

KENNETH GABURO (1926–1993)

FIVE WORKS FOR VOICES, INSTRUMENTS, AND ELECTRONICS

80585-2

Kenneth Gaburo was born in 1926 in Somerville, New Jersey; saw service in the U.S. Army from 1943–45; attended the Eastman School of Music, the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia, Rome, and the University of Illinois. He was on the faculty at the University of Illinois from 1956, where he was part of a composing community that included Salvatore Martirano, Herbert Brun (who was his mentor in many areas), Edwin London, Ben Johnston, and James Beauchamp. Of these, his relations with Brun and Martirano were particularly close, and Beauchamp’s work in developing electronic music equipment was crucial for Gaburo’s composing. In 1968 he moved to the music department at the University of California, San Diego, where his colleagues included Pauline Oliveros, Robert Erickson, John Silber, Keith Humble, and Roger Reynolds. He was also acquainted with Harry Partch, who was living in San Diego at the time, but was not associated, except briefly, with UCSD. Of his San Diego colleagues, Gaburo was closest to Pauline Oliveros. He also served as mentor to a number of his younger colleagues from the University of Illinois days, such as singer/composers Bonnie Barnett and Philip Larson, who had also moved to UCSD, where they continued working with him.

Although he was intensely collaborative in his work methods, Gaburo’s sense of individuality always marked him out, even in the hothouse environments of Illinois and UCSD in these periods. Of his relations with the more establishment new-music scenes of the day, such as in New York, they were virtually nonexistent, and this sense of mutual irrelevance between Gaburo and the New York scene grew over the years to such an extent that several recent histories of American music, all New York–oriented, do not even mention him, despite his large body of important work and his training of several generations of experimental composers! Gradually, over the years of the 1960s and 1970s Gaburo experienced a greater and greater alienation from the academic environment, until in 1975 he left UCSD, surviving as a freelance composer, teacher, and theater director (he directed the 1980 production of Harry Partch’s *The Bewitched* for the Berlin Festival). During this period, he also left urban living, and moved to Ramona, California, where he lived in its semi-desert until 1983, when he joined the music faculty at the University of Iowa. At Iowa, he founded the Seminar for Cognitive Studies, which was a freewheeling, intense, cross-media seminar open to creative people in many disciplines. University bureaucracy found it hard coping with Gaburo’s seminar, which admitted actors, dancers, musicians, poets, video artists, performance artists, and creative workers from a variety of other disciplines. In Iowa, composer colleagues he was quite close to included William Hibbard and Robert Paredes. Kenneth Gaburo died in 1993, in Iowa City, Iowa.

He composed works for instruments, voices, electronics, multi-media, theater, and a variety of other resources. Foremost among his many interests was a concern with the voice and with language—how we shape language and how we are shaped by it—and with making works that existed somewhere between the boundaries of music and language. Of the works on this CD, three are intensely concerned with what Gaburo termed “Compositional Linguistics” (*Antiphony III*, *Antiphony IV*, and *Mouth-Piece*), while concerns with balance and perceptual edges seem to be his foremost concern in the other two [*String Quartet in One Movement* and *The Flow of (u)*].

Beyond this recitation of facts, however, there looms larger for me the sense of Kenneth Gaburo as a person—a very intense person, one who showed extreme dislike for generalizations, who was never satisfied until every nuance of a given subject was investigated (he once said his favorite structures were “exhaustive” ones), and who was always attempting to push the boundaries of perception. One of his favorite creative games was the “minimum intelligibility” one—where gradual changes were introduced to a given subject matter to see just how much could be changed before the subject’s original identity was lost. He was also deeply concerned with uniqueness, and with showing how each object was unique. I once used the term “common practice” (in reference to nineteenth-century European tonality) when talking to him, and he replied that he felt there was no such thing as “common practice,” that, for example, each of the thirty-two Beethoven piano sonatas was unique enough in its approach to harmony and form that each of them could be considered *sui generis*, and in no sense could they be used as examples of “common practice.” Later in his life, he would use a number of challenging physical processes to compose in order to, as he said, “subvert my own history.” If the works on this CD all seem very different from each other, it is precisely because of his concern that each utterance be unique in both content and shape.

All of these works are from the period when Gaburo earned his living teaching in universities and had access to their research facilities; the rather drastic philosophical change that he went through after leaving academia in 1975 was yet to come. However, even within the works presented here, there are at least three different kinds of musical textures presented.

Antiphony IV (Poised) (1967) for voice, piccolo, bass trombone, double-bass and electronics. Poem by Virginia Hommel. Commissioned by the University of Illinois Contemporary Chamber Players. First released on Nonesuch H-71199.

It amazes me in reading music criticism of Gaburo’s work from the 1960s and ’70s that some people considered him to be a musical charlatan. While it might be easy to not *like* his work, only the most superficial attention could give the impression that any legs were being pulled here. As serious as your life, his work never demands less than intense, concentrated listening. This is especially the case in *Antiphony IV*, a work for three instruments and two-channel tape. The two channels are literally separate here—vocal sounds (each phoneme¹, in order, of the source poem) on the left channel, and electronic sounds on the right channel, with the instruments in the middle. Great separation exists between the sounds of the piece, as well. Many of them are surrounded by silences, as befits a work that takes “Poised” as its subject. There’s a great sense of pent-up energy here, as if the piece was perpetually ready to take the plunge described in the poem. This composition is perhaps Gaburo’s most fragmented and pointillistic, and the listener is requested to make his or her own relation to the text. But the text is there, in literal order, as well, with some of the most intense structuring of nuance that Gaburo ever used. Instrumental timbres relate to vocal phonemes; electronic splats are contrasted with delicate synthetic choirs assembled from recordings of individual phonemes; tremolos, flutters, and waverings alternate among recorded voice, electronics, and instrumental sounds. I get the sense in listening to this piece of a composer who is deeply interested in the timbral characteristics of each sound, and who is fascinated to observe the sounding structures that emerge from his microscopic dissection of the poem and the language of the poem, and who then shapes those structures into a composition of tremulous beauty.

¹ One of the set of the smallest units of speech, as the *m* of *mat* and *b* of *bat* in English, that distinguish one utterance or word from another in a given language.

Poised above the sea as if to drop
Tense.

heavy, hot

Waits
Gaining strength

And pours forth in soaring chill illusion!

—*Virginia Hommel*

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String Quartet in One Movement (1956). Previously unreleased.

This is the earliest piece presented here. It was written in Urbana, Illinois, just after Gaburo had returned from Rome, where he studied with Goffredo Petrassi, and the quartet is dedicated to him. It's a passionate, driving piece, where an intense concern for the quality of line is manifest in every gesture. It also reveals a uniquely lyrical voice—Gaburo's sense of melodic line is much more constrained, much smoother here, than the works of his European contemporaries (think of any mid-fifties work by Stockhausen, for example), but he's not looking backward in any sense to neoclassical comforts, either. Sometimes all four instruments make one line, sometimes they split into four completely distinct entities; most often they are balanced into exquisitely formed hierarchies, with one held note on one instrument being temporarily in the foreground, only to be immediately replaced by a fragment of another line in another instrument as the focus of attention. It's almost as though the music were woven, rather than composed, each line existing both as an object on its own and as part of a larger making of musical gestures. And while this can be said about almost any counterpoint, I get the feeling that in this piece Gaburo was feeling the tension between the line and its musical environment very keenly. Even in the more robust sections I get the sense of an intense concern with the delicacies of balance—a concern that links this piece to the very different-sounding *The Flow of (u)* from 1974. My sense of the form of the piece is that on the surface, there are four movements compressed into one, but underneath that, there is a more profound structuring and recirculating of certain musical gestures (the repeated notes, the pizzicatos, the arching lines made of small intervals) going on.

Mouth-Piece: Sextet for Solo Trumpet (1970). Poem by Kenneth Gaburo.
Previously released on Orion ORS 7294.

There are those famous J. S. Bach pieces where, although only one line is being played, the line itself is made up of two or more contrapuntal voices. In San Diego in the late 1960s and early '70s, it was a concern of a number of composers to see how far this kind of contrapuntal thinking could be pushed before the whole apparatus of contrapuntal perception fell over. *Mouth-Piece* is perhaps the greatest and most extreme of these pieces, as the trumpeter attempts to present six contrapuntal lines simultaneously and to maintain a sense of coherent timbral identity with each. In live performance, the piece is presented with three simultaneous slide projections. On one screen is the score of the piece—and since Gaburo is using a non-standard notation, the score is a concrete poem in its own right—so the audience can follow what the trumpeter is doing. On the second screen is each word of the poem as it occurs in the piece—each word of the source poem (which is all about the parts of the mouth) forms

a distinct phrase, so having the words presented in linear order helps the audience to hear the content of each phrase. On the third screen is the entire poem, so the audience can see the total environment that generated the piece, and in which it lives. Unlike most trumpet music, where the phoneme “t” or “k” is used to articulate the trumpet, here the trumpet is used as a filter for every phoneme the voice is capable of generating. Phonemes are spoken or sung through the trumpet, and sometimes they are used in playing to get other phonemes that result when processed through the trumpet as filter. Gaburo is here playing his favorite minimal intelligibility game—how far can phonemes be processed and still maintain their identity? So perceptually, the piece presents two challenges—the intelligibility of the text, and the intelligibility of the counterpoint. What is so wonderful about this piece, for me, is its failure. That is, for me it pushes intelligibility of both text and counterpoint just that little bit too far, and, as virtuosic and perfect as Jack Logan’s performance is, the whole conceptual house of cards comes tumbling down. But what it tumbles down into is a thing of wonder. For rising from the metaphorical dust is this amazingly sculpted multi-timbral monophonic line. Especially as it is heard on a CD, without recourse to the score or the source-text, *Mouth-Piece* becomes an amazing exposition of vocal sounds and trumpet virtuosity. On one level, the piece is a serious deconstruction (to use a once-fashionable term) of a source text. But on another, it’s a very funny piece, reminding me at times of a clown struggling and fumbling through an impossible task. And this funniness occurs only because Jack Logan is so incredibly competent and serious in his performing—his extreme effort in accurately projecting this structure that has been pushed just that little bit beyond the limits of linguistic perception is wondrous. On another level, the piece shows the effectiveness of Gaburo’s assertion that taking language seriously, and using it rigorously as a basis for structuring of a work, can result in objects that are absolutely unique and striking.

Antiphony III (Pearl-white moments) (1962) for sixteen voices and electronics. Poem by Virginia Hommel. Commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation. Previously released on Nonesuch H-71199.

At one time, I heard *Antiphony III* as an expressionist work, coming out of the tradition of twentieth-century serialist choral music. I no longer think this is the case. It now seems to me like an abstract sculpture—intricately surfaced and elaborately detailed, but solid and immovable, and I hear it as a unique gesture, both for Gaburo himself, and for music in general. I think it’s Gaburo’s most profound piece before *Maledetto* (1967–69) (which also desperately needs a CD reissue, so that the climax [literally!] of this period of Gaburo’s thinking can be once more available), and it’s a piece that richly rewards repeated listening. Again, a poem by Virginia Hommel provides the basis. Here, however, it is articulated contrapuntally, one word at a time, by both the chorus and the tape. Each word is clearly heard, sometimes spoken, sometimes whispered, sometimes shouted, sometimes electronically modified on the tape, in the order presented in the poem. As well as that, though, words are fragmented, displaced, referred to each other, and connected with each other, and text is painted with sound differently for each word. Sometimes the text breaks into two or more streams, and slight displacements of word order occur—a kind of “double-exposure” technique in setting the text—but the overall order of the poem is kept intact. Focus is drawn into each individual word as it occurs—and assembling a sense of the overall progression of the poem is left to the listeners themselves, after experiencing *Antiphony III*. Gaburo takes the old argument of music versus words, and by using words as the basis for structuring music, renders the argument obsolete. The electronic part, which counterpoints, goads on, and surrounds the live vocal part is composed of three elements: 1) recordings of voices performing the text, 2) electronic manipulations of these so that voices are heard doing things that they physically can’t do, and 3) electronic sounds that exhibit vocal characteristics. Made in the electronic music studios at Yale and the University of Illinois, this is one of my favorite early electronic music pieces. I find certain sounds, such as the electronic descending “sighs” about five

minutes in, to be extremely emotionally moving, and the tape solo at ten minutes is one of my favorite electronic sound stretches ever. Hearing the work on CD, without benefit of the score, sometimes the differences between live voice, treated voice, and electronic sound become confused. This is as Gaburo intended—pushing those boundaries of perceptual categories again—is it live or is it Memorex?—is it acoustic or electronic? A hint: Most of the whispers, and nearly all of the shouted words are performed by the live choir. A sustained sung note that swells in volume is almost nearly always the choir as well. As for the rest of the sounds in this exquisitely varied timbre-scape, you're on your own. (Listeners with access to computers might want to pull out their ring modulator plug-ins and some voice samples and, like Gaburo forty years ago, discover just how far modification of the voice can be pushed before having to resort to pure electronic synthesis!)

Pearl-white moments these
Set between two specks from the salt of time,
To be again, 'twere fantasy,
To not have been . . .
Alone and still
Being, chill nor fierce,
'Til once, a soul-felt breath imbued its life,
Depths of pitch to light of light.

Moments stolen from the jaws of time,
Even all the whiteness of blue-washed pearl,
A fault?
Or chance, with brilliance divined.
To know, one longs for surety
Of future light of loss,
Happily denied,
My white-drenched soul finds hushed beauty in love unnamed,
And freedom from salty chains.

—Virginia Hommel

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The Flow of (u)

The Flow of (u) (1974) for three voices.

Directed and recorded at the Center for Music Experiment, University of California, San Diego by Kenneth Gaburo. First complete release on CD.

(Excerpt used in “Testimony” 1987 by the Australian Broadcasting Company, and that an excerpt of the release on CD on Musicworks 75.)

On the surface, this work, which consists of one note sung by three singers for twenty-three minutes, might seem totally disconnected from the other works on this CD. Weak-minded cultural theorists may even see the definitive break between musical modernism and post-modernism in comparing, say, *Antiphony III* with *The Flow of (u)*. Alas, I think this is not the case. Such a distinction would be too silly and simplistic for Gaburo, who approached this work with the same intensity and rigor that marked any of his other composing. From 1973–75, I worked at the Center for Music Experiment at UCSD. Gaburo and his ensembles, which variously consisted of actors, dancers, and musicians, were

in residence there as well. For months, I saw the three singers, all friends of mine, engage in this seemingly impossible task: to sing in tune to such an extent that just as a laser consists of coherent waves of light, so this would consist of phase-coherent waves of sound. The task set at first seemed simple, but then all sorts of psycho-acoustic and physical phenomena revealed themselves. First of all, there was breathing. How to stop a sound, breathe, and then restart the sound so that the leaving of the group would be imperceptible? How to tune that finely anyway? What about beats, the phenomenon of two very closely tuned sounds throbbing against each other? And what about harmonics? The phoneme “u” (sounds like “oo” in too) should have almost no harmonics, it should be almost pure fundamental. This turned out not to be the case—“u” had a very rich spectrum, and gently changing balances between the voices would result in very subtle glissandi of the harmonics of the spectrum being heard. Unlike the other pieces on this CD, in this case there was no written score for the work beforehand. The singers worked with Gaburo refining the performance, discovering new areas of microscopic concern, until they felt that they’d explored as much as they could, resulting in this most “electronic”-sounding piece, which is in fact simply a recording of three people singing!

In much early minimalist music, a certain level of articulatory subtlety is eschewed in favor of an overall psycho-acoustic effect. Compare, for example, almost any serially composed instrumental line from the mid-1960s with any of the individual lines from an early Steve Reich score. In the serial piece, each note might have its own dynamic level, while in the Reich score, the individual line would usually be played as evenly as possible, because what was being sought was the effect of combining the lines, not the individual detail in any one of them. In *The Flow of (u)*, this is not the case. Here, focus is even more intense, and the attention to dynamic shaping given to the lines in the 1956 *String Quartet* is here transferred to the micro-level, and worked on with the singers in an “oral tradition” manner. So although this piece may consist of putting a metaphorical microscope to a single sound, it has, in fact, many more affinities with Gaburo’s earlier works than might at first seem to be apparent. Listening to the piece, I hear at least three levels: 1) the pitch and phoneme “u,” 2) the beats which seem to be electronic, and which get subtly faster and slower as the singers adjust their pitch to each other, and 3) the occasional harmonic glissandi as one or more singers adjust their mouth shapes to refine the purity of their “u.” You may hear more, or less, but I hope you take this opportunity to discover the (sonic) universe in this (linguistic) “grain of sand.” —Warren Burt

Warren Burt is a composer, writer, performer, video-artist, and a few other things. He lives and works mostly in Melbourne, Australia.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY:

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Antiphony X (Winded). Innova Recordings 524.

Antiphony II (Variations on a Poem of Cavafy), *Line Studies*, *Noyse*, *Testimony*, *The Flow of (u)*. *Musicworks* 75. [*Musicworks* magazine, Toronto, Ontario.]

Lingua II: Maledetto for 7 speaking voices. CRI SD 316 (LP).

Tape Play: Kenneth Gaburo—10 works for Electronic Tape. Pogus P21020-2.

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"Resonances: Erik Belgum, Warren Burt and Philip Blackburn discuss Kenneth Gaburo." In *Musicworks* 75, Fall 1999, Music Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.

Perspectives of New Music vol. 33, nos. 1 & 2 (Winter & Summer 1995). Special Kenneth Gaburo issue.

The remaining stock of publications from Lingua Press, directed by Kenneth Gaburo and including many of his own scores and writings, is now distributed by Frog Peak Music (a composers' collective). For a complete catalog, contact Frog Peak Music at fp@frogpeak.org, www.frogpeak.org, or Box 1052, Lebanon, NH 03766.

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1. *Antiphony IV (Poised)* (1967) 9:34
(for voice, piccolo, bass trombone, double-bass and electronics)
Members of the University of Illinois Contemporary Chamber Players: Thomas Howell, piccolo; James Fulkerson, bass trombone; Thomas Frederickson, double-bass; Barbara Dalheim, voice (on tape left channel); Kenneth Gaburo, conductor
2. *String Quartet in One Movement* (1956) 8:53
Walden String Quartet
3. *Mouth-Piece: Sextet for Solo Trumpet* (1970) 5:41
Jack Logan, trumpet
4. *Antiphony III (Pearl-white moments)* (1962) 16:23
(for sixteen voices and electronics)
New Music Choral Ensemble: Barbara Dalheim; Shirley Panish; Douglas Pummill; Lawrence Weller; Janet Pummill; Miriam Barndt; Brian Winter; Philip Larson; Rosalind Powell; Marcia Swengel; William Brooks; David Barron; Jean Geil; Bonnie Barnett; Albert Hughes; Richard Hanson; Kenneth Gaburo, conductor
5. *The Flow of (u)* (1974) 23:01
(for three voices)
Elinor Barron, Philip Larson, Linda Vickerman.

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