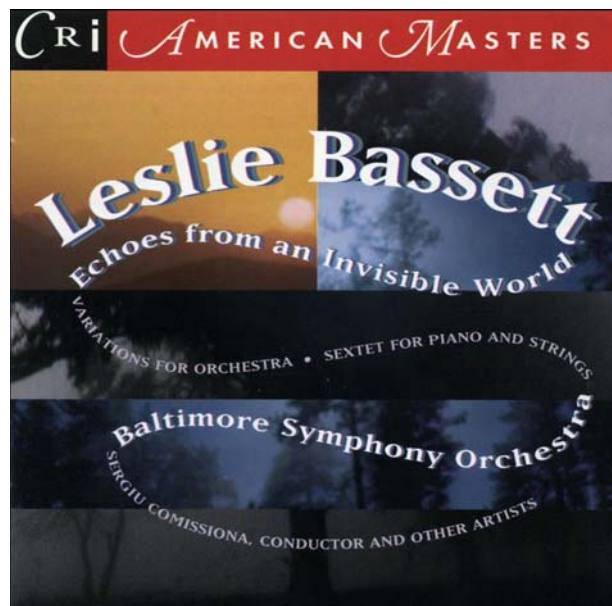


NWCR677

Leslie Bassett



1. *Variations for Orchestra* (1963) (24:36)
Radio Zurich Symphony Orchestra; Jonathan Sternberg, conductor
- Echoes From An Invisible World* (1976) (20:23)
2. Movement One (fast) (6:26)
3. Movement Two (slow) (5:48)
4. Movement Three (fast) (8:09)
Baltimore Symphony Orchestra; Sergiu Comissiona, conductor
- Sextet for Piano and Strings* (1972) (20:58)
5. Movement One (fast) (5:00)
6. Movement Two (fast) (3:29)
7. Movement Three (slow) (6:13)
8. Movement Four (Fast) (6:16)

Total playing time: 66:33

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Notes

Variations for Orchestra was composed in Rome during the spring of 1963, my final year as recipient of the Rome Prize at the American Academy in Rome, and was premiered by the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Rome, conducted by Ferruccio Scaglia, on July 6, 1963. The U.S. premiere by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy on October 22–23, 1965 led to my receiving the 1966 Pulitzer Prize in Music. *Variations* represented the U.S. at the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers in Paris later that year and was recorded for CRI by the performers here represented, assisted by an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Saturday Review* listed the disc as one of the year’s ten best and there have been excellent subsequent performances.

The piece begins with an introduction consisting of four brief phrases, each of which serves as source material for two of the eight variations. Phrase one generates variations 1 and 5; phrase two, 2 and 6; phrase three is the source for variations 3 and 7; and phrase four, 4 and 8. A conclusion follows, clearly referring back to the introduction. A twelve-note series (drawn from a women’s choir work completed shortly before) appears in the cellos about forty-five seconds into the introduction, as well as throughout all of variation 6. Although this series influenced the work’s language to some extent, the music nevertheless came about by very personal means. Reflections upon the mysterious and magical possibilities of non-standard orchestral texture led to the opening sonorities—a mixture of quiet double-bass *divisi a 4*, piano, harp, tam-tam, delicate suspended cymbals and timpani. Similarly I strove to maintain a backdrop of supportive, yet largely unessential sounds (colors, really soft percussion, muted figures, quiet trills, harmonics, etc.) that would project the expectant quality of the introduction into the variations and ultimately to the conclusion. *Variations* is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Vera Starr Bassett.

Echoes from an Invisible World was commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy for the 1976 U.S. bicentennial with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. The country’s six leading orchestras (New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Chicago, and Philadelphia) each commissioned a work, and each agreed to perform the others. Philadelphia’s premiere took place on February 27–28, 1976. If we included presentations by other orchestras, the work has received over sixty performances to date, under conductors Mehta, Maazel, Harth, Mackerras, Akiyama, Meier, Herbig, Comissiona, and others.

In reflecting on music’s power and mystery, Giuseppe Mazzini, one of Garibaldi’s comrades in the Italian liberation struggles of the last century, remarked that “Music is the echo from an invisible world.” Since part of my work on this score took place while in residence at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy, Mazzini’s definition seemed wonderfully apt for the mood and sense of awe that I wished to convey. Orchestral events and textures are highly colored in this work, with occasional small gestures that sometimes reminded me of electronic tape manipulation (tape reverb, splicing, and minuscule explosive attack onto a quieter sound, etc.) I wished to create a virtuoso work that would bring out the depth, artistry, and virtuosity of our fine orchestra musicians. *Echoes* won the 1979 National Composers Competition organized by the International Society for Contemporary Music and the League of Composers, and it represented the U.S. at the World Music Days in Tel Aviv, Israel the following summer.

The Sextet for Piano and Strings was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress and premiered in Washington at the Library’s Coolidge Auditorium on April 27–28, 1972, by the Juilliard String Quartet with John Graham, second viola, and pianist William

Masselos. It received the 1974 Walter Naumburg Recording Award, which resulted in the present recording. As with *Echoes*, the instrumental parts often rely on special string devices (*glissandi*, *ponticelli*, *snapped pizzicato*, etc.) as well as plucked and stopped notes for the piano. The pitch E is the controlling center, heard at the beginning and frequently throughout the work, pointed up by instrumental color. Enriched by the addition of the extra viola, the string ensemble functions as a group, in dialogue with the piano, the ‘other half’ of the ensemble.

During the preparation of these remarks in 1994 for the present “American Masters” compact disc, I have come to realize that critics will probably refer to these three pieces as “of his middle period.” They were written between twenty and thirty years ago, after all, and I have written a lot of music since. Yet I am especially happy to have them together on a CD, for I consider them to be among my best, pieces that have met with wonderful responses and allowed the emergence of significant change and maturity in my musical language and message.

The latter two scores include unmeasured music. To be able to move in and out of meter is a rich and important option, for which I needed to invent a ‘non-meter’ signature (a 0 with lines joining it at the top and bottom). I also like the piling up of sonorities (“pyramids”), which yield a wonderful sound, are easily performed and are rarely present in earlier music. Rustling and scurrying sounds are fascinating and I sometimes like to modify a long sound in one instrument by the addition of a simultaneous short attack in another, slightly coloring the result.

Counterpoint and canonic textures fascinate me; for one thing they may mean that the dominance of harmony is momentarily modified. Yet harmony also fascinates me. Triadic progressions may or may not sound fresh, they are

standard and simple; on the other hand they usually belong with earlier music by composers for whom they were the basis of their language. Four-part harmony, while somewhat less traditional, leaves us with only three four-note chords within twelve notes. Six-note harmony seems dense and cluster-like, and there are only two six-note chords.

I sometimes like five-note harmony. One can select five notes for the first chord, then five others for the second. (The chords must progress smoothly and must always be chosen because of their wonderful sound.) Two notes have been left over, so they go into the third chord, supplemented by three chosen from the first. The fourth chord begins with the two notes left over from the first chord, plus three drawn from the second, and so forth. This can be a lovely way to move harmony.

My first concern in beginning a work is that the sound, the gesture, the atmosphere, be poignant and uniquely appropriate for the instruments chosen. Special, unforgettable. Given a good beginning, I can then go ahead, God willing.

—Leslie Bassett

Leslie Bassett, born in Hanford, CA, 1923, served as trombonist and arranger in Army bands during World War II. A pupil of Ross Lee Finney, Arthur Honegger, Nadia Boulanger, and Roberto Gerhard, his honors include the Pulitzer Prize (1966), Rome Prize, Fulbright Fellowship (Paris), two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Naumburg Recording Award, the James Phelan Award, two Koussevitzky Foundation awards, and citations from the University of Michigan and California State University, Fresno. He was the 1984 Henry Russel Lecturer at the University of Michigan (the University’s highest honor) and is its Albert A. Stanley Distinguished University professor of music emeritus. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Production Notes

Produced by Carter Harmon.

Echoes from an Invisible World was recorded by David Hancock, Baltimore, Maryland in November of 1979.

Sextet for Piano and Strings was recorded May 19, 1975.

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