

Seymour Shifrin

Cantata to the Text of Sophoclean Choruses (1955-57)

The Cantata Singers; David Hoose, music director with the Lydian String Quartet and the Harvard University Choir; John Ferris, University Organist & Choirmaster; Sally Pinkas, piano.

While finding my own way I should not like to give up anything that has ever been won in the way of subtlety, richness and complexity; yet I retain a taste for the simple and the vernacular. The qualities I value in music have to do with strong intent, the interaction of the small and the large and the will to make whole what seems disparate. What I hope continues to evolve in my work is a highly inflected, pliable, elegant language.

-Seymour Shifrin

Seymour Shifrin (1926-1979) was born in New York City and educated at the High School of Music and Art and at Columbia University; his most influential teachers were William Schuman, Otto Luening and Darius Milhaud. He taught for many years at the University of California at Berkeley and was Professor of Music at Brandeis University. His commissions include those from the Koussevitsky Foundation, the League of Composers—ISCM, the Fine Arts Foundation, the Fromm Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He received the Bearn's Prize, the Copley Award, the Horblit Award and Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships. His *Satires of Circumstance*, issued by Nonesuch Records, received the Koussevitsky International Recording Award in 1970. Two years later, Shifrin's *Three Pieces for Orchestra* (1958), a Naumburg Award-winning composition, again received the Koussevitsky as CRI SD 275. Shifrin's work may also be heard on CRI recordings: *Serenade for Five Instruments* (1955) on CRI SD 123; *String Quartet No. 4* on CRI SD 358; *Chronicles* (1970), *Three Songs* (1952) and *Five Songs* (1979) on CRI SD 504.

Shifrin's *Cantata to the Text of Sophoclean Choruses* was begun in 1955, when the composer was 29, and completed two years later. The composer once described to this writer the unusual degree of concentration he achieved working on this piece. Long uninterrupted days in Switzerland (where the Shifrins spent a Guggenheim year) led to an especially intense relationship to the piece, one he retained throughout his life.

The *Cantata* is the work of a young composer, one who has reached maturity very early. Before beginning the *Cantata* he had already written a very characteristic *First String Quartet*, a cello sonata, a number of fine songs, and a wonderful *Serenade* for five players, this last being the most fully realized and ample work before the *Cantata*. The *Cantata* contains many traits of the early Shifrin—a reliance on the motive as organizing force, the reflection of tonal influences in the harmony, and a rhythmic steadiness, embodied in *ostinato* figures and a variety of motoric devices. Also present are traits which will remain with Shifrin throughout (unlike those mentioned above). The harmony is often based on the octatonic scale (whole tone plus half tone alternatively) without reference to specific tonal centers. The texture is sometimes a contrast between sustained and disjunct elements, an increasingly favored method for Shifrin in later years. And the orchestral interludes contain some instances of the very free linear counterpoints which engross him more and more in his later work.

The instrumental plan is unusual, beginning with a string quartet and piano accompanying the women, following it with male voices and winds, and introducing the full complement only in the third movement. It might seem that the intent was to make the early movements detachable for separate performance, and indeed they proved so, but they are very closely integrated into the whole, and the composer's preference for, or insistence on an integral performance grew increasingly firm during his last years.

The instrumental introduction which begins the *Lament for Oedipus* presents, in compact form, elements important to all the movements. A cell made up of three notes of the diatonic scale (G, F#, E) helps form both the lines and the chords. The introduction ends with a precipitous descent in seconds. Later in the piece this is developed into chains of suspensions, often preceding cadence points. When the voices enter they sing in parallel thirds, long phrases, against nervous piano interjections. This opposition dominates the movement; it is an image of fatality. The poise and formality of the voices is challenged and unsettled by the shifting ground of the accompaniment. Shifrin matches the eloquence of the text in the climactic middle section. The voices become more independent. "Time watches, he is eagle-eyed," they sing over slow moving harmonies, and the passage stays in the memory long after. After this climactic passage and consequent interlude the opening strains return ("Would you had never come"), leading to an elaborate instrumental coda built mainly on the "time watches" motives.

The *Ode* begins with a wide ranging lyric compound line which continues as accompaniment for the more conjunct vocal parts. Much of the vocal line and harmony grows out of the simple initial half-step statement "love, unconquerable." The harmony converses with A minor but refuses to submit to it. Twice, an F# pedalpoint offers temporary stability ("surely, you swerve upon ruin," "pleasure to her alone") but the final lofty cadence is less a resolution than an accommodation, in keeping with the tensions in the text.

The words, "Merciless Aphrodite," the concluding line of the *Ode*, are set to a harmony which is applied to Bacchus in the ensuing *Paeon*. Aphrodite's allure becomes for Bacchus an instrument of power. Other motives heard in the previous movements are also transformed. The chain of seconds becomes an important upbeat figure, and the diatonic cell becomes the "thunderer" motive. The descending half-step is adapted to "the shadow of plague is upon us." The most vivid impression of the *Paeon* is its unrelenting energy, and the straightforward monumentality of the climaxes.

Though its source is the classic measures of Sophocles through Yeats, the piece often attains the wilder reaches of Euripides' *Bacchae*, where the celebration of the god gets out of control.

The final *Ode* begins with a new chromatic motive F D# E ("I have seen") which can be heard as a compacting of the primary diatonic motive. This motive is extended and elaborated for most of the succeeding points of imitation ("sleep cannot lull him," "and his house is the shining day," "no pride on earth," "man's little pleasure"). This results in the variation movement, whose integration is appropriate to its text, a summary of the fatalism which guides the whole. Shifrin's melodic writing is at its finest in this movement, the lines moving naturally and with purpose, the full texture attaining at the climaxes an imposing complexity and power.

—John Harbison

In 1980, the year after Seymour Shifrin's death, John Harbison, then the music director of the Cantata Singers, began laying the groundwork for a performance of the *Cantata*. Although completed more than twenty years earlier, the work had never had a complete performance. The world premiere performance of the complete four-movement work for mixed chorus and full orchestra, took place on May 2, 1984 in Sanders Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. David Hoose conducted The Cantata Singers, joined by Harvard's University Choir and the Lydian Quartet.

The Cantata Singers was formed in 1964 with a dedication to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, performing over sixty cantatas and all the composer's motets and large choral works. The ensemble now presents repertoire from the full spectrum of choral music, from 15th century works of Dufay and Josquin to world premieres of contemporary American composers. Among its musical directors and guest conductors have been such musicians as John Ferris, John Harbison, Earl Kim, Leon Kirchner, Joseph Silverstein, Craig Smith and Benjamin Zander. In addition to their annual subscription series of concerts, The Cantata Singers have performed throughout New England and have been heard on radio stations WGBH, WBUR, WCRB and WHRB. They may be heard on CBI recording CRI SD 313; they have also recorded for Advent and Sine Qua Non.

David Hoose has been music director of The Cantata Singers since 1982. In 1981, he won the Dmitri Mitropoulos Award for conducting at the Berkshire Music Center where he studied with Gustav Meier and Seiji Ozawa. He has conducted the Brandeis University Orchestra since 1975 and also directs the Brandeis Contemporary Chamber Ensemble. He appears regularly as guest conductor of such noted groups as Collage, Alea III, Emmanuel Music, Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, and others. An unusually versatile musician, Hoose is a composer, having studied composition with Seymour Shifrin, Arthur Berger, Harold Shapero and Richard Hoffmann. He also plays horn with the Naumburg Award-winning Emmanuel Wind Quintet.

Formed in 1980, the **Lydian String Quartet** (Wilma Smith, Judith Eissenberg, violins; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello) received their first international recognition at the 1982 Evian String Quartet Competition, where they received three awards. In 1983, the Quartet was a multiple prize-winner at the Banff International String Quartet Competition, and in 1984 won the Naumburg Chamber Music Award. Artists-in-Residence at Brandeis University, the Quartet enjoys an active performance schedule in the United States and abroad, appearing regularly at the Monadnock Music Festival, the Tidewater Festival and the Aspen Music Festival.

One of the oldest collegiate choral groups in the country, the **Harvard University Choir** was founded by a group of undergraduates in 1838 "to cultivate the knowledge and practice of sacred music, having especial reference to the devotional exercises of the College Chapel." Besides providing the music for daily Morning Prayers and Sunday services at the Memorial Church, the University Choir presents special concerts in the Spring and Fall terms, which have included major Bach works, Classical and Romantic pieces and several premieres of works by such composers as Roger Sessions, William Mathias, Herbert Fromm, Donald Martino and Nicholas Van Slyck. Under the direction of John Ferris, current University Organist and Choirmaster, the choir has established itself as, in the words of Richard Dyer of the Boston Globe, "one of the most remarkable musical instruments in Boston."

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)

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Cantata to the Text of Sophoclean Choruses

I. LAMENT FOR OEDIPUS

What can the shadow-like generations of man attain
But build up a dazzling mockery of delight that under their touch dissolves again?
Oedipus seemed blessed, but there is no man blessed among men.

Oedipus overcame the woman-breasted Fate;
He seemed like a strong tower against Death and first among the fortunate;
He sat upon the ancient throne of Thebes, and all men called him great.

But, looking for a marriage-bed, he found the bed of his birth,
Tilled the field his father had tilled, cast seed into the same abounding earth,
Entered through the door that had sent him wailing forth.

Begetter and begot as one! How could that be hid?
What darkness cover up that marriage-bed? Time watches, he is eagle-eyed,
And all the works of man are known and every soul is tired.

Would you had never come to Thebes, nor to this house,
Nor riddled with the woman-breasted Fate, beaten off Death and succoured us,
That I had never raised this song, heartbroken Oedipus!

Reprinted from W.B. Yeats; "Sophocles' King Oedipus"
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II. ODE

Love, unconquerable
Waster of rich men, keeper
Of warm lights and all-night vigil
In the soft face of a girl:
Sea-wanderer, forest-visitor!
Even the pure Immortals cannot escape you,
And mortal man, in his one day's dusk,
Trembles before your glory.

Surely you swerve upon ruin
The just man's consenting heart,
As here you have made bright anger
Strike between father and son—
And none has conquered but Love!
A girl's glance working the will of heaven:
Pleasure to her alone who mocks us,
Merciless Aphrodite.

III. PAEAN

God of many names
 O Iacchos
 son
of Kadmeian Semele
 O born of the Thunder!
Guardian of the West
 Regent
of Eleusis' plain
 O Prince of Thebes
and the Dragon Field by rippling Ismenos:

God of many names

 the flame of torches
flares on our hills
 the nymphs of Iacchos
dance at the spring of Castalia:

from the vine-close mountain
 come ah come in ivy:
Evohe evohé! sings through the streets of Thebes

God of many names

 Iacchos of Thebes
heavenly Child
 of Semele bride of the Thunderer!
The shadow of plague is upon us:
 oh
down the long slopes
 across the lamenting water

lo Fire! Chorister of the throbbing stars!
O purest among the voices of the night!
Thou son of God, blaze for us!

Come with the choric rapture of circling Maenads
Who cry *lo Iacche!*
 God of many names!

IV. ODE II

I have seen this gathering sorrow from time long past
Loom upon Oedipus' children: generation from generation
Takes the compulsive rage of the enemy god.
So lately this last flower of Oedipus' line
Drank the sunlight! But now a passionate word
And a handful of dust have closed up all its beauty.

What mortal arrogance
Transcends the wrath of Zeus?
Sleep cannot lull him, nor the effortless long months
of the timeless gods: but is young for ever,
And his house is the shining day of high Olympos.
And that is and shall be,
And all the past, is his.
No pride on earth is free of the curse of heaven.

The straying dreams of men
May bring them ghosts of joy:
But as they drowse, the waking embers burn them;
Or they walk with fixed eyes, as blind men walk.
But the ancient wisdom speaks for our own time;
Fate works most for woe
With Folly's fairest show
Man's little pleasure is the spring of sorrow.

From "Antigone," translated by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, Copyright 1939, by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.