

The Boston Modern Orchestra Project's January 2008 premiere of Ezra Sims's *Concert Piece II*, featuring clarinetists Michael Norsworthy and Amy Advocat, was one of the most thrilling concert experiences I can remember. I've been an admirer of Sims's music for many years, and I am familiar with his distinctive microtonal style—certain characteristic intervals and harmonies, ostinati, and phrase contours. But despite my familiarity, I found myself laughing out loud with pleasure at this latest, and very grand, example of Sims's continued resolve and daring.

Years ago the Boston Globe music critic Richard Buell called Sims's music "subversive," and I believe in a sense he was right. With certain aspects of his music Sims sticks to tradition; for example, *Concert Piece II* is a double concerto with classic instrumentation, in ABA form, with clear motivic development, arching "antecedent" and "consequent" phrases, even tonality (albeit of an idiosyncratic kind). However, within conventional parameters such as these Sims produces sonorities that subvert our expectations on a visceral level. From the very opening of *Concert Piece II*, over undulating and pulsating microtonal figures in the strings and bassoons, the clarinets begin trading off strange, soaring lines with intervals such as 1/3 tones, 2/3 tones, and 1/6-tone-augmented minor thirds. The melodies are elegant, articulate, intensely expressive, and even seem to have familiar contours—yet they are also startlingly alien. This feeling is somehow underscored when the oboe enters with its own wild take on the theme, and then even further when later the violins, flutes, and oboe take up the thematic line in unison. Watching these two extraordinary clarinetists at the edge of the stage, listening to them bend and twist their tones along with the entire orchestra, the impact is intense. Audience members are forced to make an immediate choice: they will either refuse the notion that these, too, are "real" melodies and harmonies, or allow their conception of these things to be completely rearranged.

It is almost surrealist music, juxtaposing the familiar and the unfamiliar in such a striking way. However, as startling as this sound is, and as defiant as Sims the composer seems to be in pursuing his unorthodox musical vision to such lengths, the music is not aggressive, but rather romantic and lyrical. "Fast and eager," are Sims's own directions for the first movement, and there is indeed an eagerness, a passionate anticipation, in those ostinati and the rising clarinet lines. The first part of the second movement ("thoughtful and very flexible") comprises the slow, middle section of the entire work, to be eventually followed without pause by a return of the opening ostinati and theme (reintroduced to us by the oboe this time). In the opening of this movement, the clarinets, paired closely, the horns, and the flutes gently weave around each other over a simmering, microtonally shifting pedal tone in the violas, creating a delicate, melancholy world. The intensity gradually builds, until after about three minutes, the clarinets meet with the violins at unisons and octaves in the high register with an exquisite new melody (joined soon by flute), a passage that seems both sad and exhilarating.

Sims's lyricism and delicate touch are evident in his earliest works, such as *Sonata*, for cello and piano, from 1957. Both this and *Sonatine*, from the same year, are serial works. Sims says that at the time he was drawn to atonality, twelve-tone techniques, and serialism because of his desire for a "level of saturated dissonance." Serialism also, he says, simply "gave you a reason for the next note." The strictly twelve-tone *Sonatine* certainly creates the dissonant overall texture Sims sought, and exemplifies the feeling of discipline and rigor often associated with serial music (even the driving rhythms and forward motion reminiscent of Schoenberg's *Suite for Piano*, Op. 25). It is angular, atonal, and full of registral leaps, and coherence is created through the continual looping of a single untransposed twelve-tone row and motifs derived from it, as well as rhythmic motifs. However, *Sonata*, composed soon afterwards and also atonal, shows an alternative, lyrical approach. Here Sims creates coherence through clear lines. The opening section of *Sonata* is tender, an elegant passing back and forth of gestures and pitches between the instruments, like

precious objects. Through sustained and repeated pitches, our ears are gently navigated through the atonal structures, and each note in this delicate, pointillistic Webernesque texture feels like a discovery. As the music becomes more animated, clear, stepwise lines assert themselves as a unifying element, mostly as legato melodies in the cello part.

About a minute into *Sonata*, the piano bursts forth in a series of irregular quintuplet patterns, an early example of a distinct type of ostinato that became a frequent feature of Sims's music. The effect has been described as "telegraphic" by composer Rodney Lister, and is given the perfect delicate shuddering feeling here by Eric Moe. (They are the same sort of accompanying figures we hear in the opening of *Concert Piece II*, and they are heard in many other pieces composed in the span of Sims's career in between these two pieces.) This technique calls to mind the tremolos that other plucked string instruments (guitar, mandolin) use in place of sustained pitches. Though the surface in this piano part is rhythmically agitated, a clear line is nonetheless formed as the repeated pitches gradually move stepwise, over the leaps and broken pizzicato figures in the cello.

*Sonata* was Sims's last serial piece; when it was finished, Sims felt he had done everything it was possible for him to do with that approach, and indeed with the tempered, twelve-note chromatic scale. Although he had been having microtonal impulses—the desire to bend pitches in certain ways in his music—for a while he continued composing "respectable" music, as he puts it, while researching the music and theories of various early microtonal pioneers such as Harry Partch and Julian Carrillo, and even the seventeenth-century Dutch tuning theorist Christiaan Huygens. Sims sought a source for his harmonies and melodies that involved the intervals of the harmonic series, many of which cannot be produced with 12-note equal temperament. Ultimately he developed a system of his own, a scale derived from 72-note equal temperament that embodied his conception of harmony and tonality and served his compositional needs. In short, Sims's system does the following two things: it replaces the familiar major and minor scales with a nine-note diatonic scale whose pitches, thanks to the microtones, approximate partials 8–15 of the harmonic series, and it fills in the spaces between these basic pitches with chromatic, "dissonant" microintervals, that result in a "master" scale of twenty-four notes.

Unlike the conventional conception of the diatonic scale, Sims perceives all nine notes of his diatonic scale as "stable" or consonant, and his harmonic model is similarly expanded. Traditionally, the major triad (derived, it is often said, from partials 4, 5 and 6 of the overtone series) is the ultimate stable harmony. The thirds and fifths that make it up are in a sense also signature gestures, expressive idioms of tonal music. Sims instead uses as his basic stable harmony a chord using partials 8–11; thinking in the "key of C" this would be C, D, E lowered by a twelfth-tone, and F# lowered by a quarter-tone. The quarter-tone-diminished tritone (halfway between a tritone and a fourth) that frames this sonority is very much a signature of Sims's music, heard often at openings and closings and moments of return or resolution (where traditionally we would hear thirds and fifths). It is indeed revolutionary to propose such an interval as resolved and stable, since in tonal music we are accustomed to hearing the tritone and even the fourth as dissonances. It is in the composer's hands to make this new chord function for us the way he conceives of it, and Sims does this compellingly. Somehow this sonority is felt simultaneously as evocative and uneasy, and as a point of harmonic stability and repose.

While the theory behind Sims's scale can seem complex, it is all mainly in the service of creating a coherent language with which to speak. After his early ventures in atonality, Sims's microtonal scale, he has said, "gave [him] back dissonance in the context of consonance." It also gave him an expanded conception of consonance, and it gave him once again "a reason for the next note."

*Musing and Reminiscence* (2003) was composed for Boston Musica Viva in the year of Sims's seventy-fifth birthday. (I was an enthusiastic audience member at the premiere of this piece, as well.) In his program notes, Sims wrote that his pieces "have gotten simpler as they've gone along. Whether this is the result of maturity or just age, I can't know." Sims wrote that the title implies "an old man looking back on what he's done and how he did it." (Never mind that it was completed two years before the adventurous *Concert Piece II*.) This piece, too, has a sober and nostalgic quality. In a sense, it is a retrospective of a lifetime's methods, mannerisms, and characteristic turns of phrase. After a subdued introductory passage in the flute and clarinet, the "Ezra Sims chord," described above, is gently presented by the ensemble, but soon fades, rather than propelling us forward as it does in other pieces. The clarinet displays a characteristic Sims motif haltingly, and soon after this figure is gently echoed by the flute, then is very gradually expanded and woven together with other familiar melodic bits and pieces by the ensemble into a texture of imitative counterpoint. (The fragments in this medley call to mind such pieces as *Flight* (1989), for flute and tape, *Elegie—nach Rilke* (from 1976, also composed for Boston Musica Viva), and *If I Told Him*.) Eventually, fragments become extended melodies, wistful due to the gentle tempo and the plaintive contour of the clarinet motif.

In his notes, Sims described the third section, starting with the clarinet solo at around nine minutes, as "elegiac." This prompts us to wonder (since this is an autobiographical work), why elegiac? Is there a dark humor in this statement? One does see a tendency toward elegies and the like in Sims's music from early on (the gorgeous *Elegie—nach Rilke* is one of my very favorite Sims pieces), though this is often combined with humor and a general playfulness. (*In Memoriam Alice Hawthorne*, from 1967, used texts from Edward Gorey's macabre abecedarian *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, and another 1976 Boston Musica Viva piece is titled *Celebration of Dead Ladies*, a reference to the women in F. R. Higgins's poem "Song for the Clatter-Bones" and the blues song "St. James Infirmary.") Certainly in his titles and in his musical plans, Sims sometimes conveys a desire not to take things too seriously, yet his music nonetheless often portrays an undeniable tenderness, often melancholy.

*AEDM*, composed in 1988 for the cellist Ted Mook in memory of Mook's mother, Anne Elizabeth Dorrow Mook, also has a deeply introspective quality, as solo pieces often do. However, Sims's use, at Mook's suggestion, of the elder Mook's initials as a structural element gives this piece, too, an affectionate playfulness. Sims created a musical motif based on the four letters, and this runs in some formation through the entire piece. (The D is lowered by a one-sixth-tone, and "M"—here an E-flat, or "mi"—is lowered by a quarter-tone.) The motif comprises the first four notes of movements I–IV, and goes through various permutations: it is transposed, inverted, heard as harmony, and heard in retrograde. In the slow third movement, the dissonant D/M figure persists as an element of emotional tension. In the final movement, the motif and its symbolism become the fabric of the music in a poignant way. It could certainly seem that Anne herself is represented by the pitch A, repeating with insistence underneath a prolonged series of impulsive, grasping gestures. The piece ends with Sims's signature quarter-tone-diminished tritone, an interval that we know has "structural" significance, yet one which also leaves a yearning feeling as the final gesture of this piece.

*If I Told Him* (1996), on Gertrude Stein's poetic portrait of Pablo Picasso, was commissioned by the alto Christina Ascher, then still living in Germany, and her partner, the cellist Christoph von Erffa. Because of Ascher's reknowned virtuosity and her fearlessness with new techniques, as well as her alto range, Sims saw this invitation as a long-awaited opportunity to set Stein's poem. For many years he had been drawn to the idea of using microtones to transcribe speech as melody (like *Sprechstimme* perhaps, but fully notated and without the expressionistic inflections associated with Schoenberg's use). He had in fact included a few sections done in this manner in *Elegie—nach Rilke*, where "speaking" emerges to dramatic effect from

otherwise purely melodic vocal writing. Sims had a copy of a recording of Stein reading her poem in the 1930s, and he made the entire first movement a straightforward melodic transcription of this recitation, with the cello imitating these speech patterns in counterpoint. While the *Elegie* example is lilting, *If I Told Him* is declamatory and almost percussive, like Stein's own reading. Stein considered her poem to be a Cubist poem, an homage to Picasso's Cubist paintings. The broken fragments of sentences, and their overlapping at odd angles, are an obvious correlation to Cubism, and the exhaustive repetition of these fragments is well suited to the types of ostinati in Sims's music.

I can imagine why Sims would be drawn to the characters of Stein and Picasso, considering their lifetime's total devotion to their art, and their affectionate, teasing relationship. ("Napoleon" was Stein's nickname for Picasso, the "conqueror" of modern art.) Sims himself has an affectionate and teasing personal style, and there is always great warmth and affection in his music. He, too, has truly devoted his life to his music in a way that today seems rare, almost ascetic. Unburdened by academia and institutions in general, but surrounded by world-class performers who champion his music, he has produced a large number of chamber and solo works, choral works and two orchestral works. Thus, with his unwavering commitment to his unique vision he has made an enormous contribution to modern music.

—Julia Werntz

*Julia Werntz is a composer who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She teaches at the New England Conservatory, and is Artistic Director of the Boston Microtonal Society.*

**Ezra Sims** (born 1928) is known mainly as a composer of microtonal music. He made his professional debut (with his earlier twelve-tone music) on a Composers Forum program in New York City in 1959. In 1960, he found himself compelled by his ear to begin writing microtonal music, which he has done almost exclusively since then—aside from several years when he made tape music for dancers, musicians at the time being generally even more afraid of microtones than they are now. His music has been performed from Tokyo to Salzburg.

He has received various awards—a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Koussevitzky commission, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, among others. He has lectured on his music in the United States and abroad, most notably at the *Hambürger Musikgespräch*, 1994; the second *Naturton Symposium* in Heidelberg, 1992; and the 3rd and 4th *Symposium, Mikrotöne und Ekmelische Musik*, at the *Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Mozarteum*, Salzburg, in 1989 and 1991. In 1992–93, he was guest lecturer in the *Richter Herf Institut für Musikalische Grundlagenforschung* in the *Mozarteum*.

He has published articles on his technique in *Computer Music Journal*, *Mikrotöne III*, *Mikrotöne IV*, *Perspectives of New Music*, and *Ex Tempore*. With Ted Mook, he designed a font for use with computer printing programs for his set of accidentals sufficient for 72-note music that has been widely adopted in the field (<http://www.mindearthheart.org/MWFS.html>). He was co-founder—with Rodney Lister and Scott Wheeler—of *Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble*, of which he was President from 1977–1981, and on its Board of Directors from that time to 2003. His music is published by Frog Peak Music ([www.frogpeak.org](http://www.frogpeak.org)) and Diapason Press (*Corpus Microtonale*) and is available on New World Records/Composers Recordings, Inc.

The **Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP)** is widely recognized as the leading orchestra in the United States dedicated exclusively to performing new music, and its signature Grammy Award-nominated record label, **BMOP/sound**, is the nation's foremost label launched by an orchestra and solely devoted to new-music recordings. Founded in 1996 by Artistic Director **Gil Rose**, **BMOP's** mission is to illuminate the connections that exist naturally between contemporary music and contemporary society by reuniting composers and audiences in a shared concert experience. A perennial winner of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming of Orchestral Music and recipient of the prestigious John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music, **BMOP** has produced more than eighty performances, over seventy world premieres (including thirty commissioned works), two Opera Unlimited festivals with Opera Boston, the inaugural Ditson Festival of Contemporary Music with the ICA/Boston, and thirty-two CDs, including twelve recordings from **BMOP/sound**.

**Gil Rose** is recognized as an important conductor helping to shape the future of classical music. Critics all over the world have praised his dynamic performances and many recordings. In 1996, he founded the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (**BMOP**), the foremost professional orchestra dedicated exclusively to performing and recording music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Under his leadership, **BMOP's** unique programming and high performance standards have attracted critical acclaim and earned the orchestra eleven ASCAP awards for adventurous programming as well as the John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music. In 2007 Mr. Rose was awarded Columbia University's prestigious Ditson Award as well as an ASCAP Concert Music award for his exemplary commitment to new American music. Since 2003 Mr. Rose has also served as Music Director of Opera Boston, a dynamic opera company in residence at the historic Cutler Majestic Theatre.

Music Director **Richard Pittman** founded **Boston Musica Viva** in 1969 as the first professional ensemble in Boston devoted to contemporary music. Through the years, **BMV** has become one of the most highly respected ensembles of its kind, with an international reputation for innovation and excellence. **BMV's** mission is to broaden experience, knowledge, and enjoyment of every style of new music by embracing the full range of today's compositional activity and giving voice to music that might otherwise not be heard. **BMV's** commissioning program has brought into being essential new works for young audiences, and an intriguing spectrum of music for chamber ensemble, opera, music theater, and multimedia.

Clarinetist **Amy Advocat** is an avid performer of new music who has performed with the Firebird Ensemble, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, The New Fromm Players at Tanglewood, Callithumpian Consort, Opera Boston, and NotaRiotous. A fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center for two summers, Ms. Advocat also participated at the New York String Orchestra Seminar, Spoleto USA Festival, AIMS in Graz, and held a residency at the Virginia Arts Festival. Ms. Advocat was the first recipient of the Boston Woodwind Society's Harold Wright Award and is a Hadar Foundation Scholar. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the New England Conservatory and is currently completing her DMA at McGill University. She has been recorded on Mode, Navona, and New World Records.

Alto **Christina Ascher** was born in New York City and studied at the Oberlin Conservatory and the Juilliard Music School. Opera engagements include Chicago Lyric Opera, Dallas Civic Opera, Karlsruhe, Zurich, Bonn, Hamburg, Berlin, Munich, Graz, and Oldenburg. As a singer of contemporary music she has made guest appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Holland Music Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Wien Modern, Dresdner Tage für zeitgenössische Musik, Bonner Tage für Neue Musik, Berliner Festwochen, Berliner Biennale, Frankfurter Feste, Styrian Autumn, Styriarte, Warsaw Autumn, Sofia International New Year's Festival, Darmstädter Ferienkurse, Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik, Musica in Strassbourg, and Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen, among others. See also [www.christina-ascher.com](http://www.christina-ascher.com).

Composer and pianist **Eric Moe** has received numerous grants and awards for his work. Recordings of his music are available on Naxos, Albany, Koch, and Centaur. As a pianist and keyboardist, Moe's playing can be heard on Koch, CRI, New World, Mode, Albany, and other labels in the music of John Cage, Roger Zahab, Marc-Antonio Consoli, Mathew Rosenblum, Felix Draeseke, and Jay Reise, in addition to his own. *The Waltz Project Revisited—New Waltzes for Piano*, his solo recording of waltzes by two generations of American composers, was released in 2004 on Albany to critical acclaim. More information is available at his website, [www.ericmoe.net](http://www.ericmoe.net).

**Theodore Mook** has been an active proponent of new music, particularly microtonal music since 1980. After graduating from Boston University, he became a member of Dinosaur Annex and performed with several other ensembles in the Boston area. He maintained his interest in contemporary music after moving to New York City in 1983, and performed there frequently until 2009, when he relocated to Rhode Island. Mr. Mook has performed at the Library of Congress, the American Academy in Rome, the Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He has participated in the Bang on a Can Festival, and festivals in Graz, Montreal, Marlboro, Skopje, and Bern. Since the mid-1990s, Mr. Mook has developed a parallel career in computers, where he has worked in IT and programming for corporate clients, developed fonts for microtonal compositions, developed websites and worked as a music copyist and arranger. His website may be found at <http://www.mindeartheart.org/tmook>.

An acclaimed soloist and widely sought-after chamber music collaborator, clarinetist **Michael Norsworthy** has emerged as one of the most gifted artists of his generation. Norsworthy has performed as a soloist with numerous orchestras in the United States and abroad, and has premiered more than a hundred new works at such venues as Carnegie Hall, Vienna's Musikverein, Moscow's Tchaikovsky Hall, the Casals Festival, and the Aspen Festival. He has recorded for Mode, Albany, BMOP/sound, Gasparo, Nonesuch, Cantaloupe, and Cauchemar Records and recently premiered concerti by Michael Finnissy, Pozzi Escot and Noel Zahler. He is principal clarinet with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, a member of the Manhattan Sinfonietta, a professor at the Boston Conservatory, and artist-in-residence at Harvard University. Norsworthy is a performing artist for Buffet Crampon and Rico Reeds.

Cellist **Christoph von Erffa** was born in 1954 in Coburg, Germany. He studied with Werner Taube, Gerhard Mantel and Maurice Gendron. His repertoire includes music from all periods, from early Italian cello pieces of the seventeenth century through contemporary compositions. In addition to his duo with Christina Ascher he performs with the guitarist Olaf Van Gonnissen and the pianist Björn Lehmann. His recording of Max Reger's Sonata, Op. 78, and Heinrich Kaminski's Musik für Violoncello und Klavier is available on the Audite label. He teaches cello and musical improvisation at the Akademie für Tonkunst Darmstadt and also works in the field of psychology and astrology. His cello was built by Carlo Ferdinando Landolfi in Milan 1761.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Chamber Cantata on Chinese Poems*. R. Conrad, tenor; E. Preble, flute; F. Viscuglia, clarinet, bass clarinet; W. Hibbard, viola; J. Davidoff, cello; H. Keany, harpsichord; D. Pinkham, conductor. Composers Recordings CRI SD 186. (LP)

*Come Away*. J. Felty, mezz-soprano; Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble; D. Hoose, conductor. New World Records/CRI NWCR 578.

*The Microtonal Music of Ezra Sims*. A. Black, viola; Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble, Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston. New World Records/CRI NWCR 643.

String Quartet No. 2, Third Quartet, *Elegie—nach Rilke*. E. Charlston, soprano; Boston Musica Viva, R. Pittman, conductor; The Lenox Quartet. New World Records/CRI NWCR 784.

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Sims, Ezra. "Yet Another 72-Noter," *Computer Music Journal* 12.4 (1988): 28-45.  
Werntz, Julia. "Ezra Sims at Seventy," *Sonneck Society for American Music Bulletin* 24.2 (Spring 2002).  
Available at <http://www.american-music.org/publications/bullarchive/Werntz.htm>  
— . Interview with the composer. February 2, 2010.

Producer: Ezra Sims

*Sonata, Sonatina, and AEDM* recorded June 5, 2009 in Pelham, New York.

Recording engineer: Adam Abeshouse

*If I Told Him* recorded June 2003 in Darmstadt, Germany.

Recording engineer: Niels Reckziegel

*Musing and Reminiscence* recorded in performance November 31, 2003 in Boston, Massachusetts.

Recording engineer: Frank Cunningham

*Concert Piece II* recorded March 29, 2008 in Andover, Massachusetts.

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EZRA SIMS (b. 1928)  
*MUSING AND REMINISCENCE*  
80709-2

*Sonatine* (1957) 6:53

1. Briskly 1:56
  2. Very slow 3:42
  3. As fast as possible and strongly accented 1:15
- Eric Moe, piano

4. *Sonata* (1957) 8:41

Quietly—Fast—Slower—Poco meno mosso—Tempo I°  
Ted Mook, cello; Eric Moe, piano

*AEDM in mem* (1988) 5:11

5. Singing quietly 2:05
  6. Fleet and lyric :19
  7. Gently :54
  8. Moderately :55
  9. Plangent :58
- Ted Mook, cello

10. *If I Told Him* (1996) 12:49

Quick—fleet and flexible as speech  
Slow, flexible, introspective  
Calmly brisk  
Christina Ascher, alto; Christoph von Erffa, cello

11. *Musing and Reminiscence* (2003) 13:23

Dream-like—Tenderly and freely—Dream-like  
Boston Musica Viva: Alicia di Donato, flute; Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Krista Buckland Reisner, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Jan Müller Szeraws, cello; Richard Pittman, conductor

*Concert Piece II* (2005) 13:03

12. I. Fast & Eager 4:07
  13. II. Thoughtful and very flexible; Tempo I° 8:56
- Amy Advocat, Michael Norsworthy, clarinets; Boston Modern Orchestra Project; Gil Rose, conductor

TT: 60:47

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