

**JAMES NEWTON —**  
**As The Sound of Many Waters**  
New World Records 80579

Newton's Way

'Black music' has proved to be one of the most complex concepts in twentieth century music. In the 1960s, infused with the heightened spirituality associated with Dr. King's leadership, it rose to the dignity of a symbol of racial pride and ethnic separatism. Not only was 'blackness' a value, not only was it apparent because of specific traits of language, it also stood for a manifestation of cultural antagonism towards the predominant white society. In the seventies and eighties, the concept's confines grew hazier, coinciding with a more accurate, conscious awareness of the complex past of African-American music in the United States. Its ideological value was now diverted into its ability to bring American music into a relationship with the music of other cultures. In particular, we all realized that the music industry had encouraged the idea of blackness as a stereotype, so that the notion of a black culture became a sort of straitjacket for holding prisoner the creativity of African-American musicians. During the 1940s, the big recording companies' A&R men had stopped the black bands from venturing outside the confines of their defined ethnic repertoire. The effects of this perverse practice, which brought out the best in African-American music on the one hand, while on the other forcing many talented musicians to stay within certain bounds, took deep root in contemporary culture and was mirrored, even into the 1970s, by a reluctance within the classical music establishment to welcome in talented young African-American composers.

But it was actually the generation of musicians who emerged during the 1960s to proclaim the separateness of Great Black Music that brought the energy for overcoming the barriers of style, repertoire, and industry control over their music. From the end of the 1970s, such musicians as Anthony Davis, George Lewis, and James Newton came into their own, treading the trail blazed for them by Scott Joplin, Florence Price, Duke Ellington, Margaret Bonds, Billy Strayhorn, Charles Mingus, Hale Smith, T. J. Anderson, David Baker, Olly Wilson, and Anthony Braxton. The new generation went further and further into the terrain of what Ellington had described as "beyond category": not only beyond the bounds of the multifarious languages of the black tradition, from gospel to jazz, from spirituals to rhythm and blues, from soul to rap, but also beyond the traditional bounds of classical composition. This new generation of composers was able to start their careers with the awareness that they belonged to a tradition, and they did not refer to it as a mere reserve of linguistic solutions or of consolidated values; they fed themselves on the very essence of black music. That musical tradition, springing from the fusion of different cultures, assimilated materials of all kinds as a means of re-orienting and multiplying their meanings. That is what has long been called by African-Americans signifyin(g): a game of ceaseless appropriation, metamorphosis, and layering of sounds and cultural values, capitalizing on semantic short-circuits between materials, composer-improviser and listener. Musical meaning, thanks to this tradition, has become a

cascading array of references to other universes whose confines become permeable, combining to give birth to a new musical cosmology.

Music is judged now to be specifically African-American not solely because of the presence of crucial idiomatic elements, such as rhythm, pronunciation, or transformation of sound, nor because of a tension and balance between composition and improvisation; it's 'blackness' is confirmed in the transformation of materials, the dialog between cultures, the practice of signifyin(g).

James Newton's chamber music thrives on this kaleidoscopic wealth of moods and inspirations, most clearly in *The King's Way* (1989), which explores key moments in the life of Martin Luther King. The piece's first movement is about King's momentous decision to take on the challenge of the Civil Rights struggle. The second movement depicts the march to Selma. A quotation of the hymn, *Were You There?* marks the arrival in Selma. At the end of the movement, we hear the protestors march away. The third movement reflects on the period after the "I have a dream" speech. By now, King's premonitions that his life will be taken give his days an otherworldly feeling. He has one foot on earth, the other in heaven.

Although the work is divided into these three movements, it turns their conventional "fast-slow-fast" order inside out, into a "slow-fast-slow:" as composer, Newton is concerned with the primacy of contemplation and reflection and, above all, of peace. Seldom are the instruments paired: rather, they weave in and out of each other in subtle counterpoints that leave space for fleeting moments of contact and mobile reverberations of light. Unifying all this labyrinthine 'dispersion' of sound is the musical language of an operatic, yet archetypal African-American song, modeled on the blues scale and setting Biblical texts. The blues feeling radiates out from the voice, affecting all the instruments, and can also be perceived all the time through the chromatic alterations of the harmony. This blend between American blues feeling, the kind of coloristic writing inspired by Ravel and Webern, and an instrumental palette of the type assembled by Boulez for *Le marteau sans maître*, filtered through the Italian lyricism of Puccini, was first fully exploited by Newton in his opera *The Songs of Freedom*. The feeling of gospel is one of the more original and most deeply felt aspects of Newton's work.

*Violet* (1994-95), written after a trip to South Africa, is dedicated to Winnie Mandela. Explains Newton: "I have attempted in *Violet*, which consists of three large sections and seven subsections, to create a cohesive musical whole made up of elements that come from Africa itself and the African Diaspora. The foundation of the piece is the music of the African Pygmy, particularly the musics of the Ba-Benzele, Asua and Bibayak tribes. I have also made much use of ragtime rhythms, which I have adopted in their original forms and also developed by means of both symmetrical and asymmetrical permutations."

The listener will readily perceive this work's three-part structure. First comes the long, agitated opening; then the episode with the cello cadenza, which, with the marimbas silent, is so much more lyrical and suspenseful. Finally the short final part arrives, blending elements from the two previous sections, this time with marimbas, their complex syncopated rhythms "blocked" in *ostinatos* and frayed into subtle variations providing the pulsating heart of this music. The other instruments coagulate around their matrix, in a complex chromatic arrangement that is more aptly described as heterophonic than polyphonic: throughout, the brief melodic lines agree only approximately. This final

section is a veritable fusion of the whole work: the rhythmic figures of the marimbas pass to all the other instruments in turn until the music gradually reaches the clear focus of the final unison, the authentic sign of an awareness achieved. The central role of rhythm is crucial to James Newton's recent music: it is no coincidence that the abstract underskin tension of *Violet* was to explode two years later in the CD "*Above is Above All*" (Contour) for flute and electronic samplers, a truly healing concentrate of dance rhythms from the whole African diaspora.

The dialogue and fusion between cultural worlds is explicit and planned in *The King's Way* and *Violet*. It is much more cryptic and concealed in *Gihon*, composed for solo violin in 1995 and dedicated to Roy Malan of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. The title refers to the second river named in Genesis. The composer has divided the piece into two quite distinct parts, plus a short coda; the second part is described in the score as *Dance*. Newton says this work developed out of "a dream about a number of composers from the Jazz and Classical traditions sitting around a table and discussing how they would develop motives and give emotional contours to the music." *Gihon* is therefore a dialectic between different styles, and an attempt to transform the virtuoso piece for solo violin—in itself quite a rarity in the African-American repertoire—into a forum where different ways of treating the material co-exist. The multifarious intent of the first part is followed by a more unitary ambition in *Dance*, in which the writing is more compact, consisting of brief phrases with tight intervals based on rhythmically marked, paired chords. This dance is the contemporary projection of the music of the country fiddlers who used to entertain in the American Deep South during and after slavery. It is once again rhythm that brings history to life to provide the communicative, unified thrust in Newton's art.

Two pieces for solo flute are included in this CD. They testify to Newton's mastery of this instrument, which has earned him first place in the Downbeat polls for seventeen consecutive years. *Like Jasper and Carnelian* (1997, dedicated to the memory of Mahalia Jackson) and *As the Sound of Many Waters* (1998, dedicated to Aurèle Nicolet) constitute the first two chapters of a cycle which, when completed, will consist of seven pieces, all based on the Book of Revelations. Jasper and Carnelian are two of the precious stones that are foreseen there to be set in the foundation walls of the new Jerusalem. This inspired, spiritual composition is also an ideal musical model for African-American music, its intensity evoked by the wind instrument, by the presence of the voice, and by the dense grace notes and embellishments of the melody. Newton once again quotes *Were You There?*, whose pentatonic structure provides the whole piece with its secret melodic framework.

The title and inspiration for *As the Sound of Many Waters* can be found in Revelations 1:12-15:

And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.

Newton has described this work as “a world classical music,” intending a complete blend of voice, instrumental sound, rhythm, and dialogue with the Biblical text, all of which transforms its skillful execution into a testimonial of spiritual ecstasy, drenched with long notes, glissandos, harmonics, and multiphonics.

In both pieces, the composer specifies a number of events that can occur in different order from one performance to the next. Some are defined by texture or timbre, others by specific melodies, while still others describe images from scripture. Each of these controlled improvisations for the flute displays an impressive breadth of style and technique. They encapsulate the entire history of the instrument in this century, from Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5* to Luciano Berio's *Sequenza I*, encompassing the innovations of Roland Kirk and Eric Dolphy, to which Newton adds an unprecedented depth of sound and an even broader range of nuances of timbre and intonation, all underscored by a personal intensity of expression.

As in the seventeenth century, perhaps the composer and the improviser of the twenty-first century will coincide in the same person, now with a more complete awareness of his or her role in a global culture. If all our diverse history and memory are welcomed to live in such a present, the horizon of peaceful co-existence between people becomes possible. This generosity of vision on the path to a world music is Newton's way. —Stefano Zenni (*translated by Pete Kercher*)

Stefano Zenni is an Italian musicologist, teacher and artistic director of jazz concerts. He is the author of highly praised books on Louis Armstrong and Herbie Hancock. Mr. Zenni writes for *Musica Jazz* and has contributed to *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (forthcoming edition). He has received a Grammy nomination for liner notes on Charles Mingus' music.

### **The King's Way**

I. Prayer of Thanksgiving  
*from Habakkuk 3:12-18*

Thou didst march through the land in indignation . . .

Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation . . .

Thou didst strike through with his staves the head of his villages: they came out as a whirlwind to scatter me: their rejoicing was as to devour the poor secretly.

Thou didst walk through the sea with thine horses, through the heap of great waters.

When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself . . . when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops.

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat . . . and there shall be no herd in the stalls.

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

III. Resolution

*from Luke 6:22-23*

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.  
Amen.

**James Newton** (Los Angeles, 1953) heard African-American music from his earliest years. In his early teens he played electric bass, alto saxophone, and clarinet. At 16 he took up the flute—his influences are Eric Dolphy and Roland Kirk. In high school he became a member of Stanley Crouch's group, playing with such talents as Arthur Blythe and David Murray. In the late 1970s he began his career as a leader. Newton has appeared with numerous jazz giants, including Lester Bowie, Anthony Davis, Cecil Taylor, Buddy Collette, Kenny Burrell, John Carter, and Herbie Hancock. He has been voted Best Jazz Flutist in *Down Beat* magazine's International Critics' and International Readers' polls for sixteen consecutive years. In addition, he has performed with the New York and Brooklyn Philharmonic orchestras, the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, L'Orchestre du Conservatoire de Paris, and the New York Music Ensemble, among others. From an early age he followed the developments in contemporary music, inspired by Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Messiaen, Hale Smith, Bartók, and Lutoslawski, as well as gospel, African music, and dance rhythms. He completed his formal musical training at California State University in Los Angeles, and he has been composing since he was in his twenties. In 1997 he wrote an opera, *The Songs of Freedom*. Newton's works have been commissioned and performed by such noted ensembles as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco Ballet, the Colorado String Quartet, the Virginia Opera, the Moscow Virtuosi, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. He is a recipient of fellowships and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts among others.

Formed by leading interpreters of 20th-century music from San Francisco's premier orchestras and ensembles, the **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players** performs repertoire emphasizing masterworks written in the last twenty years. Founded in 1971, the ensemble has presented over 850 works, including 125 U.S. and world premieres, and has commissioned more than 50 new works by such diverse composers as John Adams, John Cage, Chen Yi, Oliver Lake, Mel Powell, and Julia Wolfe. A six-time winner of the prestigious, national ASCAP/Chamber Music America Award for Adventurous Programming of Contemporary Music, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players has established a reputation for innovative, diverse programs and vivid, dynamic performances. In addition to its active performance schedule, the ensemble has made numerous recordings, including music of Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Lou Harrison, Hyo-shin Na and John Thow.

**David Milnes** is currently conductor of the Symphony Orchestra of the University of California, Berkeley, and a dedicated proponent of new music. Winner of the prestigious Exxon Conductor position with the San Francisco Symphony in 1984, Milnes was hailed as “one of the major new conducting talents of our day” (Byron Belt). A student of Leonard Bernstein, Erich Leinsdorf, Max Rudolf, Herbert Blomstedt and Otto-Werner

Mueller, David Milnes also studied clarinet, piano, organ, cello and voice, and continues to pursue a life-long interest in jazz that has resulted in appearances with Gene Krupa, Chuck Mangione, Billy Taylor and John Pizzarelli.

**Adina Aaron**, lyric soprano, was recently awarded top prizes in the Henry and Maria Holt Vocal Competition, the Young Musicians Foundation Vocal Competition, the Young Artist of the Year auditions of the Los Angeles National Association of Teachers of Singing, the Performing Arts Scholarship Foundation in Santa Barbara and the National Society of Arts and Letters in Santa Barbara. A student of Nina Hinson, Ms. Aaron recently participated in the Santa Fe Opera Apprentice Program and performed in the Seattle Opera Young Artist Program. In 1991 she made her orchestral debut with the North Miami Beach Symphony Orchestra, and has performed at the Annual Haitian Gala in Miami.

**Roy Malan** has been Principal Violinist with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players since 1976. He is concertmaster and solo violinist for the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra and first violinist of the Ives Quartet. Mr. Malan has appeared as a soloist worldwide including at Washington's Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center in New York, and in such diverse cities as London, Paris, Johannesburg, Mexico City, Munich and Sydney. He is also founder and co-director of the Telluride Chamber Music Festival.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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As leader:

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Producer: James Newton  
Executive Producer: Adam Frey  
Engineer: Robert Shumaker  
Production assistant: Gregory Pitter  
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James Newton plays J. R. La Fin headjoints.  
San Francisco Contemporary Music Players: [www.sfcmp.org](http://www.sfcmp.org)

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***AS THE SOUND OF MANY WATERS* 80579-2**

JAMES NEWTON (b. 1953)  
SAN FRANCISCO CONTEMPORARY MUSIC PLAYERS

1. *As the Sound of Many Waters* for solo flute (1998) 13:38  
James Newton, flute

2. *Violet* for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and two marimbas (1994-95) 14:50

3. *Gihon* for solo violin (1995) 13:22  
Roy Malan, violin

*The King's Way* for soprano, flute, bassoon, violin, cello, harp, percussion, and piano  
(1989)

4. *I. The Prayer of Thanksgiving* 7:01

5. *II. Prayer Through Strife* 5:23

6. *III. Resolution* 3:09

Adina Aaron, soprano

7. *Like Jasper and Carnelian* for solo flute (1997) 8:06  
James Newton, flute

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players:

Tod Brody, flute; William Wohlmacher, clarinet; Rufus Olivier, bassoon; Roy Malan,  
violin; Stephen Harrison, cello; Thomas Schultz, piano; Karen Gottlieb, harp; Daniel  
Kennedy, William Winant, percussion.

David Milnes, Guest Conductor

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