

## REMEMBERING ERIC STOKES

*... we hold that all sounds are innocent until proven guilty; that in their innocence they enjoy unalienable rights to proceed from any point of the compass, out of any height or depth, however near or far as soever called for by their composers or any other compelling life force.*

—Eric Stokes

Eric Norman Stokes was born on July 14, 1930—Bastille Day—in Haddon Heights, New Jersey, about ten miles southeast of Philadelphia. He was one of five children. His father, Elliot, was director of the Philadelphia office of an import-export firm. His mother, Marie Louise, was the artistic influence—a woman of sharp musical insight and a good singer.

Eric took piano lessons and sang in school choirs (first as a boy soprano, later as a bass) in Haddon Heights. “I was first called to a life in music,” he remembered,

“by Sunday radio broadcasts of concerts and opera with which my mother and sister would sing along throughout the house. The gramophone and radio also introduced me to ragtime, early jazz, swing bands, country and western, and popular song.”

He started composing while still in school. “One day,” he recalled,

“at the piano in the back bedroom where I was supposed to be practicing for my weekly piano lesson with Evelyn White but, bored with that, had drifted into endless improvisings, my younger sister opened the door and said, ‘You’re just making that up as you go along.’ She was right! and that’s what I’ve been doing ever since—just making it up.”

By the time he went off to Lawrence College (now Lawrence University) in Wisconsin, he had decided on a musical career. Finishing his Bachelor of Music degree in 1952, he wanted to go on to graduate studies immediately but was slowed by two years in the Army, where he became a corporal and was assigned to teach new recruits about chemical warfare. He developed a profound distaste for military life, but did have the pleasure of knowing Willie Mays, his Army bunkmate and future baseball superstar.

After his discharge, Eric moved to Boston, where he studied with Carl McKinley and F. Judd Cooke at the New England Conservatory and completed a Master of Music degree in 1956. This was followed by a productive year at the Villa Montalvo artists’ retreat in the Santa Cruz Mountains. In 1959, he married flutist Cynthia Crain in her hometown of Rochester, New York, and returned to the Midwest to begin doctoral studies at the University of Minnesota under Paul Fetler and the recently arrived Dominick Argento (less than three years Eric’s senior).

His first faculty appointment was to the University of Minnesota’s General College, where he taught music and other subjects. It was a wonderful environment in which to hone his sometimes unorthodox teaching methods. He then moved on to the University’s Department of Music, which remained his base until he retired in 1988. His many notable pupils included Libby Larsen, Janika Vandervelde, and Randall Davidson.

Eric's twenty-nine years at the University of Minnesota were busy ones—the core of his creative life. In the sixties he collaborated with conductor Tom Nee to present new music in the pioneering Here Concerts series at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In 1970 he founded the University's electronic music laboratory; the next year, he organized the First Minnesota Moving and Storage Warehouse Band, a contemporary music ensemble.

His acclaimed first opera, *Horspfal*, was commissioned by the Center Opera Company (antecedent of today's Minnesota Opera); it concerns the tribulations of the American Indian since the arrival of the white man. Making inventive use of film and collage techniques, it requires as many as five conductors to coordinate the widely dispersed vocal and instrumental forces. The librettist was Macalester College English professor Alvin Greenberg, a friend and collaborator for some three decades.

*Horspfal* (which was also the name Eric adopted for his small music-publishing concern) was produced at the Guthrie Theater in 1969. Many other arresting compositions, large and small, date from this same period.

Eric was involved with the Minnesota (now American) Composers Forum from its earliest years, serving as president of its board of directors from 1991 to 1993, and with *Zeitgeist*, for which he wrote exuberantly and extensively, as heard on the present recording.

He continued to compose vigorously after his retirement. His opera *Apollonia's Circus*, again with a libretto by Al Greenberg, was produced at the University of Minnesota in 1994 with Vern Sutton as director and another old friend, David Zinman, as conductor. One of Eric's last commissions was *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, a stunning, large-scale work on poetry by Whitman for soloists, chorus, and band, which received its premiere at the University in April, 2000. On the day he died—March 16, 1999—Eric lunched with Al Greenberg to discuss a new opera, tentatively titled *The Further Voyages of the Santa Maria*, on which they had planned to work the following summer in Bellagio.

In all, Eric composed more than eighty works. Commissions came from the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Cabrillo Music Festival, London Sinfonietta, San Francisco Symphony, Barlow Endowment (with the American Composers Orchestra), Cincinnati Symphony, and dozens of other orchestras, festivals, and schools in the United States and abroad. His music was performed by the orchestras of Anchorage, Atlanta, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Tulsa; by the BBC Symphony and the WDR Orchestra, Köln; at the Vale of Glamorgan Festival (Wales); and by scores of small ensembles.

His was a unique voice in American music. He was a genuine original, justly compared with Ives, Cage, and Henry Brant. A sense of grandeur, a love of nature, and a need for personal freedom were central to both the man and his work. Nicolas Slonimsky, in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (8th edition), records that he was “variously described as a crusty, eccentric, wonderfully humorous, very healthy and resourceful American composer of gentle, witty, lyrically accessible music, with a taste for folkloric Americana and a ‘Whitmanesque’ ear.” To this I would add that he possessed a strong narrative gift and a relish for the shape and tang of words—qualities that made his vocal music, in particular, so unforgettable. (“I love composing for the voice,” he once said, “in English—or American.”)

I loved Eric for his magic thinking, that is, logical thinking with fuzzy edges. By “magic” I mean that he viewed the world with the wonderment of a child; he found fascination, fantasy, and fun everywhere around him. By “fuzzy edges” I mean that he delighted in blurring the distinction between imagination and reality. He could write symphonies overflowing with beauty, novelty, and intellectual provocation, but could also find an entrancing music in the natural world—even in the lowly rock, as illustrated by his marvelous *Rock & Roll (Phonic Paradigm I)*, in which the performers hit rocks together and roll them across the floor. I always admired his ability to marry fantasy and reality, to smudge the line between what has been and what could be. His unbounded wonder was informed but never dimmed by the wisdom of learning and experience.

On one occasion in 1979, Eric and I were eating—food was among his great passions—after several hard-fought games of racquetball. (We played regularly for more than two decades.) We were discussing “ecologies”—of nature, of music, of social groups. I shared with him some ideas of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Eric responded with enchanting and energetic verses about nature and its magic, and then pronounced a sentence that I have come to regard as emblematic of his thinking—of his suffusing of everyday reality with a singular vitalizing imagination, intent on challenging the accepted borders between art, nature, and life.

Since that day, whenever my hearing, seeing, and thinking become clouded by provincialisms, I reach for my wallet and read from a credit-card sleeve on which Eric’s words are inscribed:

“I saw some reality going around the corner the other day but it eluded me.”

I cherish Eric’s inimitable fancy and his penetrating life vision, and continue to carry his words with me as an antidote to my own parochial leanings. And I am certain that, even more than his words, Eric’s music is destined for a long and fruitful career—a career of inspiriting and gladdening anyone fortunate enough to hear it.

—Homer Lambrecht (*with the assistance of Arnold Walker*)

Composer Homer Lambrecht, whose music has been heard from Europe to Japan, was a friend of Eric Stokes’s for nearly twenty-five years. Also a Web and sound designer, he has written three pieces for Zeitgeist (the “Signature” series) and served as president of its board.

## COMPOSER'S NOTES

### **Susquehannas** (1985)

The title of *Susquehannas* refers in part to the convergence of streams like Cherry Valley, Lick-Run, Tunkhannock, Hop Bottom, and Tuscarora in the Eastern mountains. The early people who lived along those banks called themselves the Susquehanna.

This performance features the first three of these compositions:

I. Nostrum

1. a pet scheme for the solution of some problem;
2. from the Latin, "our own" (i.e., invented and made by the seller, especially in reference to patent medicines).

II. Buffalo Bones ... all the way to Medicine Hat.

III. Whangdoodles

1. mythical creatures of ill-defined characteristics, sometimes noisy, mischievous or nocturnal;
2. apprehensions resulting from the believed perception of such creatures.

### **The Pickpocket is Lyrical Two** (1994)

The music of *The Pickpocket is Lyrical Two* was first composed for the ensemble Sylmar in 1990. That original version is titled *The Lyrical Pickpocket*. This present version is designed especially for Zeitgeist.

The "Pickpocket" goes back to some favorite folk songs still flourishing at the grass roots level. I've combined some, added some of my own tunes and set them out in a fairly straightforward manner. "Bull 'Gine 'n' Tarriers" combines two nineteenth-century work songs. "Breath Can Blow Both Ways" and "Over the Deep Blue Moon" are from an unfinished musical farce I was composing many years ago entitled *The Goose Sings Low*. "Pop the Whip" is based on an ox driver's song and other melodies. "Go 'Way From My Window" has the same phrase structure as the well-known lament, but the tune is mine.

Music is for the people. For all of us: the dumb, the deaf, the dogs and jays, handclappers, dancing moon watchers, brainy puzzlers, abstracted whistlers, finger-snapping time keepers, crazy, weak, hurt, weed keepers, the strays. The land of music is everyone's nation—her tune, his beat, your drum—one song, one vote.

Composers are called to serve the people, not themselves. Performers are called to serve by presenting composers' work in distinctive ways. The people are invoked to witness this service which is celebration of our time-spun being—the ineluctable dance of sound-spelled Life:

From drum's thin skin

From the reedy buzz of pipe

and that full rasp of hairy bow

We draw the tone of "shings we mean to shay."\*

(\*these last words: a paraphrase of John Berryman, *Dream Song no. 35*, line 3 [ES's note])

## **Tintinnabulary (Phonic Paradigm IV) (1983)**

Tintinnabulary: “of or pertaining to the ringing of bells”  
— *American Heritage Dictionary* (1969)

In composing such a piece, several orders and types of struck, reverberant objects were used. The resulting sounds were recorded. By means of simple procedures, unique properties of these recorded sounds found distinctive places in the compositional plan. Composition therefore, in this instance, was and is a function of foresight and afterthought.

The compositional goal remains: “to ring some few of the sounding world’s most multitudinous tintinnabularies.”

Born to song and loving sound’s venture I still seek to celebrate that love and birthright.

## **Whittlings (1992)**

This one-movement work is composed as a sonic metaphor on the art of whittling. Imagine an experienced craftsman working on a block of fine-grained wood with very sharp blades. The artisan’s task is to shape the outcome by taking away much of the woodblock.

One could take the view that the saxophone is to some degree the agent of the whittler or the actual whittling instrument but that view is much too simplistic. Imagine instead that all of the sounds made by the players (including the sax) are the literal actions taken in the process of paring away at the sonic possibilities inherent in the Zeitgeist ensemble.

One other element to consider is the 22-beat pattern which repeats incessantly throughout *Whittlings*. In one way, that might be heard as the gestures of the whittler(s). In another way, one might also hear the repeating beat pattern as the actual block of material on which the whittlers, including the composer, are at work, paring away sound by sound.

Finally, we are left to contemplate nothing more nor less than our own memory of our experience in hearing the performance. Did a whittled object emerge as an artifact, a memory of the metaphorical process? Or as Yeats writes in his poem “Among School Children,” are we left with a philosophical puzzle:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Below are a few quotations of American folk artists (mostly carvers and assemblage artists) whose comments appear in the *Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Folk Art & Artists* by Chuck and Jan Rosenak:

“The most beautiful dolls U ever saw—Hand carved—some can sing.”

—Cal & Ruby Black: *Possum Trot Figures in the Fantasy Doll Show*

“Man can’t stop the termite.”

—Little Buck Dial, Jr.: *King of Africa*, incised wood

“The beauty of the whole thing is making it.”

—Lavern Kelley: six figures

“Life ain’t much use if you use other people’s ideas.”

—Joe Louis Light: *Hard to Beat*, oil on canvas

“The shrimp is mostly gone now but the boats is still in my head.”

—J. P. Scott: boat sculptures

“Talk about fire and brimstone ... I saw my father preach with a .38 caliber revolver in one hand and a pint of whiskey in the other.”

—Edgar Tolson: *Sodom & Gomorrah*, figures

### **Mr. Stokes Rises From His Bath**

(Robert Samarotto)

The thrash of a large fish  
is no match for Mr. Stokes in his bath.

He dives and slides  
slippery as a bar of soap,  
rolls over and lays belly up  
in the ebullience of his bubbles.

Five fathoms below in the depths of his tub  
he has been scrubbing—note by note.  
Mr. Stokes is no slacker.

Through the steam  
the shining globe of a head appears,  
follows: arms—bole—legs—butt.

Out of the stew at last  
he stands like a hot chili.  
Make way ladies and gentlemen,  
let the señor through.

Off into the astonished night he goes  
melting the darkness around him  
singing a new tune come clean.

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Robert Samarotto, for many years Zeitgeist’s reed player, was a friend of Eric Stokes’s. He writes and fishes in Wisconsin.

— *Notes compiled and edited by Lawrence Fuchsberg*

Lawrence Fuchsberg is a writer, reviewer, and consultant to nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities. He currently chairs *Zeitgeist*'s board.

Since its founding in 1977, **Zeitgeist**'s mission has been to enliven today's music and expand its public with performances that absorb, stimulate, and hearten. A family of musicians animated by a spirit of adventure and collaboration, *Zeitgeist* presents works of substance with passion and integrity, and strives to forge new links between musicians and music-lovers through concerts, commissions, recordings, and dialogue with audiences. The ensemble has commissioned and premiered works by both emerging and established composers, including John Cage, Frederic Rzewski, Terry Riley, Harold Budd, La Monte Young, Eleanor Hovda, Mary Ellen Childs, Janika Vandervelde, and Paul Dresher.

*Zeitgeist* has earned an international reputation for its dedication to and virtuosic performances of contemporary music. Its six European tours have included appearances in London, Berlin, Cologne, Bonn, Lisbon, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Copenhagen, and Stockholm. Closer to home, the ensemble has played at Merkin Hall, Carnegie Recital Hall, and The Kitchen in New York; at the Los Angeles County Museum's contemporary music series; and New Music America (in New York, Minneapolis, and Miami); and in many other U.S. cities, including Seattle, Phoenix, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Durham, St. Louis, and Des Moines.

*Zeitgeist*'s recordings include music composed for the ensemble by Harold Budd (New Albion), Terry Riley (Sony), and Frederic Rzewski (*O.O. Discs*). The group has received major support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the 3M Foundation, the Target (formerly Dayton Hudson) Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, the Bush Foundation, Chamber Music America, Meet The Composer-Arts Endowment Commissioning Music/USA, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Minnesota State Arts Board, General Mills, the Aaron Copland Fund, and other institutions and individuals.

Percussionist **Heather Barringer** joined *Zeitgeist* in 1990 and serves as its managing director and artistic co-director. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls with a B.Mus.Ed. in 1987. In 1989-90, she attended the University of Cincinnati-College Conservatory, studying with Allen Otte, founding member of the Cincinnati Percussion Group. She is a member of Mary Ellen Childs's *Crash!* ensemble and has worked with many other Twin Cities organizations, including the Nautilus Music-Theater Ensemble, The Dale Warland Singers, and Theatre de la Jeune Lune.

Percussionist **Patti Cudd** teaches at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and has given concerts and master classes throughout the U.S., China, Mexico, and Europe. She has premiered nearly a hundred works and taken part in numerous festivals, including *Bang on a Can*, *Frau Musica Nova*, *Ciclo de Percusiones*, *The Mirror of the New*, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's *Green Umbrella Series*, *Emerging Voices Festival*, *Copenhagen Composers' Biennale*, *June in Buffalo*, and the *Festival Cultural Zacatecas*. She holds a B.F.A. from UW-River Falls, an M.M. from SUNY-Buffalo, and a D.M.A. from the University of California, San Diego; she also studied at the Royal Danish Conservatory in Copenhagen on a Fulbright scholarship.

Percussionist **Jay Johnson** was a founding member of Zeitgeist and its artistic co-director for twenty years. He appears frequently with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Minnesota Opera, the Dale Warland Singers, and other Twin Cities organizations, and has performed in major halls, museums, universities, and radio studios across the United States and Europe. Also active as a composer, he recently received a McKnight Artist Fellowship to compose music for the theater. He teaches at Carleton College and served as producer for two of Zeitgeist's previous CDs.

Clarinetist and bass clarinetist **Michael Lowenstern** has performed, recorded, and toured with ensembles including The Klezmatics, The Steve Reich Ensemble, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. His playing can be heard on more than thirty CDs, including the 1996 collection *Spasm* (New World 80468-2). He has written music for concerts, recordings, dance, film, CD-ROM, and his own ensembles, and as head composer for Grey Advertising's e-Marketing division has created "e-jingles" for numerous corporate clients. Trained at the Eastman School (B.M.), the Sweelinck Conservatorium in Amsterdam (Artist's Certificate), and the State University of New York at Stony Brook (M.M., D.M.A.), Lowenstern plays in the New Jersey Symphony and teaches at The Juilliard School.

Saxophonist **David Milne** is an assistant professor of music at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls. He earned B.A. and M.M. degrees at Indiana University and a D.M.A. at the Eastman School of Music, and has taught at Indiana, Eastman, the University of Wisconsin–Indianhead Arts Center, and the MacPhail Center for the Arts in Minneapolis. He has performed with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Bobby McFerrin, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Rochester Philharmonic, Ray Charles, Lou Rawls, Jack McDuff, Johnny Mathis, the Nelson Riddle Orchestra, Rita Moreno, the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, Frankie Valli, the Four Tops, Ben Vereen, Smokey Robinson, the Radio City Music Hall Spectacular, and other big bands and jazz ensembles. He also commissions, composes, and presents new music for saxophone with the Ancia Quartet.

Composer and pianist **Carl Witt** received his D.M.A. from the Eastman School of Music in 1988. He has performed with members of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and recorded with members of the Minnesota Orchestra, notably with co-principal flutist Barbara Leibundguth. In 1998 he was a recipient of a McKnight Composer Fellowship. His many compositions for the dance include several created in collaboration with choreographer Wynn Fricke.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Brazen Cartographies*. The Chestnut Brass Company. Albany Records Troy 223.

*The Continental Harp and Band Report*. Louisville Orchestra; Dennis Russell Davies conducting. First Edition Records LS 760 (LP).

*Eldey Island*. Cynthia Stokes, flute and piccolo, with tape. CRI 415 (LP).

*Eldey Island*. Richard Dirlam, alto and baritone saxophones, with tape. Innova 435.

*On the Badlands—Parables*. St. Paul Chamber Orchestra (with tape); Dennis Russell Davies conducting. CRI 415 (LP).

*Song Circle*. Jubal Trio (Christine Schadeberg, soprano; Sue Ann Kahn, flute; Susan Jolles, harp). CRI CD 738.

*Tag*. Richard Dirlam, alto saxophone, with tape. Innova MN 109.

For a catalog of Stokes's compositions and excerpts from his poetry, visit [www.ericstokes.com](http://www.ericstokes.com).

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## PRODUCTION CREDITS:

Produced and edited by Jay Johnson.

Engineer: Craig Thorson

Digital mastering: Dirk Sobotka, SoundByte Productions, NYC

Mixed and mastered by Craig Thorson and Jay Johnson.

*Susquehanna*s and *The Pickpocket is Lyrical Two* were recorded December 18–19, 1998 at Studio M, Minnesota Public Radio. *Whittlings* was recorded August 1, 1999 at the same location. *Tintinnabulary* was recorded in 1983 at House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, and was originally released in the same year by the Minnesota Composers Forum on an LP (MN 101) titled *New Music Minnesota*. It was recorded by Russ Borud and produced by Steve Barnett.

Cover art, including size, gallery credit, date, format of art (pastel, etc):

Photograph:

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

*Susquehanna*s was commissioned with the support of the Northwest Area Foundation. The commissioning of *Whittlings* by Zeitgeist, the California E.A.R. Unit, and Relâche was made possible by a grant from the Meet The Composer–Reader's Digest Commissioning Program, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund. This recording of *Tintinnabulary* was originally released by and is used with the permission of Innova Recordings and the American Composers Forum.

Special thanks to Cynthia Stokes, Jay Johnson, Homer Lambrecht, Arnold Walker, and Larry Fuchsberg for their support and assistance.

**This recording was made possible by grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the Francis Goellet Charitable Lead Trust and the New York State Council on the Arts.**

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**ERIC STOKES (1930–1999)**

**80596-2**

*Susquehanna* (1985) **10:49**

1. I. Nostrum 3:23
2. II. Buffalo Bones 4:23
3. III. Whangdoodles 3:03

Jay Johnson and Heather Barringer, percussion; Carl Witt, keyboards; Michael Lowenstern, reeds

*The Pickpocket is Lyrical Two* (1994) **13:51**

4. I. Bull 'Gine 'n' Tarriers 1:41
5. II. Breath Can Blow Both Ways 3:17  
... hot on cold fingers  
... cold on hot soup
6. III. Pop the Whip 2:11
7. IV. Go 'Way From My Window 3:28  
... from my door  
... my bedside  
... bother me no more
8. V. Over the Deep Blue Moon 3:15

Jay Johnson and Heather Barringer, percussion; Carl Witt, keyboards; Michael Lowenstern, reeds

9. *Tintinnabulary (Phonic Paradigm IV)* (1983) **11:31**

Jay Johnson and Eric Stokes, percussion

10. *Whittlings* (1992) **11:13**

Patti Cudd and Heather Barringer, percussion; Carl Witt, piano; David Milne, alto saxophone

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