

LOUIS KARCHIN
American Visions

New World Records 80583

One of the great pleasures of putting the turn of the millennium behind us is that it now becomes easier to view many of the twentieth century's aesthetic battles with some much-needed perspective. Aside from the Stravinsky-Schoenberg schism, few confrontations within the music world seemed more intense and irreconcilable than the Uptown-Downtown feud that struck New York in the 1970s. Although the debate between the so-called "serialists" (uptown) and "minimalists" (downtown) tended to lump everyone into one camp or the other, in fact very few composers ever fit neatly into a single stylistic category. With people constantly asking "Which side are you on?", when the answer proved to be the "wrong" end of Manhattan, the beauties of many individual voices were often ignored by an entire group of listeners. Fortunately, these differences look a lot less extreme today. For one thing, the composers who were once seen as purists within a given aesthetic have broadened their reach and enriched their technical and expressive palettes. As a result, "minimalist" music nowadays is a lot more complex than it once was, and "modernist" music is similarly more direct in its expressive punch. With the benefit of a little hindsight, the spectrum of music our culture has produced looks increasingly like a broad-based, somehow unified *American* music, rather than the output of so many disparate, isolated factions.

Louis Karchin lived for many years in Greenwich Village, but he has Uptown roots. The music of Charles Wuorinen (and, by extension, the "time-point" system of Milton Babbitt, which Wuorinen advocated) was enormously influential on his early development. The signposts of post-serial music — quick overturn of events, highly chromatic surface materials, abrupt contrasts, and disjunct melodic lines — abound in Karchin's early works. Nonetheless, even when I first met him twenty years ago, Karchin treated these aspects of compositional language as tools, not scripture. I remember being wowed by his fertile rhythmic imagination; an early violin concerto's cadenza had the feel of a great solo rock guitar break. I also remember feeling that one really *heard* the harmonic motion, no matter how complex the surface.

Over the ensuing decades, I have observed Karchin's artistic growth with great pleasure. It has become clear that his music comprises a deep, ongoing dialogue with the great works of the core repertoire. Modernism is for him, as it was for Schoenberg, a way of establishing contact with tradition, not a means of eradicating it. Gradually and naturally, with the pacing of a life focused securely on his personal vision, Karchin has developed a language that is rich, consistent, and difficult to pigeonhole. Unlike the stereotype of Uptown music, his pieces consistently explore and use such devices as consonant intervals (fifths, fourths, and thirds), deployment of those intervals to define clear points of harmonic arrival and departure, repetitive textures that afford the music expansive gestures, and highly recognizable motives that recur in perceptible and meaningful transformations. In short, the techniques that have defined Western compositional practice during the past three centuries are constantly at work in Karchin's music.

Rustic Dances was composed in 1995 and received its premiere at the (SUNY) Purchase College Conservatory in 1998. It makes a fitting opening for this collection in that it bustles with energy and asserts its presence like a sustained fanfare. The title suggests a certain brusque quality to the music, and the piece's rhythmic profile, while ever-changing, projects athletic and pulsating textures

throughout. While the composer speaks of the initial impulse of the work as "the three instruments each playing in a characteristic way," it is the intersection of those idiomatic practices that becomes the true subject of the piece. Each instrument is influenced by its two partners, and modes of playing one blend into those of another. Tremolos on the marimba become trills in the violin; rapid passage-work on the clarinet becomes almost breathy ostinati on the marimba. The piece is an accumulation of formal "chunks"; there is little repetition of specific motives, but the overall formal curve is clear and direct.

While Karchin's output tends to favor the more abstract world of instrumental music, he has also written many vocal works (most notably the comic chamber opera *Romulus*). *American Visions*, a setting of two Yevgeny Yevtushenko poems, emerged from the Russian poet's residency at New York University in 1994–95. Living in an apartment across from the composer, Yevtushenko became interested in Karchin's music, and out of this encounter emerged a collaboration. In *American Visions*, Karchin has set two Yevtushenko poems—*Who Are You, Grand Canyon?* and *Requiem for Challenger*—dealing with distinctly American subjects: the Grand Canyon and the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster. Yevtushenko conceives of the canyon as a touchstone for the entirety of both human civilization and natural forces, but his celebratory poem takes an extraordinary turn in its final quarter, when, out of the whirlwind of images emerges a young blind woman trekking down into the gorge. In Karchin's setting, this image merges seamlessly into that of the spacecraft shattering in the sky above.

Karchin has set these two poems in a manner befitting a mini-opera, and, like Yevtushenko, he brings into play a broad range of techniques and gestures. *Who Are You, Grand Canyon?* takes up the majority of the music's duration, and *Requiem for Challenger* serves as a sort of epilogue. Through the use of recurring musical material in the treatment of both poems (most notably the slowly accelerating progression first heard with the text "as if like sunflower seeds," and then again accompanying the climactic images of the blind hiker's descent into the chasm), Karchin creates a unified whole. While he uses only a "Pierrot plus percussion" sextet as accompaniment, the textures and colors he coaxes from the ensemble are orchestral in scope. To take just one moment of inspired sonic imagination, listen to the combination of shuddering piano chords, plucked strings, temple blocks and glockenspiel at "The answer strains. The rocks struggle."

Cascades, written in 1997 for pianist Cathy Callis, comes perhaps closest of all the works heard here to an overtly Impressionist aesthetic. The association is partly sonic, as the piece begins with a memorable figuration—a lone C oscillating over three octaves, whose pulsation evokes the nocturnal world of *Gaspard de la Nuit*. This apparent Impressionism, however, runs deeper than just a single gesture. Much of Karchin's music is built from the rapid and abrupt contrast of material—fragments bumping up against one another, whose sparks engender further ideas and impel the dynamism of the music. In the case of *Cascades*, these contrasts exist, but the way they appear is remarkably fluid: one idea seems to emerge from behind another, in a rapid process of transformation rather than juxtaposition. There are two basic ideas in the piece. After the introduction, Karchin employs an array of trills and lightning-fast arpeggiations, whose speed and subtlety show a masterly understanding of piano timbre and texture. About two minutes into the piece, a contrasting idea appears—little chorale figures, dancing via asymmetric rhythms. These two ideas alternate and eventually blend, lending *Cascades* momentum and enlarging its range of registral play. At last the opening gesture returns, now fuller, more expansive, and harmonically rich. This

music is poetic and mercurial, yet also formally concise.

The *Sonata da Camera* (1995) may well be the most intensely wrought work on this disc. Written in the wake of the death of the composer's father (himself an amateur violinist), it is immediately distinguished by an opening melody of great breadth and poignancy. Yet this work, despite these emotional wellsprings, does not sustain a purely elegiac tone. It quickly leaps into choppy waters, with the violin and piano engaging in vigorous dialogue. Although this resembles somewhat the rapidly shifting world of *Rustic Dances*, one of the pleasures of Karchin's music is that vaguely similar surfaces often mask extremely different architectures. The *Sonata da Camera* is in fact one of his most traditionally structured compositions. For one thing, the opening tune is constantly resurfacing—sometimes as a wisp, a memory fleetingly perceived. In addition, the piece uses a gesture rich in meaning; several times an obvious E–B open fifth occurs—in tremolo, arpeggiation, or as a chord. Each such occurrence is strongly cadential in function; indeed, the recapitulation of the opening theme is presaged almost exactly halfway through the work by this stark harmonic gesture. Such returns and correspondences give the *Sonata da Camera* the feel of traditional sonata form, even though it does not mimic the literal template of that form.

A Way Separate... has an unusual creative provenance. Commissioned in 1992 by the Rochester Hillel Foundation in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and in honor of the composer Samuel Adler, it was designed to be part of a cantata in nine movements, each by a different composer. For this reason, Karchin's mini-cycle has the concision and flow of a single sustained song. For his movement, Karchin chose to set two Ruth Whitman poems—*I think of the pine tree* and *I am already*—depicting the mind-set of Hanna Senesh—a Jewish martyr who returned to Hungary to attempt to rescue other freedom fighters—before and after her capture by the Nazis. The Whitman poems frame a text by Senesh herself (as translated by Whitman). The music projects a sustained dramatic monologue, which reaches its climax in the brief transitional second song, twisting with mordant figures.

The final work on this disc, *String Quartet No. 2* (1994), represents yet another formal strategy. Karchin's first string quartet is a rather traditional multi-movement work; this one is a ten-minute, densely packed single movement. The quartet derives all its material from a single motive heard in the first measure—a rising and falling major third, punctuated by a grace note. This idea is so simple, so basic, so *open* that it frees the music to explore a seemingly endless range of possibilities in its compact span. The music stops and starts, like a series of tableaux framed by blackouts, but the persistence of the motive guarantees that it never feels like "moment-form," where each fragment exists unrelated to its neighbors. Instead, one senses a new sort of variation process at work, tantalizing and elusive in its string of interrupted gestures, but always connected across sudden contrasts and silences.

Consistent but varied, traditional yet also progressive, harmonically complex but audibly clear, structurally inventive but architecturally sound—these are but a few virtues of Karchin's music, which bode well for its endurance.

— Robert Carl

Robert Carl is chair of the composition department at the Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford. He co-directs the Boston-based new music ensemble *Extension Works*, and writes extensively on new music for *Fanfare*

magazine.

Who Are you, Grand Canyon?

(Yevgeny Yevtushenko)

A thing
 laminating,
 ever bifurcating,
a thing
 melting away
 from itself,
frightened
 by its own terrible weight,
like a lizard
 hiding its soul from the tourists
beneath the rocks.
A thing
 unimaginably old,
something of the very beginning,
 something of the end,
something
 of Cain and Abel.
Womb of the ages,
 turned inside out,
a sphinx
 whose enigma,
 aired out by time,
unsolved by us,
drips away into oblivion.
The body of history,
 not split into chapters,
but ripped asunder by a tomahawk,
both guts and dung.
Granite sandwiches
 of red icebergs,
as if, like sunflower seeds,
 they had pressed into oil cakes
all the blood of the murdered, drop by drop.
Creases,
 like all the wrinkles of mankind
gathered together by eternity.
...Who are you,
 Grand Canyon?
 What is it you want?
You

are the circles of Dante's hell.
 Noah's Ark,
 Babylon.
 Hellas.
 Roman circuses—
 luxuria of tyrants
 on the Arizona sand.
 In each of your scorching grains
 hide Huns,
 Aztecs,
 Incas,
 like fire in tiny pieces of coal.
 These precipices
 are redskin chiefs
 lodging their wary thoughts
 in the caldron
 with spears.
 You
 are the partition in all the pyramids,
 the walls of the Kremlin
 with the ghost
 of Ivan the Terrible in his cowl.
 Who are you,
 Grand Canyon?
 The answer strains.
 The rocks struggle.
 Each one is a clever devil.
 They want to press each other down,
 but there are no victors:
 all are injured
 by the struggle,
 all are defeated,
 all are pinned down
 by the weight of years.
 The rocks languish from the senseless combat.
 Afterward
 they huddle together,
 and embrace,
 and break apart,
 hoarsely wheezing at the end.
 Those who ruled in grandeur,
 all Macedonians,
 Xerxes and Dariuses,
 the planters of fear in souls—
 fleas
 who only seemed to be giants—

have a hard icy crust
on their foreheads.
You were made, Grand Canyon,
not by the rules.
you are a skyscraper
only turned inward.
A stone apple pie.
You,
Grand Canyon,
are filled with chimeras,
like a Notre Dame de Paris of America,
and are cluttered with things,
like a barn.
You,
like America,
are restless and not in place,
you,
like her,
are uncoordinated and dissonant.
But even though split asunder,
you are whole—
that's how God made you,
with a Frank Lloyd Wright
devil's daring.
Who are you Grand Canyon?
You are the people's reward.
A young girl descends to the Colorado River.
About sixteen.
She is so delighted,
sleeping gear juts out of her rucksack.
She looks about unearthly,
heavenly.
A dog on a safety leash
pulls her
along the edge of the abyss.
This tourist is a little different:
she has no fear of the deadly risk,
she has no desire to cling to the shadows.
She moves strangely,
stepping cautiously.
Shudder, Grand Canyon:
she is blind.
Let not a tiny stone strike her.
Quietly she moves on the leash above the river,
touching the sky with her free hand,
caressing tenderly the clouds with her cheeks

in the morning hour.
On her face so many freckles—
childlike all-seeing eyes!
Greedily gulping the air
her skin sees
 the Grand Canyon,
the miracle of its beauty.
And wounded by its healing beauty,
a blind girl
 down in the Grand Canyon
is,
 Grand Canyon,
 above you.

1972

Grand Canyon, Arizona

Translated by Albert C. Todd

Requiem for Challenger

(Yevgeny Yevtushenko)

This white tragic swan
 of farewell explosion,
this white swan of death
 made from the last breath
 of seven evaporated souls,
shook the gravestones of Arlington,
 the Kremlin stars,
 and the ancient armless statues of Rome.

The already gray
 Pyrenees,
 Caucasus,
 and Everest
now are become even more gray forever.
Gagarin's brotherly shadow
 shuddered,
immortally crucified on the stars,
and his widow
 began to walk over the ocean
 to her American sister-widows.

The Statue of Liberty,
 crying the green tears of a mermaid,
tried to reach the cosmos
 to save her children,
 but could not.

Our life is a challenge.
Our planet is our common "Challenger."
We humiliate her,
frightening each other with bombs.
But could we explode her?
Even by mistake?
Even by accident?
That would be the final mistake,
which could never be undone.

8 March 1986
Translated by Albert C. Todd with the author

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"A Way Separate ..."

I

I think of the pine tree
beside my tent
on the dune
at kibbutz Sdot Yam:

I watched the sea,
I walked on the fragrant shore
and my blood lifted
with the salty lift of the tide:

now under the pine trees
in a foreign land
I live day and night
with strangers:

I'm a drop of oil on water,
sometimes floating,
sometimes sinking,
but always apart

Ruth Whitman

II

Blessed is the match that burns and kindles fire,
blessed is the fire that burns in the secret heart.
Blessed are the hearts that know how to stop with honor ...
blessed is the match that burns and kindles fire.

Hanna Senesh

III

I am already
the widow of my life:

I chose a way separate
but paved with light,

a promise that I would be
a gift accepted,

that the world and I
would join rejoicing:

but now I am
married to solitude,

sister of death,
a gift that went astray

Ruth Whitman

Poems I and III by Ruth Whitman. Poem II by Hanna Senesh, translated by Ruth Whitman.

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LOUIS KARCHIN studied at the Eastman School of Music and Harvard University; his teachers have included Joseph Castaldo, Samuel Adler, Joseph Schwantner, Earl Kim, Leon Kirchner, and Gunther Schuller. Twice a Leonard Bernstein Fellow at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, he was awarded the Center's Koussevitzky Tanglewood Award in 1971 at age 19, and the Joseph Bears Prize in Composition from Columbia University a year later. As a graduate student, he co-founded with fellow composer Paul Salerni the Harvard Group for New Music, and later in New York was a co-founder of the Chamber Players of the League-ISCM. Karchin has often appeared as the conductor of his own music and the music of colleagues. Since 1979, he has taught in the Faculty of Arts and Science at New York University; he is director of the Department of Music's advanced graduate program in composition, and co-director of the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society.

Mr. Karchin's portfolio comprises more than forty compositions; these have encompassed virtually every genre. With five song cycles, a one-act opera, *Romulus* (a winner of the 1990 National Opera Association Contest), two string quartets, chamber works for numerous combinations, and three orchestral works, his music has been performed widely both in the United States and abroad. Commissions have come from the Group for Contemporary Music; Parnassus; the Da Capo Chamber Players; the Portland Symphony (Maine); the Talujon Percussion Ensemble; and soloists David

Starobin, Taimur Sullivan, and Cathy Callis, among others. His work has been supported by grants and awards from the Koussevitzky, Fromm, Copland, Ditson, and Danforth Foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Most recently, he is the recipient of the 1999 Heckscher Foundation Composition Prize, for *American Visions*. His music is published by C. F. Peters Corporation and recorded on New World Records and CRI.

One of the world's most distinguished poets, **Yevgeny Yevtushenko** was a first lonely voice against Stalinism, foreshadowing a career in which art and politics would often be indelibly intertwined. In 1960, he was the first Russian poet to break through the Iron Curtain and to recite his poetry in the West, where he was befriended by Pablo Picasso, Graham Greene, Heinrich Böll, and Federico Fellini, among others. He served in the first freely elected parliament of the USSR (1988–91), and much later read his poetry from the balcony of the Russian White House before two hundred thousand defenders of freedom during the attempted coup by right-wing leaders in 1991. In addition to poetry, Yevtushenko has written and directed two films (in which he also acted). His latest novel, *Don't Die Before You're Dead* was awarded the 1995 Boccaccio Prize in Italy for the best work by a foreign novelist. He currently divides his time between Russia and America, and is a member of both the European Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Baritone **André Solomon-Glover's** international career has brought him solo appearances throughout the world; he has performed with such groups as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and most recently with the American Composers Orchestra as soloist in Hindemith's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. A guest artist at numerous festivals including the Marlboro Chamber Music Festival and the Munich Biennale, Mr. Solomon-Glover's diverse operatic roles have included Escamillo in *Carmen*, the title role in *Rigoletto*, Porgy, in a thirty-five city tour of *Porgy and Bess*, and numerous operatic roles written specifically for him.

As one of the most sought after pianists on the New York New Music scene, **James Winn** is featured on nearly two dozen CD's, many of them world premiere recordings. A member of the New York New Music Ensemble, and the sextet, Hexagon, he has been a frequent guest with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Speculum Musicae, Parnassus, and the Group for Contemporary Music. With his duo-piano partner, Cameron Grant, he was the recipient of the first prize given in the two-piano category of the 1980 Munich Competition.

Violinist **Curtis Macomber's** extraordinary efforts on behalf of new music were recognized when he was awarded a top prize in the 1980 Rockefeller Foundation International Competition; more recently, he was a featured lecture/recitalist in the first American Violin Congress. A member of Speculum Musicae since 1991, he has recorded for numerous labels including Koch International, Vanguard, and CRI. CRI Records recently released his second solo recording, *Songs of Solitude*, which the New York Observer named as one of 1996's best instrumental discs. Mr. Macomber is a member of the faculties of both the Juilliard and Manhattan Schools of Music.

Conductor **David Gilbert** has been acclaimed for his dynamic performances with orchestras and chamber ensembles throughout the world. A first prize winner of the 1970 Dimitri Mitropoulos International Conducting Competition, he was Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic from 1970 to 1979, and principal conductor of the American Ballet Theatre from 1971 to 1975. A composer as well as conductor, he has been an active advocate of contemporary opera, recently

conducting Ned Rorem's *Miss Julie*, and Dominick Argento's *Postcard from Morocco*, along with his own opera, *The Shadowy Waters*, with the opera department of the Manhattan School of Music.

Soprano **Cheryl Marshall**, a foremost exponent of contemporary vocal music, was recently awarded the International Gaudeamus Competition Prize. She has appeared as soloist and guest lecturer at the Aspen Music Festival, Indiana University, and the Stephan Wolpe Conference in Toronto; in New York she has been heard frequently in recital at the Museum of Modern Art's Summer Festival and at Merkin Concert Hall. She has performed numerous premieres including the New York premiere of John Cage's last operatic work, *Europera 5*. Ms. Marshall has recorded for Koch International, and has performed on WNYC Radio and on RIAS Radio in Berlin.

For more than two decades the **Da Capo Chamber Players** have charmed listeners not only with their exceptional artistry, but also with the wealth of new compositions—numbering over 70—written especially for them. Da Capo has recorded for CRI, New World, GM Recordings, Bridge, and Neuma Records. A profusion of honors have been accorded the ensemble including the prestigious Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Award, the ASCAP/Chamber Music America Adventurous Programming Award, two Chamber Music America Commissioning Awards, and a major grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, now in its twenty-third season, has received wide-spread critical acclaim for its annual series of Merkin Hall concerts. Drawing accolades from the New York Times, New York Newsday, and the Wall Street Journal, it has also been the subject of two feature articles in the New Yorker Magazine. Utilizing a core ensemble of some of the country's finest instrumentalists, as well as hosting guest groups such as the renowned Pro Arte String Quartet and the American Brass Quintet, the Society has performed over fifty world premieres and over one hundred New York premieres, many by young and emerging composers.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Capriccio. Benjamin Hudson, violin; Group for Contemporary Music Ensemble, Harvey Sollberger, conductor. New World 80425-2.

Galactic Folds. New York New Music Ensemble, Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor. CRI 739.

Ricercare. Curtis Macomber, violin. CRI 739.

Sonata. Fred Sherry, cello; James Winn, piano. CRI 739.

Songs of Distance and Light. Andrea Cawelti, soprano; Washington Square Contemporary Music Society Players; Bradley Lubman, conductor. CRI 739.

Songs of John Keats. Andrea Cawelti, soprano; Group for Contemporary Music Ensemble, Harvey Sollberger, conductor. New World 80425-2.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carl, Robert. "Three Points on the Spectrum: The Music of Louis Karchin, Lois V. Vierk, and Paul Dresher." *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 10, Part 1, 1994.

Oskamp, Jacqueline. "Eigentijdse muziek in de Verenigde Staten." *Mens en Melodie*, February, 1991.

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Assistant engineer: Jeanne Velonis

Digital mastering: SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC
Louis Karchin photograph: William Tomlin
Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

All works recorded at the Performing Arts Center of Purchase College, State University of New York between Sept. 27, 1997 and May 30, 1999.

The composition of the *American Visions* was made possible by a deeply appreciated grant from the Research Challenge Fund of New York University.

Special thanks to my wife, Julie, and to Marisa and Lindsay for lots of enthusiasm and inspiration.

This recording was made possible with grants from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trusts and the New York State Council on the Arts.

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LOUIS KARCHIN (b. 1951) 80583-2
AMERICAN VISIONS

1 *Rustic Dances* (1995) 8:29

Curtis Macomber, violin; Jean Kopperud, clarinet; Dominic Donato, marimba

American Visions: Two Songs on Poems of Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1998)

2 *Who Are You, Grand Canyon?* 19:12

3 *Requiem for Challenger* 7:04

The Da Capo Chamber Players:

Patricia Spencer, flute/piccolo; Jo-Ann Sternberg, clarinet/bass clarinet; Eva Gruesser, violin; André Emelianoff, cello; and guest artists Stephen Gosling, piano; Pablo Rieppi, percussion; Andre Solomon-Glover, baritone; Louis Karchin, conductor

4 *Cascades* (1997) 7:58

James Winn, piano

5 *Sonata da Camera* (1995) 11:42

Curtis Macomber, violin; James Winn, piano

6 – 8 *"A Way Separate ..."* (1992) 7:35

Jayn Rosenfeld, flute; Jean Kopperud, clarinet; Deborah Wong, violin; Christopher Finckel, cello; Margaret Kampmeier, piano; Cheryl Marshall, soprano; David Gilbert, conductor

9 String Quartet #2 (1994) 10:07

Curtis Macomber, violin, Deborah Wong, violin, Lois Martin, viola; Christopher Finckel, cello

Tracks 1, 4–9 performed by members of the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
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