

“Music is *about* something. It is always about human experience, human emotion when you get to the essentials.”

“If you get right down to the bottom of what composers do, I think that what composers do now and have always done is to compose their environment in some sense. So I get a special little lift about working with environmental sounds.” —*Robert Erickson*

Robert Erickson died in 1997, two months beyond his eightieth birthday. Flat on his back for the previous twelve- or- so years and in constant pain from a wasting muscular disease, he continued to compose music almost until the end: serene, affectionate, open-textured music for the players he had come to know best, fellow faculty members at the University of California at San Diego. His legacy includes that school’s music department, which he co-founded (with fellow-composer Will Ogdon) in 1966 as a unique educational venture in which composers—not musicologists, vocal coaches, or bandmasters (as at most institutions)—could feel at home. Before coming to San Diego, he had encouraged his most ardent composition students in San Francisco to lose their qualms about experimentation and to stiffen their backs against the attacks from the conservative world around them; San Francisco’s famous Tape Music Center, a hotbed of experimentation in all the arts that flourished in the early 1960s, was created by Erickson students under his urging. Before that, as music director for KPFA, the first-ever radio station supported by listeners instead of commercial advertisers, Erickson had invented the hitherto unheard-of notion of offering airtime to the most adventurous contemporary composers and their music.

Born in Marquette, Michigan, in 1917 to Swedish-American parents, Erickson began playing the piano at the age of five, learned to read music at seven, tried his hand at composition soon after, played wind and brass instruments in local bands, hobnobbed with other serious composers (among them George Perle and Ben Weber, both of them somewhat under the spell of Schoenbergian atonality at the time), and then, at the age of nineteen, encountered the immensely persuasive émigré composer Ernst Krenek, who became his principal teacher.

Under Krenek’s guidance Erickson journeyed toward, and then away from, the realm of atonality. “I really had given up the twelve-tone technique long before most people even started,” he would later reminisce into my tape recorder. “I think I quit around 1940. But I was still writing a freely atonal kind of music that sometimes tended disconcertingly toward tonality; it was very puzzling to me.” In 1955 Erickson’s *The Structure of Music* “started out to be a book on counterpoint, but ended up being a book on listening.” That book apparently purged him of the contrapuntal obsession. A year later he moved to California and—more to the point—became a Californian in his musical outlook and manner.

For a composer, emigrating from the frozen Midwest to sun-drenched California was—in the 1950s and remains today—an interplanetary journey. For Erickson, his sudden immersion in the teeming community of the West Coast’s many musics was the greatest mind-expanding experience, and it had an immediate impact on his own music. Like so many other Californians, native or adopted, he felt the warm winds blowing in from across the Pacific. He was captivated at one time by an assortment of flutes a friend had brought back from Japan. “The nuance was remarkable,” he noted in a memoir, “the breath control hard to believe, the range of sound far beyond our own flutes. I was particularly attracted to the marvelous bent tones, glissandi from microtonal dimensions to as wide as a third or more, and when I composed my Concerto for Piano and Seven Instruments I incorporated a number of these inflections into the flute part.”

A heightened interest in the *atmosphere* of a piece, an obsession with timbre, ways of varying the sound of a work with experiments in new technique, explorations into the new worlds uncovered through the invention of tape recording: These were the components of the impact California's music had on the new arrival. One striking piece from Erickson's first years at San Diego, for example, calls for three double basses—one live and two on tape—with the “live” performer indulging in all manner of pizzicato, glissando, and percussive sounds, as well as drones, everything *except* playing the instrument “normally” with the bow. Sounds unfamiliar to Minnesota ears filled the California air, and challenged the new arrival to draw them into his music: the clinks and clanks of stones and slabs of marble gathered together as a kind of backwoods glockenspiel; the babble of a brooklet in the Sierra, its sounds filtered and “tuned” to form a kind of gamelan accompaniment to a solo violin; the crashing of waves on a California beach. Erickson dabbled for a time in tape composition, but soon returned to Mother Nature's own orchestra.

“The thing about monkeying with natural sounds,” he recalled, “is that they are so full of random detail. The thing about electronically generated sounds is that they are *not* full of random detail; you have to add it in. If I could do it easier in an electronic lab, I might. There is something very charming, however, in the idea of converting sounds from our environment, transforming them and musicalizing them.” The “musicalizing” process was a treasurable product of Erickson's ingenuity. He asked his San Diego neighbors to save their coffee cans for him; these Erickson welded together to form the pipes of what he called a “noise organ.” Loudspeakers at the bottom of each pipe fed the taped sounds up into the pipe itself; the varying length of the pipes “tuned” the sounds into something recognizable as separate pitches. Thus are the waves at a California shore transformed into the watery serenading of the *Pacific Sirens*.

The four works in this collection range in date of birth from the 1963 Piano Concerto, when Erickson was a potent force in the musical affairs of the San Francisco Bay Area, to the 1977 *Garden* nourished by the creative atmosphere at UC—San Diego that he had worked hard to create. At the far end there are the exuberant challenges flung forth to the solo pianist and the seven participating instrumentalists, the interplay between the written-down notes and the improv, the encouragement offered to all eight performers to go as far as they can and then keep on going. At the near end there is the elegant, quiet, reflective joy, the infinitely sweet solo melody that seems to sing of gardens spread over the California hillsides and over the hillsides of, perhaps, some distant and exotic land as well. In between there are the revelings in the pure magic of sound: the siren beckonings of Pacific waves, the robust play of colors around a gathering of wind players in some onshore safe haven.

Commissioned by the University of Illinois School of Music for its 1963 Festival of the Arts, the Piano Concerto is in three continuous movements. On the original score Erickson titled the work *Illinois Piece*. A solo cadenza—improvised, as is most of the piano part—links the first two movements; a free-for-all cadenza for all instruments links the second and third. Throughout the work the players are asked to alternate between written-out music and improvised passages. Echoes of classic jazz improv resound here and there; often a piano solo slides easily into a moment of jamming for the whole ensemble. One of the great poetic moments (of which there are many) occurs right after the big solo cadenza; the pianist keeps going, but now the solo flute and contrabass emerge from the shadows and join in.

“I first became interested in improvised music some years ago,” Erickson wrote in a program note for the premiere, “partly through listening to the music of children.... [This quality is] precious to me and worth the obvious risks inherent in any extemporized expression. As the composer, I would be pleased if the listener were unable to tell where (except for the cadenzas) the written music leaves off and the improvisation begins.”

Six years later: Erickson is ensconced at the University of California at San Diego, which is picturesquely perched with a fabulous view through tall pines to the crashing Pacific below. At UCSD Erickson devised a new kind of music-appreciation course, where students went out to tape the sounds around them—rain on a roof, traffic on a freeway, ocean waves—and work them electronically into full-scale compositions. The 1969 *Pacific Sirens*, commissioned by the University of Washington School of Music, is his own accomplishment along these lines.

“Ever since childhood,” he once told me, “I had wondered about the songs the Sirens sang to Ulysses and his men. I became even more intrigued with a story about how sailors passing a certain cliff in Italy often heard quasi-musical moans and sighs. *Pacific Sirens* was my attempt to capture those sounds. I took a tape recording of the waves at Pescadero Beach, about 50 miles south of San Francisco, and filtered the sounds electronically to produce sixteen different pitches which were then retuned, equalized, and remixed. The live performers play into the wave sounds, sometimes matching and sometimes contrasting, to produce a continuous, seamless siren song.” Erickson’s score for this fourteen-minute work is a single page of quasi-graphic notations. The actual instrumentation is up to the performers.

White Lady, composed for the Northern Illinois Wind Ensemble, dates from 1975, Erickson’s first work since the Piano Concerto that was scored for an ensemble of conventional instruments—the full complement of winds and brass from a large symphony orchestra—but not, of course, conventionally used. It belongs to a group of pieces that Erickson referred to as “no-tune” music, music deriving its shape and impact from pure sonority, timbre. In 1975, too, his most important book appeared: *Sound Structures in Music*. “I wanted to look closely at how we use timbre in music,” he wrote in the preface, “at our assumptions about its functions and our traditional ideas about what we are doing.... This is a what-might-be book rather than a how-to-do-it book.”

Speculative, at times abstruse, *Sound Structures* wasn’t meant for even the well-intentioned outsider (as Erickson’s previous *The Structure of Music, A Listener’s Guide* magnificently was). *White Lady*, and the other “no-tune” pieces—*Pacific Sirens* among them, most emphatically—are the easy guide for penetrating the book’s mysteries. *White Lady* is very much a piece about timbre. There is little harmonic movement, less rhythm, no melody as we usually think of it. Even here, however, there is an antecedent: “By the Lake” of 1909, one of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra* that astonished (and, in some quarters, infuriated) the outside world. There, as in *White Lady*, the play of color holds our attention—and holds the piece together.

And who is this “White Lady” of the title? Erickson left no clue, but his onetime student the California critic Charles Shere comes up with a plausible idea in *Thinking Sound Music*, his valuable Erickson biography. “Erickson was thinking,” Shere surmises, “about the cool elegance of a satin-clad Jean Harlow or Carole Lombard, and there is something of Art Deco about the slow, rich sonorities of this music.”

Garden, composed on a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, was completed in 1977. Its scoring is modest: violin solo plus a small orchestra with single winds. It is decidedly *not* a “no-tune” piece; the song spun by the soloist comes across as a single, ecstatic line of melody something like seventeen minutes long in a single breath. It does, however, exemplify the kind of deep and loving quiet that settled upon Erickson’s music in his last active years; listen to it here and then find, if you can, the lovely *Summer Music* for violin and (!) the rippling of a Sierra brooklet, and the final masterpiece for small orchestra, the 1978 *Night Music*.

The work, Erickson wrote in a program note, “explores possibilities within a radically ‘quiet’ music. More than a few of my compositions ... have worked toward a feeling of quietness, seamless, expansion without special drama, almost denuded of melodic profile ... *Garden* is a reversal.” And in a letter to Charles Shere couched in the whimsy that endeared him to all who knew him, Erickson had this to say of *Garden*: “I have weird feelings about this piece. I like it. It is lyrical. So lyrical and long-phrased ... so unintellectual that I can hardly believe it, although there are some satisfying tonal secret things that I don’t comprehend yet.”

—*Alan Rich*

Alan Rich is the music critic of *LA Weekly* and author most recently of *American Pioneers* in the Phaidon Press 20th-Century Composers series.

Since 1980, under the visionary leadership of its founder and artistic director, Edwin London, the **Cleveland Chamber Symphony** has achieved an important position in today’s music world for its encouragement of the creation of new American music through free concert performances, commissions, and recordings. Thanks to the fulfillment of its unique mission and foresight in championing composers of our time, no other institution has more notably advanced the art of contemporary American music. The musicians of the Cleveland Chamber Symphony (a professional ensemble-in-residence at Cleveland State University) have developed an extraordinary set of skills required to meet the ever-advancing evolution of musical language and challenges of institutional development in these competitive times.

While the Cleveland Chamber Symphony’s current number of new works commissioned by the ensemble ranks at the top of the list of all orchestras over a comparable period, the commitment includes repeat performances, often in multiple locations locally, regionally, and nationally. The authoritative results achieved in the recording studio have led to production and distribution of compact discs. This further ensures a permanent and widely available legacy of its work. The Cleveland Chamber Symphony is dedicated to supporting the creative work of “emerging” composers by presentation of semiannual concerts and recording of competitively selected new works chosen from leading colleges, conservatories, and universities in the region. The Cleveland Chamber Symphony’s excellence has been repeatedly recognized with numerous prestigious awards, including the American Music Center Letter of Distinction in 1995, the John S. Edwards Award for strongest commitment to American Music in 1990, 1996, 1998, and 2000, the 1992 Laurel Leaf Award from the American Composers Alliance, and others.

The group has consistently earned significant financial support from individuals, government, and distinguished private foundations including the National Endowment for the Arts, The Ohio Arts Council, The Ohio Board of Regents, The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Kulas Foundation, the Fromm Foundation, The Bascom Little Foundation, The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the Virgil Thomson Fund, and others.

Composer-conductor **Edwin London** has served living music throughout his distinguished career. He has founded two highly acclaimed ensembles: the Ineluctable Modality, a new-music choral ensemble, in 1968 and the Cleveland Chamber Symphony in 1980. For his efforts he has earned the ASCAP–John S. Edwards award on several occasions for “the strongest commitment to new American Music,” the Laurel Leaf award presented by the American Composers Alliance, the Letter of Distinction given by the American Music Center, and the Conductor’s Prize awarded by the Alice M. Ditson Fund. A graduate of Oberlin College, he received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Iowa, where he studied composition with P. G. Clapp and Phil Bezanson. Subsequently, his teachers included Luigi Dallapiccola, Gunther Schuller, and Darius Milhaud. He has taught at Smith College, the University of Illinois, the University of California—San Diego, and Cleveland State University.

Australian composer, conductor, and pianist **Keith Humble** (1927–1995) was a child-prodigy pianist. He studied piano with Roy Shepherd at the University of Melbourne Conservatorium (1947–49) and won many awards, including a scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music. Before leaving Australia he was also a swing band pianist of repute, and this association with jazz subtly influenced his later approaches to composition and performance. He studied at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris (1952–54), where René Leibowitz (with whom he studied privately, 1953–55) and serialism became seminal influences. In 1960 he became founding director of the Centre de Musique in Paris, which performed a remarkable spectrum of contemporary music, including works by most of the leading figures in American and European new music and music theater. Humble returned to Melbourne in 1966 to lecture in composition at the Conservatorium. In the early 1970s he was involved in the establishment of the Centre for Music Experiment (University of California at San Diego), and he was founding professor (1974–89) of the Department of Music at La Trobe University in Melbourne, a major locus for the research and creation of contemporary (including electro-acoustic) music until its controversial closure in late 1999. He co-founded and directed the Australian Contemporary Music Ensemble (1975–79), which provided the impulse and model for later contemporary ensembles such as Flederman and Pipeline. His interest in improvisation culminated in his collaboration in the international improvising ensemble KIVA (1982–90).

Violinist **Laura Martin**, concertmaster of the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, also serves as a principal violin in the Cleveland Opera Orchestra, coaches chamber music at the ENCORE School, and is a member of the Trinity Chamber Orchestra and Chamber Players. She has also served as a principal player for the Cleveland Pops, the Cleveland Ballet, and for the former Ohio Chamber Orchestra. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the Cleveland Institute of Music. Ms. Martin studied with Linda Cerone at CIM and also at the Meadowmount School of Music, which she attended for ten summers. She was a member of the CIM preparatory faculty for nine years and served as teaching assistant to Linda Cerone. As soloist with the Cleveland Chamber Symphony she has recorded works by Augusta Read Thomas and Robert Erickson. In addition, Ms. Martin and pianist Mark George have recently recorded works of Edwin London and Virko Baley.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Chamber Concerto*. Hartt Chamber Players, Ralph Shapey, conductor. CRI SD 218. (LP)
End of The Mime. New Music Choral Ensemble I, Kenneth Gaburo, director. CRI SD 325. (LP)
General Speech. S. Dempster, trombone. New World 80541-2.
The Idea of Order at Key West. C. Plantamura, soprano; Arch Ensemble; R. Hughes, conductor. CRI SD 494. (LP)
Kryl. E. Harkins, trumpet. CRI 616.
Night Music. Arch Ensemble, R. Hughes, conductor. CRI SD 494. (LP)
Postcards. C. Plantamura, soprano; J. Hübscher, lute. CRI 616.
Quoq. J. Fonville, flute. CRI 616.
Ricercar à 3 for Double Bass. B. Turetzky, double bass. CRI 616.
Ricercar à 5 for Trombones. S. Dempster, L. Dwyer, F. Harmantas, L. Newton, P. Vander Gheynst, trombones. New World 80563-2.
Sierra. P. Larson, baritone; SONOR Ensemble of UC San Diego, T. Nee, conductor. CRI 616.

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MacKay, John. *Music of Many Means: Sketches and Essay on the Music of Robert Erickson*. (includes Erickson's memoirs, "Hearing Things"). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995.
Shere, Charles. *Thinking Sound Music: The Life and Works of Robert Erickson* (includes CD). Berkeley: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995.

Producer: Morris Quince

Recording engineer: David Yost (*Garden, Pacific Sirens, White Lady*); Rex Anderson (Piano Concerto)

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ROBERT ERICKSON (1917–1997)

PACIFIC SIRENS

80603-2

1. *White Lady* (1975) 8:01

(wind ensemble)

Cleveland Chamber Symphony; Edwin London, conductor

2. *Garden* (1977) 18:23

(violin and orchestra)

Laura Martin, violin; Cleveland Chamber Symphony; Edwin London, conductor

3. *Piano Concerto* (1963) 17:13

(piano and seven instruments)

Keith Humble, piano; University of Illinois Contemporary Chamber Players; Edwin London, conductor

4. *Pacific Sirens* (1969) 14:03

(ensemble and tape)

Cleveland Chamber Symphony; Edwin London, conductor

White Lady, *Garden*, and *Pacific Sirens* published by Smith Publications. *Piano Concerto* published by Theodore Presser Co.

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