

LUKAS FOSS (1922-2009)

*CURRICULUM VITAE*

80703-2

1. String Quartet No. 3 (1976) 21:49

Columbia String Quartet: Benjamin Hudson, violin; Carol Zeavin, violin; Janet Lyman Hill, viola; André Emelianoff, cello

2. *Music for Six* (1977, rev. 1978) 16:10

University of Buffalo Percussion Ensemble: Jan Williams, vibraphone; Bruce Penner, marimba; Edward Folger, vibraphone; Rick Kazmierczak, marimba; Kathryn Kayne, electric piano; James Calabrese, synthesizer

3. *Curriculum Vitae* (1977) 7:37

Guy Klucevsek, accordion

4. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1978) 16:23

(poem by Wallace Stevens)

RoseMarie Freni, mezzo-soprano; Robert Dick, flute; Jan Williams, percussion; Yvar Mikhashoff, piano

TT: 62:23

In a history of American music populated richly with immigrants and the sons or daughters of immigrants, few absorbed and embraced so readily a richly, demonstrably American style as the German-born Lukas Foss. Or we should say “styles,” since no single approach to American music would suit his diverse and extraordinary talent. Born in Germany 1922 and raised there and in Paris, he and his family eventually moved to the United States in 1937 to escape the spread of anti-Semitism in Europe. Already an advanced musician at age fifteen, he attracted the attention of such mentors as Fritz Reiner and Paul Hindemith. As a member of the first class of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, he worked with Serge Koussevitzky and got to know Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, with both of whom he had, particularly in the first period of his compositional life, a great deal in common as a composer of American populist neoclassicism.

Foss was fond of saying that one becomes a composer through love of music, which necessarily means music that other people wrote first. His first works were composed in imitation of the music he loved—Bach, Mozart—and as he progressed as a composer those influences came to include Copland and Stravinsky. The premiere under Robert Shaw of his Carl Sandburg cantata *The Prairie* put the composer on the map at age twenty. By the 1950s Foss had made a name for himself as a composer, conductor, and pianist, and was deemed a significant enough personage to join the exclusive club of composers commissioned to write an opera for a major television network. His children’s opera *Griffelkin* was broadcast by NBC in November 1956.

But something seismic happened in the middle of that decade. Foss took a position on the faculty of UCLA in 1953 (becoming the youngest full professor in the school's history—without a high school diploma), and in the process of working with young musicians began to reconceive “classical” performance as an open, creative enterprise, an attempt to get beyond “the tyranny of the printed note.” He founded the Improvisation Chamber Ensemble, which, through group composition, helped break down (at least superficially) the division between composer and performer. This endeavor was very much in keeping with other experimental currents of the time, most notably the work of John Cage, but Foss maintained an essential aversion to pure “chance” techniques, preferring the freedom of on-the-spot creative decision-making. Foss mused on his experience with group improvisation in an important article that appeared in the Spring 1963 edition of the progressive music journal *Perspectives of New Music*. The essay, called “The Changing Composer-Performer Relationship: A Monologue and a Dialogue,” traces the new paradigm between composer and performer to the advent of electronic music, in part due to an implicit challenge to musicians to create new sounds for themselves, and in part as a reaction against the rigidity of machine music. Foss wanted to create a new ideal of partnership in which composer and performer could feel a shared creative responsibility for a work of art.

Thus began a new stage in Lukas Foss's musical life, a stage that threw open the windows of his art potentially to accept any and all the interesting currents of the time, not only including improvisation but such ideas as serialism, graphic notation, “mobile” forms, collage and quotation, pre-recorded tape, rock music and free jazz, and even minimalism. Pre-packaged notions of style, however, never overwhelmed his sense of craft. We experience in Foss's music of this time—the late 1950s onward—not a complete change in philosophy but rather a great expansion, the acquisition of a more gestural, even choreographic, approach that clearly grew out of his appreciation for the creativity of the individual performer. The first of his assured classics in this era was *Time Cycle* (1960) for soprano and orchestra, on texts of Auden, Housman, Kafka, and Nietzsche. Leonard Bernstein led the premiere with the New York Philharmonic; between the song movements, Foss's Improvisation Chamber Ensemble performed improvised interludes. Such widely diverse and highly influential works as the Handel-Bach-Scarlati collage *Baroque Variations* and *Echoi*, in which structure is sabotaged by the performers, established Foss as a major force in progressive music. *Baroque Variations* (1967) also reflected Foss's continuing love for the traditional repertoire, a love that also informed his busy conducting and performing careers. In the 1960s and '70s he was a major force in elevating the reputations of the Buffalo Philharmonic and the Brooklyn Philharmonia.

Foss's influence was deeply felt not only through his compositions and performances, but also through a deep engagement with education, beginning with his UCLA post. He also taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he founded the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, and also at Boston University, Yale University, the Manhattan School of Music, Carnegie Mellon University, and Harvard, and he was a frequent presence at the Tanglewood Music Center. The combination of a rigorous traditional foundation and an openness to new ideas made him an invaluable resource for generations of younger musicians.

The late 1970s marked another turning point for Foss. After twenty years of experimentation, he began to reconsider and embrace his first mature style, that of neoclassicism, but he did so without abandoning the discoveries of the previous two decades. The progressive and the conservative comfortably coexist in his music of the 1980s onward—the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, the third and fourth symphonies, *For Aaron*, the chamber work *Tashi*, and others. Quotation, in particular, already present in the radical *Baroque Variations* and *Curriculum Vitae*, became a stylistic mainstay. The overall impression of the later works of Lukas Foss is of a satisfied introspection that carries with it an awareness of a musical life rich in associations and accomplishments.

The four works on this disc represent the culmination of Foss's long period of experimentation. His String Quartet No. 3 was written for the Concord String Quartet, one of the more intrepid of the American quartets of the time, which had already performed his short Divertissement "pour Mica" (String Quartet No. 2, 1973). The quartet's first violinist, Mark Sokol, had also worked with Foss in the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at SUNY Buffalo. The Concorde premiered the String Quartet No. 3 on a Naumburg Foundation concert in New York's Alice Tully Hall on March 15, 1976, but the way there was far from straightforward. According to Concord cellist Norman Fischer, the quartet needed the composer's guidance on some of the more unusual aspects of the score, which required a hearing to sort out. Foss was at that time an extremely busy conductor, and no time prior to the concert could be found to bring composer and performers together; nor would the composer be able to attend the premiere. But, Foss suggested, there might be a way. After conducting at the Concertgebouw, he would be flying to a Kansas City engagement, with a midnight plane change and layover at JFK Airport in New York. The Concord Quartet, in residence at Dartmouth College, drove from New Hampshire to New York, met Lukas Foss right at the gate (in those halcyon days of light security), took out their instruments, and played through the piece for him.

The Quartet No. 3 has, superficially, the hallmarks of minimalist style that also characterize Foss's piano work *Solo* and the ensemble piece *Music for Six*; Fischer calls it a kind of "minimalist *Grosse Fuge*." It begins with a tiny gesture, an up-and-down glissando in the violin (A to C and back, a minor third) that becomes the tile in a mosaic of identical gestures throughout the ensemble. This procedure, a small gesture used as the building block of a dense texture, is the crux of the piece, but after a few pages of standard notation Foss presents the quartet with a notational-performance challenge: printed pinwheels of fragments to be chosen and combined spontaneously by the performers. The fragments are set out in ten groups, each with a different aggregate character. (This is a more controlled version of the kind of fragment-combination found in Terry Riley's *In C*.) The specifics will vary from performance to performance, but the general effect is one of insistent, motoric activity. Harmony is kept almost exclusively in the "white note" range with a very few instances of a sharp or flat within a pattern.

The onset of a *ppp* section signals the return to fully notated music, in the present performance occurring just past the 11-minute mark. As the piece progresses, the players encounter other unusual events: a sustained harmony with simultaneous humming (17:40 in this recording) and further repeated, fortissimo fragments, their continuance dictated by the first violin's whim, that lead to the biggest surprise of all, the ultimate goal of the dense but white-note tending harmonies of the previous twenty-one minutes: a final, definitive stop on a C major triad.

*Music for Six*, completed the year after the String Quartet No. 3 and revised in 1978, is an even more radical design in process and textural accumulation. The most radical aspect is its instrumentation, which is open to any instrument in the treble range. The performance here is by the University of Buffalo Percussion Ensemble, playing two marimbas, two vibraphones, electric piano, and synthesizer.

The score for the first of three sections is laid out in six separate lines, played simultaneously but without conscious coordination. Small, very simple fragments of a few notes are grouped together and repeated in varying order; the phrases are separated by pauses. In the longer second section, each instrument plays a series of phrases made up of quick, asymmetrical motives. The third section (sudden drop to piano, about 11:00) has the players combining the materials of sections one and two, gradually moving from piano to forte. One also hears, as the phrases of each section progress, a sense of harmonic movement. In a final coda, an unexpected, sustained melody (synthesizer) provides strong contrast to the tapestry of patterns.

*Curriculum Vitae*, for solo accordion, was written in 1977 on commission from the American Accordionist Society. (A later version, *Curriculum Vitae with Time Bomb* [1980], incorporates a faux-ominous percussion part.) Accordionist Guy Klucevsek edited the printed score, which provides parts for either free (melodic) or Stradella (chord) bass system for the left hand. The aggressive first section, marked *Furioso*, and the rapidly succeeding episodes that follow are fairly explicitly notated, with the exception of a little graphic notation. Following an extended, nostalgic slow passage, the accordionist is instructed to play a cadenza mixing any of the materials from the *Furioso* sections: “juxtapose the various fragments at random . . . play in an obsessed manner, as if practicing frantically.” The last multi-part section reveals the choice of title, quoting from works of Brahms and Mozart that had nostalgic meaning for Foss, as well as the Nazi anthem (representing that which drove him to the U.S.). The ending is a return to the first extended slow section.

In 1978 the Chicago radio station WFMT commissioned Lukas Foss to write a song cycle. His choice of text was Wallace Stevens’s poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, a series of extraordinary, oblique, and evocative vignettes that Foss had long wished to set to music. *Thirteen Ways* is one of Foss’s most important pieces and one of his most successful in integrating his musical concerns with as direct as possible an expression of musical and poetic meaning. As with *Time Cycle*, the text pushed the composer to expand his musical language in an attempt to match the subtlety and range of the poetry. Most remarkable perhaps is Foss’s ability to match, in the voice part, the surface simplicity of Stevens’s syntax and language. The rhythms of the voice tend to mimic speech rhythms, even to the point of stylized oversimplification, and the pitch language for the voice is also very constrained. Flute, percussion, and piano, on the other hand, add in sonic terms that dimension of mystery that hovers above and behind the cryptic commonplaces of the text.

Foss chose a delicate, exotic ensemble to accompany the voice (soprano or mezzo-soprano): “distant but visible” flute to represent the blackbird, pianist playing both traditionally and inside the strings of the instrument, and percussionist playing “almost exclusively” inside the piano, with cowbells and Japanese bowls placed on its strings. Foss draws on the wealth of timbral potential in his ensemble, as well as on different vocal styles, to delineate the different sections of the poem, using no approach twice. Subtle kinds of tone-painting are found throughout, such as the flute’s “sample” technique of tremolos at the end of the first verse, representing (as indicated in the score) “the moving eye of the blackbird.” The glassy sounds of a cowbell’s glissando on the piano strings reflect the cold, jagged icicles of the sixth verse.

Along with these “pictorial” gestures, the composer taps into the eclectic nature of Stevens’s poem for more complex interpretive gambits. An extended, semi-improvised flute and percussion duo—flute pitches are suggested, percussion pitches free, and rhythm is indicated graphically—prepares us for “the sight of the blackbirds/Flying in a green light” in no. 10. No. 11 brings pastiche, a barroom piano accompanying the ride “over Connecticut in a glass coach.” “Non-musical” sounds, such as the rubbing of a hard silicon ball on the wood soundboard of the piano (no. 7, “O thin men of Haddam”), are hard to interpret—humorously? Ominously? Foss relished, and sought out, this kind of ambiguity, which parallels that of the text itself, telling the conductor Richard Dufallo, “When a text is mysterious and visual, then it attracts my music.”<sup>1</sup> In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, Foss was moved to create one of his most unique and enduring masterworks.

—Robert Kirzinger

*Composer Robert Kirzinger writes and lectures on musical subjects. Based in Boston, he is on the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and is associated with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project.*

1. Richard Dufallo, *Trackings: Composers Speak with Richard Dufallo* (Oxford University Press, New York 1989). Interview with Lukas Foss.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Complete Works for Solo Piano. Scott Dunn. Naxos 8559179.

*Echoi, The Fragments of Archilochus*. Electronic Music Foundation EM 105.

*Griffelkin*. Soloists, Back Bay Chorale, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose, conductor. Chandos 10067 [2 CDs].

*Orpheus and Euridice, Renaissance Concerto, Salomon Rossi Suite*. Carol Wincenc, flute; Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, Lukas Foss, conductor. New World Records 80375-2.

Piano Concertos. Jon Nakamatsu, Yakov Kasman, pianists; Pacific Symphony Orchestra, Carl St. Clair, conductor. Harmonia Mundi 907243.

*The Prairie*. Soloists, Providence Singers, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose, conductor. Bmop/Sound 1007.

*Song of Songs*. Jennie Tourel, mezzo-soprano; New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, conductor. Sony 63164.

*Time Cycle*. Lukas Foss, piano; Adele Addison, soprano; Richard Dufallo, clarinet; Howard D. Colf, cello; Charles DeLancey, vibraphone; Columbia Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein, conductor. Sony 63164.

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Yiu, Raymond. "Renaissance Man: A Portrait of Lukas Foss," *Tempo*, no. 221 (July 2002), pp. 15-23.

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