

**YEHUDI WYNER**  
**On This Most Voluptuous Night**

**New World Records 80549**

Yehudi Wyner (b. 1929) has led many different lives in music. His compositions stand at the many interesting intersections among them. He was born into a musical family: His father was the Ukrainian-American composer Lazar Weiner (1897–1982), the leading composer of Yiddish art songs. Young Yehudi was composing his own music from the age of five, making things up at the piano; his father wrote the pieces down for him. Wyner's formal training as a pianist took place at Juilliard, and it was only after his undergraduate years that he decided to become a composer. At Yale he studied with Paul Hindemith, at Harvard with Walter Piston. He has been a full-time teacher since 1963—at Yale, SUNY Purchase, and Brandeis, with many summers on the faculty of the Tanglewood Music Center, yet he has never been an “academic” figure. He is above all a practical, performing musician who has helped run opera companies (the resident New Haven Opera, the touring Turnau Opera); conducted and played in countless new-music concerts; and taught and toured with the Bach Aria Group as keyboardist and occasional conductor for more than 30 years. His wife, Susan Davenny Wyner, was one of America's most prominent sopranos of the 1970s, and their recital partnership was one of the great ones of the period. After a bicycle accident ended her singing career, Susan Davenny Wyner became a conductor, and as notable an interpreter of her husband's orchestral works on the podium as she had been as a singer.

Wyner might have become a touring virtuoso pianist; he is an exceptionally precise, alert, and vividly imaginative instrumentalist. But he never seriously pursued that life because he didn't like the idea of constant travel and repetition of a limited repertory. He also feared he lacked the commanding memory such a career requires. Later, he says, he came back to the piano on his own terms, out of appetite, not obligation. Wyner's friends have included some of the best musicians of his time and place; like Benjamin Britten and other performing composers, he wrote most of his music for his friends to perform, often with himself at the keyboard. Much of Wyner's music was written for specific occasions and purposes as well as for specific people—he has composed a lot of incidental music for the theater, for example, including the music for the prestigious original productions of Robert Lowell's plays *The Old Glory* and *Benito Cereno*. But his music transcends those original occasions and purposes. *3 Informal Pieces* and *Brandeis Sunday* are examples of this dimension of Wyner's work and how his intentions realized themselves in unexpected ways with the passage of time. His career began at a time when many composers aligned themselves into camps and then wrote the kind of music they were expected to. Wyner has a strong independent streak and preferred to write the music he wanted to and that he felt he had to. His work represents a fusion and reconciliation of opposites—of coherence and surprise; of formal ingenuity and informal, spontaneous ease; of clarity and elusiveness. The mixture of thoughtfulness and earthy demotic vigor in Wyner's speech patterns reappears in his music. The repeated allusions to pop music of the swing era never appear in quotation marks, but as part of a texture where everything is always turning into something else, and you never know what's going to lie around the corner.

One consequence of Wyner's independence from dogma has been delayed recognition for his achievement as a composer; until relatively recently he had been better known as a performer and educator. Twenty-five years separated his first orchestral work, written during his student days, and *Prologue and Narrative* for cello and orchestra, which became his first major international success in

1994 when Ralph Kirshbaum played it with the BBC at a cello festival in Manchester, England. In 1998, Wyner's Horntrio was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and since then it has become his most-performed piece.

On this record, *Dances of Atonement* reflects Wyner's Jewish heritage, his practicality, and the way his music takes on a life of its own. The String Quartet, written for his friends in the Lydian Quartet, begins in one place and ends in another that is a surprising but inevitable consequence of where it began. *On This Most Voluptuous Night* is perhaps most characteristic of the intersections in Wyner's music. It was originally conceived for the voice of his wife. The text comes from a poetic master of the American vernacular, William Carlos Williams, and the music, like much of Wyner's work, is both learned and vernacular. It also represents the fruit of decades of work on Bach—"the words and the music, and the relationship between the words and the music as a way of getting into its inner life."

Above all, Yehudi Wyner's music is immediate. What other American composer could startle you by mentioning Verdi as his model? "My music," Wyner once said, "is anything but theoretical. It is full of palpable gestures; it packs an immediate punch, but there is more underneath that, as in Verdi. I want things to be clear, powerful—and complicated."

—Richard Dyer

Richard Dyer is the classical music critic for The Boston Globe.

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*On This Most Voluptuous Night* was commissioned in 1982 by the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival to celebrate its tenth anniversary. One stipulation of the commission was that the poetry be American, and I at first misinterpreted this to include South American as well and began a quite different composition to texts by Pablo Neruda in English translation. Quite late I learned that this would not be acceptable to the commissioning agency and needed to tack sails very swiftly. A mad search for appropriate and stimulating American poetry ensued and from diverse sources I assembled a number of poems and fragments of poems by William Carlos Williams. Before this I had never found Williams's poetry sympathetic. At first it was the short lyrics that yielded musical thoughts, but the meaning of larger bodies of work, the five books of *Paterson*, for example, eluded me, probably because I was trying to understand it all rather than allowing myself to respond to flashes here and there. Responding without full "understanding" was the key to my efforts to invent a musical discourse that would parallel Williams's poetical intentions. Some aspects of Williams's credo were clear enough: reliance on plain speech, often vernacular in origin; American, as opposed to Continental, diction; the conception of a poem as a "machine made of words," not merely a fancy sentiment or emotional confession; the idea of poetry as a shared experience, ordinary and entertaining at a certain level, sometimes familiar and flat, to mirror the normal diction of our culture, yet at the same time capable of embedding profound and moving sentiments and observations about our lives.

The title poem, which begins this set of songs, is one of the rare pieces of purely lyric poetry to be found in *Paterson*, all the more fragrant and astonishing because of its matter-of-fact surroundings. If I remember correctly, it was my response to this lyric that really got me going. *The End of the Parade*, with its obvious musical imagery and its suggestion of a disintegrating march, helped me find apposite musical figures. The poem in all its brevity is about a number of things, including the actual

process of creating a work of art. *The Artist* describes an actual incident in Williams's life, a visit to the old-age home where his mother spent many of her later years. The structure of the poem, with its stepped lines (in groups of three), is a significant Williams invention, typical of his later poems. I made three settings of the poem, intending to use only one. In the end, finding myself unable to make a choice, I found a way to use all three, but how this was done must remain a surprise for the listener. *Learning with Age to Sleep My Life Away* is, from an expressive point of view, the central song of the set. The mysterious text, resonant with distant allusions, is a summation of much of what Williams believed. Finding a vehicle for the evocative transmission of this text was in a certain way the most taxing of my efforts on the entire composition. The problem was how to embrace a set of metaphysical epigrams in a lyrical, sensuous texture without sentimentalizing the toughness and tragic tenderness of Williams's final musings. *Puerto Rico Song* is one of the poet's last lyrics. Similar to a Japanese haiku, it is an epigrammatic compression of all Williams wished to say, placing God, man, and nature in plain and inexorable relationship. Once again I chose to set the poem three times with the instruments alone providing the first version.

In the preceding comments I have said very little about musical matters, nothing about technical means or formal design. A few remarks here may be helpful. The compositional language is a varied one, ranging from strong tonal allusion to highly chromatic or atonal procedure. Nevertheless, at the core of all the invention is a narrow context, a chord or two, a characteristic series of tones, from which most, if not all, the material of the piece is drawn. Even the vernacular elements are closely derived from this governing context. I have attempted to use those vernacular elements not as "references" but as normal and inevitable speech in much the same way Williams uses them in his poetry. Overall I have sought in *Voluptuous Night* to achieve a kind of "classical" music, presenting rather than editorializing, seeking a measured balance of external allure and internal expressivity, of the "gallant" and the "learned," of sentiment and structure.

*Brandeis Sunday* was written in 1996 for the Lydian String Quartet to play at the inauguration of a new president of Brandeis University. Despite its intended function, it is by no means an exercise in bombastic public rhetoric. The opening music is somber and thoughtful and shares material with an orchestra piece I was writing which was given the title *Epilogue (in memory of Jacob Druckman)*. The second half of *Brandeis Sunday* is jazzy and spirited but certainly not grandiose. The question of "occasional music" comes up in connection with *Brandeis Sunday*. How relevant to the occasion ought a composition be? Must a musical birthday greeting be gay and flippant? Should a fanfare for an affair of state be pompous and noisy? How conventional ought music for a public occasion be? How can one reconcile personal expression with the scale needed for a public occasion? In the case of *Brandeis Sunday* I surely failed to provide music suitable to the occasion, but I am satisfied with the expression and intimacy of the composition as it stands.

The String Quartet was conceived in the hills of Tuscany during the winter and spring of 1984–85. I would be hard-pressed to find some connection between the serene, orderly landscape of our physical surroundings and the restless moodiness of this music. Perhaps the influence of external calm encouraged me to explore inner states of anxiety and introspective disorder. In any case, the composition appears to project an atmosphere far removed from the harmonious surface of pastoral Italy. The music divides into three movements. The first, relatively short, is a succession of episodes, somewhat angular in character, dissolving into a quiet coda. The second movement, more interlude than self-contained organism, begins quietly elegiac but concludes with an elusive and very brief

scherzo. The last movement is substantially longer than the others and proceeds through a more varied array of experiences. The lengthy stretch of sustained lyricism that concludes the movement is the expressive heart of the entire Quartet. Here all the preceding shapes are synthesized, clarified, and transmuted to produce a more direct, more resolved mode of speech.

*3 Informal Pieces* for violin and piano were written in 1961. The first performance took place in New York City. The violinist was Matthew Raimondi, and I was the pianist. In this work I set out to do certain specific things. Some years earlier I had written a large, intense, elaborately developed composition for violin and piano entitled *Concert Duo*, which Raimondi and I had performed widely and ultimately recorded. I wondered if it would be possible to embody many of the values of *Concert Duo* in a radically compressed form, presenting extremes, juxtaposing self-contained events, high and low points, eschewing all transition and development. I suppose one could refer to “essences.” The instrumental relationship was also altered. In *Concert Duo* the occasional swamping of the violin sonority was a deliberate expressive strategy. In *3 Informal Pieces* the aim was equality, transparency. The word “Informal” in the title was by no means an informal choice. One of the reigning attitudes of contemporary composition in the 1950s and 60s was an aspiration for total control of all components of a musical structure. “Pre-compositional” design, serialization of pitch, register, dynamics, durations, pauses, and proportions, were being promulgated as historical imperatives, as the obligatory “wave of the future.” Obviously I didn't think so. I wanted to restore some elements of spontaneous improvisatory invention to the compositional process, to celebrate the power of the “informal” even while acknowledging the organizing power of rigor and formality.

After a number of performances in 1961 I found myself uncomfortable with *3 Informal Pieces*. Possibly it was the lurking hysteria emanating from the juxtaposed extremes that I objected to. Perhaps it too closely mirrored my inner life at that time, an autobiographical exposure altogether too blatant for comfort. In any case, I banished the pieces to the morgue of a desk drawer where they languished, gathering silent dust for eight years. They hesitantly emerged in 1969 in response to a request by the extraordinary violinist and pedagogue Broadus Erle to perform a composition of mine at the Yale Summer Festival in Norfolk, Connecticut. I agreed to have another look at *3 Informal Pieces*, and with Erle's refined and sympathetic performance, this work began a second life.

*Dances of Atonement* began its existence as an occasional piece. In 1976, in response to a request for instrumental music suitable for a television program devoted to Yom Kippur featuring violinist Joseph Silverstein, then concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, I was unable to come up with any suggestions. In the absence of any available literature, the notion to create an appropriate music sprang to mind and I set to work at once. My first thought was to base a piece on the familiar *Kol Nidre* chant utilized by the nineteenth-century composer Max Bruch and unmistakably identified with Yom Kippur. But the very familiarity of this chant made it difficult to work with; every variation, every distortion abused rather than enhanced the original, and I felt myself trapped by the association. I sought a solution by searching for material elsewhere and found an unfamiliar *Kol Nidre* in a collection of the music of the Jews of Morocco. From the style of the chant I inferred it to be of great antiquity. Its very remoteness stimulated my imagination. In a short time the piece was completed and first performed on Boston television Channel 5 by Silverstein and myself. But the piece was not complete. The vitality of the material seemed to enjoy an unsolicited life in my imagination and the *Kol Nidre* continued to expand, to elaborate, to transform. An additional group of themes, also from traditional chants reserved for Yom Kippur demanded a hearing as well. So while *Kol Nidre*

expanded, a new movement, *V'hakobanim*—"and the priests entered"—was begun. Both movements were completed in November 1976 and *Dances of Atonement* received its first performance in New York shortly thereafter. Like much of my work, *Dances of Atonement* seeks to transform simple, even commonplace material into abstract, mystical, or otherwise unforeseen states of being.

— *Yehudi Wyner*

*On This Most Voluptuous Night* (1982)

(A song cycle based on texts of William Carlos Williams)

*On This Most Voluptuous Night*

(from *Paterson*, Book III)

On this most voluptuous night of the year  
the term of the moon is yellow with no light  
the air's soft, the night bird has  
only one note, the cherry tree in bloom

makes a blur on the woods, its perfume  
no more than half guessed moves in the mind.  
No insect is yet awake, leaves are few.  
In the arching trees there is no sleep.

The blood is still and indifferent, the face  
does not ache nor sweat soil nor the  
mouth thirst. Now love might enjoy its play  
and nothing disturb the full octave of its run.

Her belly • her belly is like a white cloud • a  
white cloud at evening • before the shuddering  
night!

*The End of the Parade*

The sentence undulates,  
raising no song;  
it is too old, the  
words of it are falling  
apart. Only percussion  
notes continue  
with weakening  
emphasis what was once  
all honeyed sounds  
full of sweet breath.

*The Artist*

Mr. T.

bareheaded  
    in a soiled undershirt  
his hair standing out  
    on all sides  
    stood on his toes  
heels together  
    arms gracefully  
    for the moment  
curled above his head!  
    Then he whirled about  
    bounded  
into the air  
    and with an entrechat  
    perfectly achieved  
completed the figure.  
    My mother  
    taken by surprise  
where she sat  
    in her invalid's chair  
    was left speechless.  
"Bravo!" she cried at last  
    and clapped her hands.  
    The man's wife  
came from the kitchen:  
    "What goes on here?" she said.  
    But the show was over

*Learning with Age to Sleep My Life Away*  
(from *Paterson*, Book V, conclusion)  
—learning with age to sleep my life away:  
saying

The measure intervenes, to measure is all  
    we know,

    a choice among the measures

    the measured dance  
"unless the scent of a rose  
    startle us anew"

Equally laughable  
    is to assume to know nothing, a  
    chess game  
massively, "materially," compounded!

Yo ho! ta ho!

We know nothing and can know nothing  
but  
the dance, to dance to a measure  
contrapuntally,  
Satyrically, the tragic foot.

*Puerto Rico Song*

Well, God is  
love,  
so love me.

God  
is love, so  
love me. God

is  
love, so love  
me well.

Love, the sun  
comes  
up in

the morning,  
and  
in

the evening—  
zippe, zappe!—  
it goes.

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*“Book III, excerpt,” “Book V, excerpt”* by William Carlos Williams, from PATERSON, copyright ©1958 by William Carlos Williams. Used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

**Yehudi Wyner**, composer, pianist, and conductor, was born in 1929 in Canada and raised in New York City. Son of composer and conductor Lazar Weiner, he attended Juilliard as a pianist, then studied composition at Yale with Richard Donovan and Paul Hindemith and at Harvard with Walter Piston. After receiving the Rome Prize in composition, he began an active musical career as solo

pianist, chamber musician, collaborator with notable singers and instrumentalists, director of two opera companies, conductor of numerous chamber and vocal ensembles in a wide range of repertory, and, of course, composer and teacher.

He has received commissions from Carnegie Hall, The Boston Symphony, The BBC Philharmonic, The Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, The Library of Congress, The Ford Foundation, The Koussevitzky Foundation at the Library of Congress, The National Endowment for the Arts, and The Fromm Foundation, among others. His *Horntrio* (1997), commissioned by Worldwide Concurrent Premieres, was a finalist for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in Music. His compositions include works for orchestra, solo voice, and solo instruments, small ensembles, and music for the theater, as well as liturgical services for worship.

His honors and awards include two Guggenheim Fellowships, The Institute of Arts and Letters Award, and The Brandeis Creative Arts Award. In 1998 he received the Elise Stoecker Prize given by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center for lifetime contribution to chamber music. In 1999 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Since 1990 Mr. Wyner has held the Walter W. Naumburg Chair of Composition at Brandeis University and has also been a frequent Visiting Professor at Harvard University. He has served as Dean of the Music Division at SUNY Purchase and was head of the Composition faculty at Yale University, where he taught for fourteen years. As keyboard artist of the Bach Aria Group since 1968, Mr. Wyner has played and conducted a substantial number of the Bach cantatas, concertos, and motets, and he was on the chamber music faculty of the Tanglewood Music Center from 1975–97. He is married to the conductor and former soprano Susan Davenny Wyner.

The **Lydian String Quartet** (Daniel Stepner, violin; Judith Eissenberg, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello), in residence at Brandeis University, was founded in 1980. The ensemble has won a number of prizes at international competitions in France, Canada, and England, as well as the prestigious Naumburg Award for Chamber Music. The group has appeared in major concert venues in England, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Russia, Armenia, and throughout the United States. The Lydian String Quartet has earned a reputation as an important advocate of new music, and has a number of ASCAP/Chamber Music America Awards for Adventurous Programming, combining classical repertoire with recently composed music. In the spring of 2000, the Lydians completed a five-year “American Originals” project, during which more than 60 American works were performed or recorded. The Quartet is embarking on a five-year, cross-disciplinary project, “Vienna and the String quartet”—featuring the works of Haydn through Schoenberg, and serving as a centerpiece for a coordinated series of lectures, films, concerts, and discussions of Central European culture of the past 250 years. The LSQ has recorded works of Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Gabriel Fauré, Charles Ives, Allen Anderson, John Harbison, Peter Child, Thomas Oboe Lee, Martin Boykan, William Schuman, and Yehudi Wyner, among others.

**Daniel Stepner**, first violinist of the Lydian String Quartet, is also a founding member of the Boston Museum Trio, the resident ensemble for 25 years at the Museum of Fine Arts. He serves as concertmaster of the Handel and Haydn Society under Christopher Hogwood, and is Artistic Director of the Aston Magna Festival. His solo recordings include music of Bach, Vivaldi, and

Charles Ives (the complete Violin Sonatas, with pianist John Kirkpatrick). He has commissioned and premiered solo works of composers Daniel Pinkham, John Heiss, Allan Anderson, Thomas Oboe Lee, Bob Nieske, Martin Boykan, and Yehudi Wyner.

Soprano **Dominique Labelle** has appeared with the symphony orchestras of Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Dallas, Houston, Minnesota, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Toronto, with such noted conductors as Charles Dutoit, Christopher Hogwood, Raymond Leppard, Kurt Masur, Nicholas McGegan, Seiji Ozawa, Robert Shaw, and Franz Welser-Möst. Her operatic appearances have included leading roles with such companies as the Boston Lyric Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Glimmerglass Opera, Minnesota Opera, and Vancouver Opera.

**Christopher Krueger** is a member of Collage New Music, Emmanuel Music, the Aulos Ensemble, and the Bach ensemble, and is principal flutist with the New Hampshire Symphony, the Handel and Haydn Society, and Boston Baroque. He has been a soloist on the Great Performers series and Mostly Mozart Festival and has performed with the Boston Symphony, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the Boston Pops. Mr. Krueger is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

**Jean Rife**, first-prize winner of the Heldenleben International Horn Competition, was one of ten invited guest soloists at the twenty-seventh International Horn Society Workshop in Japan, and has been featured guest soloist at horn workshops in Germany, Maryland, Kansas City, and Virginia. Ms. Rife has made solo and ensemble recordings for Telarc, Telefunken, Titanic Records, Harmonia Mundi, Arabesque, the BBC Radio, Radio Suisse Romande, and WGBH Radio in Boston. She is on the performance faculties of the New England Conservatory and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Concert Duo for Violin and Piano.* Michelle Makarski, violin, Brent McMunn, piano. New World Records 80391-2.

*Intermedio for Soprano and Strings.* Susan Davenny Wyner, soprano; Yehudi Wyner, conductor. CRI 701

*Intermezzi for Piano Quartet.* Cantilena Chamber Players. Pro Arte PAD 120

*Memorial Music (in 2 parts) for Soprano and 3 Flutes.* Susan Davenny Wyner, soprano. CRI 701.

*Passage I for Small Ensemble.* CRI 701

*Serenade for 7 Instruments.* CRI 701.

*Three Short Fantasies for Piano.* Robert Miller, piano. CRI CD 701

Producer: Susan Davenny Wyner (*On This Most Voluptuous Night*), Yehudi Wyner (String Quartet, *Brandeis Sunday*), Jonathan Wyner (*3 Informal Pieces, Dances of Atonement*)

Engineer: Jonathan Wyner, M Works

Assistant engineer: Bill Wolk (*On This Most Voluptuous Night*, String Quartet, *Brandeis Sunday*)

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**YEHUDI WYNER (b. 1929) 80549-2**  
**ON THIS MOST VOLUPTUOUS NIGHT**

*On This Most Voluptuous Night* (1982)

(A song cycle based on texts of William Carlos Williams)

- |   |  |      |
|---|--|------|
| 1 | <i>On This Most Voluptuous Night</i>           | 6:35 |
| 2 | <i>The End of the Parade</i>                   | 3:38 |
| 3 | <i>The Artist: I, II, III</i>                  | 5:16 |
| 4 | <i>Learning with Age to Sleep My Life Away</i> | 5:34 |
| 5 | <i>Puerto Rico Song</i>                        | 4:51 |

Dominique Labelle, soprano; Lydian String Quartet: Daniel Stepner, violin; Judith Eissenberg, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello; Christopher Krueger, flute; Jean Rife, horn; Yehudi Wyner, piano

- 6 *Brandeis Sunday* (1996) 5:40

Lydian String Quartet: Daniel Stepner, violin; Judith Eissenberg, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello

String Quartet (1985)

- |   |                          |       |
|---|--------------------------|-------|
| 7 | I. Tense and incisive    | 6:09  |
| 8 | Interlude with scherzino | 3:38  |
| 9 | II. Alla marcia          | 11:19 |

Lydian String Quartet: Daniel Stepner, violin; Judith Eissenberg, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello

*3 Informal Pieces* (1961)

- |    |     |      |
|----|-----|------|
| 10 | I   | 1:35 |
| 11 | II  | 2:33 |
| 12 | III | 1:51 |

Daniel Stepner, violin; Yehudi Wyner, piano

*Dances of Atonement* (1976)

- |    |                    |      |
|----|--------------------|------|
| 13 | <i>Kol Nidre</i>   | 6:31 |
| 14 | <i>V'hakobanim</i> | 5:07 |

Daniel Stepner, violin; Yehudi Wyner, piano

All compositions published by the composer.

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