

In the twentieth century, a series of instruments and ensembles have found their repertoire expanding exponentially, and their place on the classical stage suddenly front and center, instead of accompanying from the wings. The percussion ensemble, the saxophone quartet, the “Pierrot” sextet, and now the laptop ensemble are emerging as viable chamber groups. And similarly, instruments from the woodwind and brass choirs have assumed a soloistic role that was denied them, not even considered in the nineteenth century (except for showy pieces that served double-duty as pedagogic milestones.) The contrabass and viola were the last of the string instruments to make the leap to this prominence, and Robert Black’s recital on these discs shows the remarkable emergence of the former as a leading voice for the most intimate and imaginative musings of American composers from the past century.

Black’s program falls into two parts. Disc 1 features music for bass and piano, Disc 2 the instrument unaccompanied. It also breaks down chronologically, with the former works largely earlier and more traditional in character, the latter later and more experimental/avant-garde.

The works for accompanied bass show the first step taken toward instrumental “equality”: it becomes a lyric partner with the piano like any other stringed instrument. Composers come to realize that the exceptional range of the instrument, combined with its rich and differing timbres from one register to another, make it uniquely expressive. And the bass’s importance in jazz is mirrored in a new interest in active rhythms and *pizzicato* textures.

**Joseph Iadone** (1915–2004) was most renowned as a virtuoso lutenist, but he began his musical career as a guitarist and bassist. His *Sonata for Double Bass and Piano* (1944–50) shows a definite Hindemithian influence, probably based on his studies with the composer at the Yale School of Music. (According to his obituary in *The New York Times*, he picked up the lute on joining Hindemith’s Collegium Musicum when the latter offered him a blunt invitation: “You, Iadone, play the lute.”) The work’s construction is highly polished, classical in its formal balance. Its standout is the final movement, which has the bass always in a jaunty *pizzicato*, a legacy of the composer’s experience as a jazz player.

**Halsey Stevens** (1908–1989) is most known (outside of his own music) as the foremost English-language biographer of Bartók. But his *Arioso and Etude for Double-Bass and Piano* (1953) shows once again at least as much influence of Hindemith, who at midcentury presented Americans with an alternative to both Schoenbergian dodecaphony and Stravinskian neoclassicism. There’s a sober, noble quality to the Arioso that emphasizes the bass’s lyric voice and also covers an extremely wide range without paring it out into separate registers. The effect is of a seamless song floating over the entire range of the instrument. The Etude is brilliant in its alternation between three highly idiomatic gestures: highly rhythmic double-stops, rapid sixteenth-note passagework on separate bows, and fluid melodic writing.

**Quincy Porter** (1897–1966) is a fascinating combination of a neoclassical with romantic spirit. He spent most of his life in academia, concluding with a long tenure at Yale. His *Lyric Piece* (1950) is a hushed prayer; like so much of Porter’s music, it evidences great lyric honesty and sweetness. The influence of his years of study in France is obvious. There are Impressionist harmonies and gestures throughout, and while there are recurrent ideas, they tend to melt into one another in a manner suggestive more of wandering thought than architectural form.

**Jerome Moross** (1913–1983), because of his extensive experience in film and Broadway, has the most obviously “American” sound on this entire collection. His *Sonatina for Contrabass and Piano* (1967) would be accessible to an audience more familiar with popular musical idioms, but its simplicity is deceptive, as there is a lot of craft and sophistication embedded within the vernacular tropes. Each movement evokes a particular American musical genre. The first is a modal folk song, though the harmonies keep it off-kilter, especially the chromatically drifting triads in the piano. The second is jazz, with bouncy syncopations and extensive pizzicato writing. The third is a blues, beginning with an extensive bass solo alternating between bowed and plucked, then settling into a languid duet where the bass is *pizzicato* and the piano sustaining. It’s very happy to take its time and sing its simple little song, unbothered by any outside pressure. It might also be a personal statement of the composer’s state in his musical climate, as the date of composition is right at the height of the modernist and experimentalist wave crashing over American arts at that moment.

**Otto Luening** (1900–1996) is perhaps best known as the “co-inventor” (with Vladimir Ussachevsky) of American electroacoustic music, he was also a composer of tuneful, mid-American nationalist/neoclassical music, which seemed to meet his deepest expressive needs. The three-movement *Suite for Bass and Piano* (1958) begins curiously, with bass and piano lines rising and falling a little like children’s swings swaying out of phase (though all within a more traditional than experimental template). The second is a very pure and simple song, with no rhythmic duration shorter than a quarter note nor longer than a dotted half. It feels a little like a Baroque chaconne, even if not strictly so in form or harmony. The third is a brash and bravura fanfare, its harmony closest to Copland at his most populist.

The bass-piano program concludes with music that is both a look backward and forward, **Johanna Beyer’s** (1888–1944) *Movement for Double Bass and Piano* (1936). Backward in that this is the earliest piece on the entire program, but forward in that it is relentlessly probing and intense in the spirit of the American “Ultramodernists.” Their resolutely experimentalist stance, at the same time un beholden to most European models, made them sort of “double-outsiders” on the American musical scene, and the German-American Beyer, perhaps partly because of her gender, remains perhaps the most neglected. She also created some of the earliest American percussion ensemble music, and her 1938 *Music of the Spheres* is a landmark electroacoustic piece.

This is a highly compact piece that seems to encompass an entire world. The piece parses into two clear sections. The first is an essay on an obsessively varied motive, whose kernel is a descending minor third. Because the strength of the music is above all in its motivic structure, it allows for, indeed welcomes, stringent dissonances where ideas rub against one another. Then the music changes character dramatically, with a bass cadenza. But interestingly enough, it doesn’t return to the original material (even though the original motivic idea does underpin the conclusion of the piece). Instead, we have an antiphonal conversation between bass and piano, almost as though they were in different rooms, that resolves on a surprisingly gentle and soft embrace. But then the descending minor third appears at the very end in string *pizzicati*, as though to dare us to forget it. There’s a touch of almost black humor here.

When we move to the unaccompanied works, a new conception of the bass emerges. In the postwar years, a series of factors combined to create a new instrumental practice, one combining elements of theatricality, a concentration of unusual sounds and techniques, and extreme virtuosity. Bertram Turetzky (b. 1933) was a catalyst for this movement, commissioning more

than 300 pieces, including the first four on this disc. He represented a new sort of adventurous performer, encouraging composers to experiment with new ideas and means, inventing techniques to meet the attendant challenges (and he represents a larger tendency toward genuine bass virtuosity and exceptional musical training, a trend which finds its current manifestation in Black).

And also, combined with this expansion of performer attitude and technique, is a new concept of the instrument itself. The bass, with its decidedly “human” scale, has a “corporeal” quality like few other instruments. It invites sonic exploration in a near-erotic manner (embodied at its height by Druckman’s *Valentine*). Its deep, plaintive voice, both raucous and fragile, its exceptional timbral diversity, its equal performative division of traditions of *arco* (classical) and *pizzicato* (jazz): all these combine to create a field for exploration that was as vast as any instrument’s. It was an open invitation for composers at the height of the experimental 1960s, which was irresistible.

**Barney Childs** (1926–2000) was an experimental composer who spent the majority of his career in the West, with a long tenure at the University of California Redlands. He was also a questing, polymathic artist, writing poetry and teaching creative writing throughout his career. Improvisation and indeterminacy play a major role in the body of his work, but the 1960 *Sonata for Bass Alone* is more traditional, with three movements in a classical sequence: slow/meditative, pizzicato/jazzy, rhythmic martial (march). The first starts out sounding like it will be serial, but quickly focuses on recurrent motives of alternating thirds. The second alternates between swinging lines (described in score as “non-legit”) and more classical, “legit” phrasing. The final creates its drive between even quarters and crackling triplets, builds to a wonderful climax.

**George Perle** (1915–2009) was one of the most original of the New York serialists. A scholar of the Second Viennese School, he developed a theory of twelve-tone harmony which created some of the most pleasingly lyrical and coherent music of his circle. His *Monody II* (1962) is a whirlwind of compact musical ideas. Like so much music written from a modernist stance, it demands close listening. With concentration, and perhaps multiple listening, one hears several basic micro-ideas cycling, a kind of motivic kaleidoscope. Yet Perle also always had a strong “classical” temperament, and these are never ambiguous or blurredly elided. They are always clear and distinct, no matter how fast they fly by. And the breakneck *pizzicati* sections are a wonder to behold.

**William Sydeeman**’s (b. 1928) *For Double Bass Alone* (1959) is also in three movements, which are highly concentrated. It becomes clear that there are unifying motives between all of them, especially a little rising figure of a melodic major second, then minor second. The first movement has a grave, almost archaic flavor, and Sydeeman uses techniques idiomatic to the instrument such as double-stops, glisses, left-hand pizzicato. But these are never showy; they always feel essential to the intended structure and expression. The second movement is a driving scherzo, Shostakovichian in its sinister tone. The final movement is an unusual ending. It alternates between plain, almost breathy perfect fifth double-stops, reminiscences of earlier ideas, and sudden *sul ponticello* downward cascades of *tremoli*. It feels deliberately open and unresolved. Sydeeman was a composer who experienced significant youthful success, but left the New York “uptown” scene to live in California, where he began to explore both a more eclectic spiritual path and a more tonal musical language. This piece is from his earlier, modernist period, but that very ambiguity of its ending might be seen as a presage of the changes to come.

**John Cage** (1912–1992) of course needs no introduction, as one of the most prolific and influential artists in any medium of the twentieth century. *59 ½" for a String Player* (1953) comes from early in the period when he embraced chance procedures for generating materials, and indeterminacy for leaving many decisions to the creative impulse and imagination of performers. This piece has an original notation, combining graphics with a staff for each string of the instruments, leaving room at the top for a composite result, from which one plays. While a result of chance procedures, it also creates a strict and compact template that forces the music to race through its roughly one-minute duration, creating an effect a little like time-lapse photography.

**James Tenney** (1934–2006) was an original musical thinker who articulated perhaps the best approach for continuing the tradition of the Ultramodernists, but with a new level of theory and rigor typical of the postwar era. *Beast* (1971) was written for Buell Neidlinger, and is part of the series of *Postal Pieces*, which set the constraint that the score had to be contained on a single postcard. Tenney was a master of the elegant compositional algorithm, a capacity to create a single coherent process that projected an immediately recognizable concept. In this case, the instrument is turned into the groaning animal of its title by a simple process of varying tuning. The low E is tuned down to an E flat. Then a double-stop is played for the entirety of the piece between the open A string and the low E flat, whose pitch is varied microtonally to create different numbers of frequency beats (the player follows a graph which looks like a complex waveform to vary the beat patterns). The effect is unlike anything ever heard from the instrument before, but simultaneously, it's perfectly idiomatic.

*Valentine* (1969) by **Jacob Druckman** (1928–1996) provides a fitting conclusion to this program, a bravura flourish. Written for Alvin Brehm, it's one of the great virtuoso pieces of its era. When one examines the score, one sees an extravaganza of extended techniques (use of timpani mallet to play the instrument; bowing and knocking on different portions thereof; vocalisms: shouts, sung pitches, imitations of bass sounds, superfast whispered instructions). Despite its free improvisatory feel, every sound is precisely, unequivocally notated. The work is also a celebration of performance, not just musical, but erotic. As its title implies, the work is a love-note to the instrument that in fact lavishes a sort of physical attention upon the instrument that is sensual, at times even sadistic. It's also quite funny, working its way up to a "grand climax" in more than one sense of the word. Few pieces sum up the heady, liberating ethos of the 1960s better.

*Robert Carl is chair of the composition department at The Hartt School—University of Hartford, the author of Terry Riley's In C (Oxford University Press), and writes extensively on new music for Fanfare Magazine.*

**Robert Black** tours the world creating unheard-of music for the solo double bass. He collaborates with the most adventurous composers, musicians, dancers, artists, actors, and technophiles from all walks of life. He is a founding and current member of the Bang on a Can All-Stars. He makes frequent appearances at various music festivals including the Moab and Monadnock Music Festivals. A recipient of numerous grants, he received a Bessie Award for his collaborative work with The School of Hard Knocks in New York City. He has recorded solo CDs for Mode Records (*The Complete Bass Music of Christian Wolff* and *The Bass Music of Giacinto Scelsi*), O.O. Discs (*State of the Bass*), and his All-Stars recordings on Cantaloupe Records. He teaches at The Hartt School—University of Hartford, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Festival Eleazar de Carvalho in Fortaleza, Brazil. [www.robertblack.org](http://www.robertblack.org)

**John McDonald** is a composer who tries to play the piano and a pianist who tries to compose. He is a Professor of Music at Tufts University, where he teaches composition, theory, and performance.

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##### **John Cage**

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MODERN AMERICAN BASS

ROBERT BLACK, BASS

JOHN McDONALD, PIANO

80722-2 [2 CDs]

DISC ONE [44:33]

(Accompanied)

Joseph Iadone (1915–2004)

*Sonata for Double Bass and Piano* (1944/1950) 9:49

1. Con moto 3:58

2. Adagio 3:50

3. Scherzo 2:01

Halsey Stevens (1908–1989)

*Arioso and Etude* (1953) 4:44

4. Arioso 2:36

5. Etude 2:08

Quincy Porter (1897–1966)

6. *Lyric Piece for Contrabass and Piano* (1950) 5:04

Jerome Moross (1913–1983)

*Sonatina* (1967) 14:08

7. Andante 3:17

8. Allegro ma non troppo 4:54

9. Poco lento ma ben ritmato 5:56

Otto Luening (1900–1996)

*Suite for Bass and Piano* (1958) 5:47

10. Moderato con moto 2:22

11. Not too slow 1:43

12. Allegro moderato 1:42

Johanna Beyer (1888–1944)

13. *Movement for Double Bass and Piano* (1936) 4:29

Disc Two [41:50]  
(Unaccompanied)

Barney Childs (1926–2000)  
*Sonata for Bass Alone* (1960) 9:44  
1. Meditative 3:36  
2. With relaxed motion 3:26  
3. Recitative and March 2:43

George Perle (1915–2009)  
4. *Monody II* (1962) 5:05

William Sydeman (b. 1928)  
*For Double Bass Alone* (1959) 8:37  
5. Rubato 2:15  
6. Allegro ritmico 1:56  
7. Moderato 4:26

John Cage (1912–1992)  
8. *59 1/2" for a String Player* (1953) 1:04

James Tenney (1934–2006)  
9. *Beast* (1971) 7:11

Jacob Druckman (1928–1996)  
10. *Valentine* (1969) 9:42

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