

Mel Powell once wrote: “Over the centuries, the invention of a music that sounds too lovely to be thought of as ingenious has remained one of the grand deceptions manageable by the great masters. Cleverness is not necessarily lovely, nor is loveliness necessarily clever; it is when they are hand-in-hand, in fact conjoined so as to be indistinguishable from one another, that composition proclaims its supreme achievement.” Nothing better describes Powell’s own music. A jazz prodigy in his youth and later one of the country’s most distinguished composers, he created a legacy of works both sonically alluring and intellectually compelling.

Mel Powell was born Melvin Epstein on February 12, 1923, in the Bronx. His father, a diamond merchant, was rarely home; a Talmudic grandfather was an imposing presence. Mel started taking piano lessons when he was six years old. In his early teens, his younger brother took him to a Benny Goodman concert at the Paramount Theater. Biographer Joan Peyser writes: “Powell was so taken with the improvisations of Teddy Wilson that, at his next lesson, he embroidered Beethoven in the same ways.” At age fifteen, Mel was playing regularly at Nick’s, a jazz club in lower Manhattan. Too young to be in the musicians’ union, he was spirited into the men’s room between sets. As his career advanced, he changed his name to Powell, borrowed from a Polish uncle who had changed his name from Poljanowski. At eighteen, he dropped out of school to join the Benny Goodman Orchestra. He performed with Goodman for barely a year. Nevertheless, he established himself as one of Big Bands’ most electrifying pianists.

During World War II, Powell was recruited into the Glenn Miller Air Force Band, appearing in hundreds of performances. In 1945, he was selected as *Downbeat* magazine’s jazz pianist of the year. But he was already turning away from being a jazz star: During the war, he wrote concert works, which the Miller musicians tried out for him. Powell would later say that he was able to endure the solitary life of a modern composer without bitterness or regret because of his youthful years in the limelight.

After the war, Powell spent another year with Goodman, followed by an unfulfilling stint as a studio musician in Hollywood. Finally, he moved back East and auditioned for Paul Hindemith at Yale. As Powell recounted it, he had carefully prepared Scarlatti and Mozart sonatas to play for the maestro. Somewhat apprehensively, he entered the classroom, walked over to the piano and sat down. No sooner had he lifted his hands to play than Hindemith said, “Fine—that’s enough.” Crestfallen, Powell asked what he had done wrong. “Nothing,” replied Hindemith. “I could tell by the way that you adjusted the piano bench that you are a musician.” Powell graduated with a bachelor’s degree from Yale in 1952.

At first, Powell was drawn to Hindemith’s neo-classic style, but he eventually turned toward a more modernist approach, inspired by Schoenberg, Webern, and American serial composers. Upon hearing Powell’s first twelve-tone work, Hindemith said laconically, “So, you’ve gone over to the other side.”

Powell’s first teaching position was at Queens College. At Hindemith’s invitation, he taught at Yale in the late fifties, eventually succeeding his teacher as chair of the composition department. He was a founding editor of *Perspectives in New Music*, and a pioneering figure at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center studios. By then, Powell had essentially retired from public jazz performances, though he made an occasional studio recording. His legendary sessions for John Hammond have just been re-released on the Vanguard label.

In 1968, Powell was invited to serve as the inaugural dean of the Music School at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. He later served as provost for six years. At the time of his death in 1998, he held the Roy E. Disney Chair in Music Composition.

Powell was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for *Duplicates: A Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra*. Numerous other honors included the Brandeis Creative Arts Medal, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and commissions from the Koussevitzky and Fromm foundations. In his last years, he revived his jazz playing, performing in the SS Norway’s Floating Jazz Festival several times. He was inducted into the Jazz and Big Band Hall of Fame in 1997, and posthumously inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998.

When Powell was in his mid-fifties, he fell inexplicably while playing tennis. He was diagnosed with a degenerative muscle disease, which eventually left him confined to a wheelchair. He endured his disability with characteristic dignity and optimism. He fought courageously against numerous health problems, eventually succumbing to liver cancer on April 24, 1998.

Powell was a peerless teacher; the power of his instruction lay in his articulation of style-transcendent principles. Studying with him was an apprenticeship: A lesson would often start with Powell saying, “Okay—now it’s *my* piece.” He would carefully revise the score while the student sat in silence. He would then explain his corrections in such a way that the student was aware of the principles that guided his judgment.

In the classroom, Powell was famous for his slogans—aphorisms that crystallized a musical concept into concise and memorable form. “Repetition ensures closure” was a particular favorite. Form was “perceived differentiation.” Orchestration was “animating the inert.” To demonstrate this last concept, he put a piano reduction of Debussy’s “Rondes de Printemps” on the board: five bars of just a single pitch, B-natural. Then he showed how Debussy brought this single note to life by using repeated notes in the upper strings, harmonics in the basses, a distinctive figure in the harp, and more. Out of the inanimate note, Debussy had created a multiplicity of motions. Unceasingly generous with his time, Powell made his students feel as though teaching was not an intrusion but rather a natural extension of his creative life.

Until his illness, Powell was an enthusiastic athlete: He played semi-pro baseball in his youth and was later an avid tennis player. He painted watercolors as a hobby, and was very well read.

Powell’s mature compositional voice was carefully cultivated and constructed. He considered total chromaticism to be the “most advanced musical language” and developed a penetrating vision of its special challenges.

Tonal music is highly directional: Its progressions are not reversible, its phrases and sections not interchangeable. The music flows through a carefully calibrated landscape of escalating tension and eventual resolution. On the other hand, in Powell’s view, non-tonal music is much more ambiguous and steady-state. He used the term “module” to describe a statement of the complete chromatic. Modules are self-contained units, with no obligation to follow from or proceed to any others; they can be shuffled like a deck of cards. To demonstrate this, he would play a recording of Boulez’s *Third Piano Sonata*, but with the phrases spliced all out of order. Surprisingly, no violation of the music’s rhetoric occurred; it was seemingly the same piece, viewed from a new perspective.

Schoenberg’s vision of twelve-tone music was of a unifying pattern presented in a constant variety of forms. Powell felt that Schoenberg’s approach heavily taxed a listener’s perceptual capacities. Because of totally chromatic music’s inherent instability and saturation, Powell felt that listeners could not discriminate details and subtle connections as they might in a music of clearer harmony. In other words, if you go to two small dinner parties, you are likely to observe how many of the guests are the same. On the other hand, if you go to two baseball games, you will compare the size of the crowd, not the actual people in attendance. In such a saturated situation, details don’t matter; only more general impressions do. As a result, Powell’s music is athematic: It does not draw its resources from a commanding, all-encompassing pattern. In relation to the tradition that he so revered, this was perhaps his most radical notion.

In its place, Powell developed the notion of pitch tableaux. Drawing on models from Webern and Boulez, the tableau method was a way of treating modules as harmony. In Powell’s formulation, a tableau consisted of all twelve tones of the chromatic scale arranged as a chord, with each pitch occurring in a unique register. A tableau might closely pack the pitches together in a near cluster, or spread them out widely in space. In expressing the tableau, pitches could be played in any order and repeated at will; the only requirement was that all twelve be sounded. One consequence of the tableau method was that, no matter how many instruments were playing, Powell had command over the resultant sound: Because all the instruments participated in expressing the same tableau, their polyphony was reducible to a twelve-note chord. The music progressed as a series of chord changes. How long each tableau lasted created a sense of harmonic rhythm. Tableaus could occur uniquely or recur as desired. Returning to the same tableau, but articulated with new surface details, was a way of creating structural connections. Flow and voicing were primary concerns.

As a composer, Powell also thought meticulously about rhythm. He felt that there was an analogy between the tonic of a tonal piece and the sense of a regular downbeat: Both were points of orientation around which everything revolved. If non-tonal music eliminated the tonic, it followed that it should efface metric regularity as well. He developed sophisticated procedures for fighting rhythmic predictability. His music is metrically fluid, his rhythms spontaneous, irregular, impossible to predict.

Powell's interest in modular thinking and pitch tableaux led him to construct a music of moments. Silence and sustained resonances play an important role. Rather than moving in novelistic paragraphs of action, Powell's writing is more poetically concise and epigrammatic. Long continuities are rare: The insistent xylophone line near the end of *Sextet* stands out in its rhythmic persistence; everything else in the piece is fragmentary and episodic.

In speaking about form, Powell described the "Aha!" moment when he apprehended the overall shape of a work. The initial sketch for his *String Quartet* (1982) was a drawing of a ball of yarn unwinding to a single strand.

The contrast between "the one and the many" is an important part of Powell's ensemble writing. As its sketch would suggest, the *String Quartet* begins with a kaleidoscopic trading of gestures, and works its way to a jittery, unison melody—Powell termed it "Jewish boogie-woogie." In *Modules: An Intermezzo for Chamber Orchestra*, the work's formal strategy includes one solo for every instrument in the ensemble—much like a jazz composition, but in a totally different rhetoric. The piece ends when the last instrument, the viola, has had its turn, presenting a rapturous, elegiac line.

Sextet (1996), the major work on this recording, begins in an unprecedented way. The first movement opens with five consecutive solos: First the clarinet, then the flute, the violin, the cello, and the piano enter alone. From then on, the work progresses as the initially solitary instruments at first evade and collide with each other, then eventually coalesce in a remarkable passage at the movement's close. This arrival point is not a unison melody, as in a string quartet, but an intense exchange where flute, clarinet, violin, and cello are clustered together both rhythmically and registrally. The instruments' identities are maintained, but are fused into a jagged, compact statement. Chimes and celeste enter to punctuate this peak of instrumental union.

The second movement retraces the first movement's steps: Agitated contrapuntal interplay eventually leads to ruminative, reflective solos by the clarinet and the flute; this time, though, the solos are not entirely alone, but sporadically commented on by the other instruments. Most of Powell's mature works are one-way trips, ending very differently from the way they began. *Sextet* is unusual in its equivocal look back.

Powell clearly loved and admired the musicians of the California EAR Unit. *Sextet* was written expressly for them, through a commissioning grant from the Reader's Digest/Meet-the-Composer Fund. Not only did his ensemble piece for the EAR Unit open with solos, he also wrote individual solo works for many of its members. The *Invocation* (1988) for cello includes the dedication: "Composed for Erika and only Erika! With gratitude and affection, Mel Powell." The *Flute Sonatine* (1996) began as a single movement—*Somewhat Stoned*—for flutist Dorothy Stone, and grew into three. *AmyAbilities* (1988) was written in tribute to percussionist Amy Knoles. Powell called these solo works "overnight pieces," though their genesis often took considerably longer.

Composers have approached solo works for essentially melodic instruments such as the flute, violin, and cello in various ways. Bach created the illusion of counterpoint by splitting the solo voice between low, middle, and high registers and carefully shaping the resulting lines. Composers such as Paganini carried instrumental technique to virtuosic extremes.

Powell took a third approach: He wrote *bel canto* lines for the soloists. His instrumental writing was essentially an extension of the human voice. Although it is technically demanding, his solo writing breathes. Even his percussion writing is *bel canto*. While percussion solo works are often muscular, propulsive rhythmic displays, *AmyAbilities* is a delicate, hazy shift of colors—a long melody shaped out of a combination of pitched and unpitched sounds.

In his solo works, Powell created counterpoint not through stratified registers, as in Bach, but through what he termed a "music of elements." That is, the persistent lyricism was embedded within a web of textures, including sparkling grace-notes, trills, repeated notes, and sharply accented notes. This created a "depth of field," as if the foreground melody were commented upon and interfered with by a darting and furtive chorus. Rarely is any texture sustained; rather, there are sudden shifts from the fevered to the restful, the fierce to the tranquil. These are soliloquies imbued with a multiplicity of moods and gestures.

The *Prelude* for piano (1988) rounds out this set of later solo works. Powell's restless invention is particularly evident: the music constantly seeks out new constellations of sound, never repeating itself. Pauses punctuate the music, creating eddies and pools of activity.

Powell's *Setting* for violin (1972) and *Immobiles* (1967) date from an earlier period. Powell published a version of *Setting* with tape, but violinist Robin Lorentz has chosen to record the original version. With its unpredictable arcs and patient silences, it is consistent in style with the later works. *Immobiles* for chamber ensemble and tape shows another side of Powell's compositional voice. He described the work as "wallpaper music." The synthesized part is uncharacteristically continuous: It has an effervescent quality, insistently brewing and bubbling. The effect is both remote and intoxicating.

When Mel Powell died in 1998, his close friend the composer Milton Babbitt wrote: "We have lost the wit, warmth, and wisdom of a singular musician whose creative achievements extend from the biggest of the big bands to the smallest of that small band of distinguished contemporary composers." Until his very last years, Powell kept these two sides of his musical life strictly segregated. Occasionally, he might be prodded into a private rendition of "Honeysuckle Rose." But, once he left the jazz world, he seldom talked about his life as an improviser and rarely performed in public.

It is tempting to wonder whether Powell's gift for jazz expresses itself in his concert music. At first blush, the musics could not seem to be more different. His jazz playing is fleet and motoric, filled with playful cascades and rollicking rhythms. His concert music is fragmentary and spare. His jazz playing is grounded in a colorfully immediate tonality, while his concert music explores the outer realms of non-tonal abstraction. His jazz compositions fulfill the popular expectations of the genre. His concert music is more refractory and experimental, emphasizing the individuality of each work.

Jazz is the dynamic interplay between spontaneity and predetermined structure: A jazz performer builds his or her high-flying inventions from a prepared harmonic plan. It is this interplay that Powell carried over into his mature concert music. He designed an underlying structure, and then improvised with it. For Powell, composing was serious play: It was improvisation without the time pressure, enabling him to fold extra layers of meaning and purpose into his designs. Furthermore, jazz places a value on the unique, the momentary, the fresh. His interest in unpredictability and episodic, inventive forms was a natural extension of this. Powell didn't leave jazz; he merely transported it into a new realm.

Powell's music couples an Apollonian restraint and discipline with a celebration of sonority—a quick splash of castanets and drums in *AmyAbilities*, a delicate harmonic and whispering trill in *Invocation*. There is a coolness and reserve to his writing: His music is never indulgent or overwrought; it interrupts itself before it gets too carried away. Powell frequently quoted the philosopher Frans Hemsterhuis's definition of the beautiful as "the greatest number of ideas in the shortest space of time." In listening to this disc, be prepared for an hour's worth of uncommon ideas and graceful, potent fantasy.

—Anthony Brandt

Anthony Brandt was a student of Mel Powell at the California Institute of the Arts from 1985–87. He is currently Assistant Professor of Composition and Theory at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University.

The **California EAR Unit's** performances are visually and aurally stunning, utilizing state-of-the-art technology, found objects, and traditional instruments. The Unit has brought an unparalleled versatility and virtuosity to its performances, garnering recognition from the American Music Center's "Letter of Distinction" to the L.A. Weekly's "Best Classical Ensemble 1999" award. In residence at the L.A. County Museum of Art since 1987, the Unit's repertoire of more than five hundred compositions ranges from the most demanding works for the concert hall to collaborations with major artists in other fields to create original multimedia works. Worldwide appearances include at the Kennedy Center, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Ars Musica Brussels, the Zagreb Biennale, Kiev Fest, and the Santa Fe, Aspen, and Tanglewood festivals, among many others. The EAR Unit's extensive discography can be found on the New World, New Albion, O.O. Discs, Tzadik, Cambria, Bridge, and Echograph labels.

Cellist **Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick** has premiered more than a hundred works written for her by composers including Joan LaBarbara, Mel Powell, Alvin Lucier, Elliott Carter, Stephen Mosko, and Morton Subotnick, with whom she has performed and toured internationally since 1981. She was principal/soloist with Santa Fe Pro Musica from 1992–97, and has performed more recently with Bach's Circle at Chamber Music Northwest. Erika is a founding member of the EAR Unit and a faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts.

Percussionist **Amy Knoles** is the recipient of the UNESCO International Prize for the Performing Arts, the C.O.L.A. Award, and the Lester Horton Award. She was the ASCAP Foundation Composer-in-Residence at the Music Center of Los Angeles. She has worked with the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt, Frank Zappa, Morton Subotnick, and Flea, and is a featured soloist at festivals throughout the world as a performer/composer of live electronic music and video.

Robin Lorentz has been the California EAR Unit's violinist for twenty years, performing and recording internationally at notable venues and festivals for leading composers of the day. Former concertmaster appointments include the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella Series, The Ojai Festival, and Santa Fe Pro Musica. Ms. Lorentz has served as adjunct faculty for the California Institute of the Arts and is currently involved in a recording project of seven commissioned works for solo violin.

Pianist **Vicki Ray** has been featured at the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella Series and has performed with the L.A. Chamber Orchestra, the German ensemble Compania, and the Blue Rider ensemble of Toronto. Vicki is a founding artist of PianoSpheres, a concert series devoted to less familiar repertory for solo piano and has been a longtime member of the EAR Unit and the Los Angeles-based chamber ensemble Xtet. She is the head of the piano department at CalArts.

Flutist **Dorothy Stone** has been active in the vanguard of the international contemporary music scene for more than twenty years and has consistently been hailed for her virtuosic interpretations of the latest literature. A founding member of the EAR Unit, she has performed throughout the United States and Europe as a soloist and has been featured on National Public Radio and WGBH's Art of the States program. Her solo CD, *None but the Lonely Flute*, is available on New World Records.

Clarinetist **Marty Walker** has premiered more than eighty pieces written especially for him, many of which highlight his bass clarinet playing. He has been a featured soloist in numerous venues throughout the United States and Mexico, and has participated in live broadcast performances for Pacifica and National Public Radio. Marty performs and records frequently in Los Angeles for several ensembles such as Some Over History, Ghost Duo, and Gong Farmers.

Guest conductor **Stephen L. Mosko** was born in Denver, Colorado, where his early musical education was fostered by the conductor Antonia Brico. He received an M.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts in 1972, studying with Mel Powell, Leonard Stein, and Morton Subotnick. Mosko was Music Director of the Chicago Contemporary Players of the University of Chicago, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, and Principal Conductor of the Griffin Music Ensemble of Boston. He has been a guest conductor on numerous occasions with the San Francisco Symphony and with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and has conducted at the Holland Festival, Ojai Festival, Foro Internacional de Musica Nueva in Mexico City, and Washington's Kennedy Center, among many others.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Duplicates: A Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra; Modules: An Intermezzo for Chamber Orchestra; Settings for Two Pianos. Alan Feinberg, Robert Taub, Los Angeles Philharmonic, David Allen Miller, conductor. Harmonia Mundi CD 907096.

Setting for guitar. David Starobin, guitar. Bridge Records 9042.

String Quartet. Colorado String Quartet. Albany Records 259.

Woodwind Quintet. New York Woodwind Quintet. New World Records 80413-2.

"The Best Things in Life." Vanguard Jazz Showcase 79602-2.

"It's Been So Long." Vanguard Jazz Showcase 79605-2.

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SETTINGS

CALIFORNIA EAR UNIT

80616-2

Sextet (1996)

1. *First movement* 8:21

2. *Second movement* 6:13

California EAR Unit: Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick, cello; Robin Lorentz, violin; Dorothy Stone, flute; Vicki Ray, piano; Marty Walker, clarinet; Amy Knoles, percussion; Stephen L. Mosko, conductor

3. *Invocation* (1988) 2:25

Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick, cello

Sonatine (1996)

4. *First movement* 2:31

5. *Second movement* 2:28

6. *Third movement* 3:17

Dorothy Stone, flute

7. *Amy Abilities* (1988) 4:54

Amy Knoles, percussion

8. *Prelude* (1988) 2:17

Vicki Ray, piano

9. *Setting* (1972) 10:39

Robin Lorentz, violin

10. *Immobiles* (1967) 10:31

(for chamber ensemble with tape)

California EAR Unit: Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick, cello; Robin Lorentz, violin; Dorothy Stone, flute; Vicki Ray, piano; Marty Walker, clarinet; Amy Knoles, percussion

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