were George Crumb, Richard Wernick, and Mario Davidovsky. He was drawn to Crumb's music by its sensitivity to timbre and its handling of time—studying with Crumb, he says, was "like talking to a tree about botany—he just embodies music." From Wernick he gained a new focus on harmony, and Davidovsky led him to think about "a counterpoint of forms." He also studied piano with Lambert Orkis, Andrius Kuprevicius, Joan Terr Ronis, and Nancy Voigt, and has made a name for himself as a keyboard interpreter of the works of Ives, Schoenberg, Bartók, Messiaen, Copland, Berio, Schat, and many younger composers. Performed by such ensembles as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago, and Speculum Musicae, his own works have brought him honors from the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Academy-Institute of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and fellowships to the American Academy in Rome and the Tanglewood Music Center, where he studied with John Harbison. He has received commissions from the Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations, the Network for New Music, the New York Camerata, and other organizations, and served in 1994 as composer-in-residence at the Marlboro Music Festival. In 1988 he joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, where he directs the Presser Electronic Music Studio and began a term as chairman of the Music Department in 1996.

Presented in approximately reverse chronological order—two of the pieces date from the same period—the four works heard in this recording also constitute a diminuendo in the number of performers involved: quintet, quartet, trio, and duo (plus tape). This is perhaps all the more appropriate in that each work individually follows a kind of progression from complex toward more simple that is characteristic of the composer. Along with the devotional penchant already alluded to, Primosch's interest in both forward-looking techniques and backward-looking assimilation of elemental existing materials—what could be called "musical found objects"—might suggest an affinity with the Polish composer Henryk Górecki. But where Górecki reflects the values of a nation with a strong peasant tradition, Primosch is the product of an urban society, and his way of bringing together diverse cultural elements is more sophisticated—the word is used here purely descriptively, not as value judgement—than Górecki's deliberately blunt juxtapositions.

The subtlety of these processes is already apparent in the earliest work on the disc, *Icons*, which was completed in 1984 and received its premiere that year at Tanglewood. The tape part, using analog devices and voltage-controlled synthesizers to provide a diverse palette of colors, was realized at the Columbia University Electronic Music Center. According to the composer, the work's title refers to passages in a book by Madeleine L'Engle entitled *Walking on Water*, which

speaks of the calling of artists to form "icons of the true." The following excerpt from the book appears in the score: "In art we are once again able to do all the things we have forgotten; we are able to walk on water; we speak to the angels who call us; we move, unfettered, among the stars.

The instrumental layout of the piece, which includes direct plucking of the piano strings at various points, vividly reflects this implied intercourse among disparate strata of experience. The clarinet is used to mediate, as it were, between the hard-edged sound world of the piano and the infinitely malleable quality of the tape part. It is noticeable that there is no hard-and-fast distinction between the woodwind instrument and the tape: at times the listener is hard put to it to be sure which of the two he is actually listening to. And within this tripartite timbral texture, the progression of the work from a broad repertoire of expressive and thematic gestures to an all-embracing tranquillity is crystal clear and emotionally satisfying.

*Fantasy-Variations* for violin, cello, and piano was composed seven years later for the Leonardo Trio with the support of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. The composer explains that the opening theme of the work

permeates the harmonic and melodic life of the 24 short episodes and coda that follow. However, in a few sections the relationships with the theme are more hidden than explicit; the fanciful connections between these portions and the opening theme suggested the work's hybrid title. Yet even in these more wide-ranging variations the opening theme is usually still hovering nearby, often as a quiet presence contrasting with more animated gestures. The piece may be understood as a kind of dream journal: a chain of brief entries that seem to vary greatly, yet rotate about a fixed constellation of types and obsessions, speaking a language of images at once logical and impossible, familiar and mysterious.

Dreams or not, the materials and processes that make up *Fantasy-Variations* again communicate with the utmost directness. At the end, after a rapturous climax of remarkable sensuous beauty and dynamic power, the basic melodic-rhythmic figures of the theme reappear stripped, so to speak, of all inessentials: technically, this brief and poignant coda recalls the stripping-down process that Brahms applied to the finale theme of his First String Sextet, Op. 18, but the language in *Fantasy-Variations* is Primosch's own.

Having composed a first string quartet in 1983, Primosch waited until 1991 to write his String Quartet No. 2 (after Zurbarán). The occasion for the piece came through a commission, as the composer explains:

The concerts and exhibits of the Cleveland Museum of Art were an important formative influence for me during my student days. So when the invitation came to create a new work celebrating this institution on its seventy-fifth anniversary, I was not only happy to accept, but knew immediately that I wanted to write a piece that would somehow relate specifically to the museum. I decided to make the work a reflection on a painting in the museum's collection: Zurbarán's *The Holy House of Nazareth*. My quartet is not program music in a narrative sense, but rather a kind of meditation that takes its tone from this painting's remarkable integration of intense affect, mysterious repose and secret geometry.

If Zurbarán's painting is the implicit "found object" that provides the quartet with its spiritual jumping-off point, there is another quite explicit one that furnishes the basis of its thematic material: the piece is occupied, Primosch continues,

with a purely musical object of contemplation: the hymn tune "Picardy," best known with the text *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*. This tune permeates the harmonic and melodic life of the quartet, sometimes appearing in a very simple, straightforward fashion, but often hidden amidst more complex structures. I was attracted to the melody for its musical qualities, but later realized that the hymn's text also resonates with the mood of the painting; the words speak of a reverent awe, of "cherubim with sleepless eye," and of the mystery of the Incarnate Word who must suffer: "King of kings, yet born of Mary. . . ."

Itself a term taken from the world of visual art (and used again as the title of a piano-and-tape piece he wrote two years later), the "secret geometry" Primosch finds in Zurbarán's calm depiction of the Holy Family has its application not only in the cleverly interrelated lines and planes of the painting but in the fabric of the music itself: here it refers, the composer says, to certain "little hidden games of patterning" that inform its structure. In this work, as in the later Piano Quintet, the progression from complexity to simplicity is even clearer than in the two pieces already discussed, and it is at once reinforced and diversified by these "games." Seemingly, the declamatory, harmonically intense opening pages of the quartet could hardly be more different from the simple diatonic and scalar lines of the hymn tune that duly emerges. But in retrospect, or on second hearing, the listener comes to understand that the tune's opening five-note ascending scale is already present in the second violin and viola in the very first measure. What gradually happens is a kind of denaturing of the harmony, removing first one and then another "foreign" element to reveal and illuminate the hymn tune as

cousin to the simple yet delicately balanced forms of the painting.

In the course of comments on his own Piano Quintet, composed in 1996 and dedicated to the Cavani Quartet, Primosch relates that, in a letter written after hearing the Brahms Piano Quintet for the first time,

Thomas Mann remarked that the work was ". . . more like a symphony than chamber music—something to remember. . . ." Indeed, the combination of string quartet and piano has often inspired composers to write works of symphonic proportions, among them some of the jewels of the chamber music repertoire. While I have not written a work of the grandest symphonic proportions, I have adopted a traditional four-movement scheme for my quintet with an impassioned sonata-like first movement, a lighter scherzo to follow, a set of variations for the slow movement, and a finale that at times plays at being serious but is mostly serious about being playful. These last two movements, a meditation on an African-American spiritual and an evocation of a hard bop tune, represent my first attempts to explicitly incorporate idioms from jazz into my concert music, although I suppose there have been less obvious reflections of my love for African-American musical traditions in my music all along.

Here, in contrast with the melodic and harmonic emphasis of the String Quartet No. 2, the argument is carried through more emphatically in rhythmic terms, from the forceful dotted figures of the opening piano/strings antiphony and the variously interlocking time-signatures of the first movement, by way of the mercurially shifting yet natural-sounding meters of the scherzo, to the wittily obsessive "Allegro shuffle" of the finale. There is nevertheless no lack of melodic interest, and this comes to a fore in the third movement's meditation on "Motherless Child," compellingly nostalgic, but at the same time meticulous in its clarity of texture and its avoidance of self-indulgent excess. This finely controlled slow movement offers a well-judged interlude of repose in the quintet's evolution toward rhythmic fundamentals. It is an evolution paralleled in the other three works recorded here: in each, as we have seen, shaping different aspects of the musical texture, and in each to equally cogent expressive effect.

—Bernard Jacobson

*Born in London in 1936, Bernard Jacobson studied philosophy and history at Oxford. The author of three books, he now lives in Philadelphia, where in addition to writing freelance criticism he serves as a contributing editor of Fanfare and as a member of the board of directors of Theodore Presser Company music publishers.*

**Aleck Karis** has been featured at leading festivals in the Americas and in Europe, performing both contemporary and classical works. He is the pianist with Speculum Musicae and SONOR, the contemporary ensemble at U.C. San Diego. He has recorded solo music by Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Stravinsky, Cage, Davidovsky, Babbitt, Reynolds, Anderson, Krieger, Primosch, and Yuasa, for Bridge, Nonesuch, New World, Neuma, and CRI. Awarded a solo recitalist's fellowship by the NEA, Karis has been honored with two Fromm Foundation grants "in recognition of his commitment to the music of our time."

Karis studied with Artur Balsam and Beveridge Webster at the Manhattan School of Music and The

Juilliard School, and privately with William Daghlian. He is currently a professor of music at the University of California, San Diego.

**Jean Kopperud** is one of the most versatile and innovative clarinetists appearing before the public today, known for her virtuoso performances both in the concert hall and in musical theater. A graduate of The Juilliard School and a former pupil of Nadia Boulanger, Ms. Kopperud has toured internationally as a concert soloist and chamber musician. National acclaim for her performances of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Harlekin*, a tour-de-force for dancing clarinetist, resulted in her Avery Fisher Hall debut, presented by the New York Philharmonic. Ms. Kopperud is currently performing with the New York New Music Ensemble, the Chamber Players of the League of Composers/I.S.C.M., Ensemble 21, The New Music Consort, the Washington Square Chamber Players, and the Omega Ensemble. She is on the faculty of The Juilliard School, teaching a class called "On the Edge," as well as private and class clarinet.

**The Cavani String Quartet**, winner in 1989 of the prestigious Naumburg Chamber Music Award, was formed in 1984. The quartet performs regularly in major concert series and festivals throughout North America and Europe. Appearances include the Carnegie Hall Centennial Series and at Alice Tully Hall in New York, the Corcoran Gallery of Art and Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Ambassador Series in Los Angeles, and Muziekcentrum De Ijsbreker in Amsterdam. The quartet's recordings feature an unusual range of repertoire which includes quartets by Dvorák, Schumann, Bartók, Ravel, the first recording of George Szell's Piano Quintet and Donald Erb's Quartet No. 2, as well as works by Chausson and de Falla with soprano Benita Valente. The Cavani has commissioned and performed the music of a wide array of living composers, including Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Dan Welcher, Joan Tower, Donald Erb, and James Primosch, and is the recipient of a 1998 ASCAP-Chamber Music America Award for Adventuresome Programming of Contemporary Music.

Formerly in residence at the University of California/Riverside, the Cavani Quartet was appointed to the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music as quartet-in-residence in 1988.

Now in existence for more than a decade, the **Leonardo Trio** continues to excite audiences throughout the United States and abroad. In 1991 the trio made its first European tour to such critical acclaim that the tour is now an annual event. Trio appearances in Europe include a three-concert series at Frankfurt's Alte Oper and appearances at other major German festivals and at the Muziekcentrum De Ijsbreker in Amsterdam. Leonardo Trio performances in the U.S. include concerts in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Salt Lake City, and Honolulu. The ensemble has been in residence at Pennsylvania's Music at Gretna since 1987 and has been featured at festivals throughout the Northeast. In 1989 they were finalists in the Naumburg competition and prizewinners in the Concert Artists Guild Competition. It is a goal of the trio to expand the existing repertoire and in 1989 they were awarded a Reader's Digest/Meet the Composer Commissioning Grant. The Leonardo Trio's debut recording on the XLNT label features works of Smetana, Shostakovich, and Martinů.

## **DISCOGRAPHY**

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Painting: Francisco de Zurbarán, Spanish, 1598-1664. *Christ and the Virgin in the House of Nazareth*, c. 1635-1640. Oil on canvas, 165 x 218.2 cm. c The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1998, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund, 1960. 117

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## ICONS

**JAMES PRIMOSCH (b. 1956) 80523-2**

**Piano Quintet** (publ. Merion Music, Inc., BMI) 25:08

- 1 I Allegro con intensità 6:22
- 2 II Molto vivace 4:38
- 3 III Meditation on "Motherless Child" (Adagio molto) 8:56
- 4 IV Allegro shuffle 5:06

Cavani String Quartet: Annie Fullard, violin; Mari Sato, violin; Kirsten Docter, viola; Merry Peckham, cello; James Primosch, piano

5 **String Quartet No. 2** (after Zurbarán) (publ. Merion Music, Inc., BMI) 16:33

Cavani String Quartet: Annie Fullard, violin; Mari Sato, violin; Kirsten Docter, viola; Merry Peckham, cello

6 ***Fantasy-Variations*** for violin, cello, and piano (publ. Merion Music, Inc., BMI) 16:34

Leonardo Trio: Cameron Grant, piano; Erica Kieseletter, violin; Jonathan Spitz, cello

7 *Icons* for clarinet, piano, and tape (publ. Margun Music, Inc., BMI) 13:44  
Jean Kopperud, clarinet; Aleck Karis, piano

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