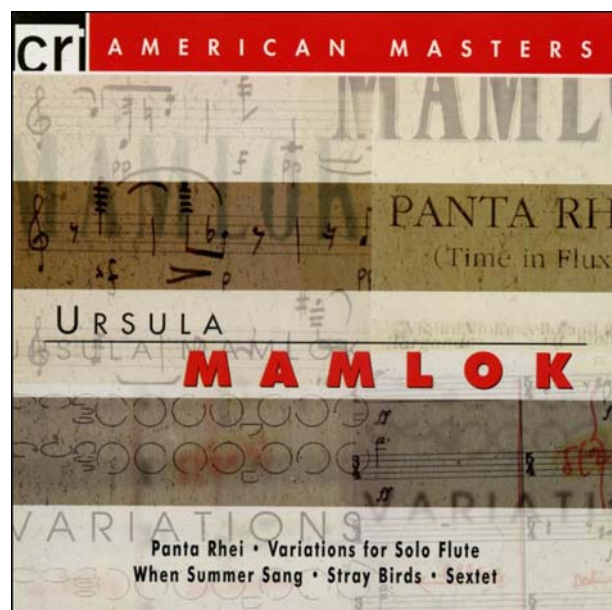


NWCR891

Ursula Mamlok

Chamber Works



Ursula Mamlok (b. 1928)

1. *Panta Rhei* (1981) (7:55)
Benjamin Hudson, violin; Chris Finckel, cello;
Aleck Karis, piano
2. *Variations for solo flute* (1961) (6:04)
Samuel Baron, flute
3. *When Summer Sang* (1980) (8:06)
Da Capo Chamber Players: Patricia Spencer,
flute; Laura Flax, clarinet; Joel Lester, violin;
André Emelianoff, cello; Joan Tower, piano
4. *Stray Birds* (1963) (14:22)
Texts by Rabindranath Tagore; Phyllis Bryn-
Julson, soprano; Harvey Sollberger, flute; Fred
Sherry, cello
5. *Sextet* (1977) (12:41)
Parnassus: Keith Underwood, flute; Robert
Yamins, clarinet; Dennis Smylie, bass-clarinet;
Cyrus Stevens, violin; Donald Palma, bass;
Edmund Niemann, piano; Anthony Korf,
conductor

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Notes

Ursula Mamlok: “I began composing as a child,” says the Berlin-born composer. “Right from the beginning I was playing my own tunes on the piano, complete with accompaniments. It was all done instinctively. My piano teacher would write down my compositions because I didn’t know how to write music at that time.”

Mamlok’s instinctive gifts and impeccable ear are balanced by an exacting self-discipline and craftsmanship that are still at the core of her music. The five chamber works on this recording, spanning the 1960s through the ’80s, display Mamlok’s lean, superbly economical, style. “My music is clear, and not overburdened with notes,” she says. “I work with concise ideas, sometimes using traditional forms as well as techniques developed in the last seventy-five years. I never strive for an effect for the sake of an effect; this is the way my music comes out.”

Mamlok’s path to a place in the vanguard of contemporary composers, started with an exodus. “I left Germany with my parents during the Nazi time, in 1939. Like many Jewish people at that time, we thought it would all blow over in a couple of weeks, and we didn’t make an effort to leave Germany, until it was almost too late. After we left, we could not get into the United States because there was a quota for German immigration. We had to go to Ecuador, where we stayed for two years. This was a hardship because there was no opportunity to study music in Guayaquil (Ecuador). I sent pencil-written compositions to schools—fugues, sonatas, the things you need to know as a composer—and eventually

received a full scholarship from Mannes College in New York.”

At Mannes, Mamlok studied composition with George Szell, until he assumed the leadership of the Cleveland Orchestra. She was still writing tonal music: “I went to many concerts, and was curious to learn about the many facets of new music. When I heard some contemporary music for the first time, I was baffled. I didn’t know anything about it.” Understanding came when she attended a music institute at Black Mountain College, where she met composer Roger Sessions, and a host of European immigrant composers, including Ernst Krenek. “I decided that I would like to study with Sessions; he was teaching at Princeton at the time, but he came to New York once a week. It was difficult at first, because I had to give up my language, so to speak, and I didn’t succeed at first.”

Mamlok’s pursuit of a degree brought her to the Manhattan School of Music (where she is currently a faculty member), and to studies with Vittorio Giannini. Giannini was a musical conservative: “I was probably his musical black sheep.” After she completed her degree, she studied with two key figures in her musical development, Stefan Wolpe and Ralph Shapey. Wolpe looked at her work and said, “My God, you’ve been doing this [tonal music] much too long.” Wolpe, while not a twelve-tone composer, left his mark on Mamlok’s music: his use of gesture and sound inspired her to imbue her serialist works with rich emotion. From Shapey she learned new rhythmic possibilities, and how to write what she calls “freer” music.

“From the 1960s onwards, I refined my style, and I’ve been doing that ever since,” says Mamlok. “I think the moment you stop learning, that’s the end. As years go by, you change, and your influences and goals are different. Now my music is less complex than it was in the ’50s and ’60s. I’m very comfortable writing twelve-tone music, but you will hear composers say that’s *passé*. That’s the same thing as saying the C Major scale is *passé*—you can’t go by that, you have to have your own language.”

Mamlok has been labeled a serialist, but she believes the many “isms” that dot the musical landscape are really a minefield. “-isms? I don’t think highly of them,” says Mamlok. “If you tell a listener about how you make a piece, they get frightened, and don’t listen anymore. The educated listener, the student, should know how a piece is structured, but the piece should speak on many levels: it must speak to the layman as well.”

—Craig Zeichner

Craig Zeichner is reviews editor for Early Music America magazine, and a member of the music department at Oxford University Press. He writes for a variety of music publications.

Panta Rhei (1981)

Writing music for conventionally-sized ensembles is another facet of Mamlok’s performer-friendly style. Throughout her career she has achieved remarkable results with modestly-sized groups. Her 1981 composition *Panta Rhei* (*Time in Flux*) is a veritable showcase of twentieth-century instrumental techniques, that calls upon the ensemble to use various types of pizzicato, glissando, staccato, and ponticello. Even more impressive is that this universe of kaleidoscopic color, and pungent sound, comes out of the most basic of chamber ensemble, the piano trio.

[From the composer’s original liner notes] The seven-minute work is in three parts, the first consisting of short sections of quickly shifting moods, marked *agitato*—*calmo*—*vivace*—*misterioso*, in waltz time. Part two, still *molto tranquillo* as if suspended, is in four successive, songful, phrases, played by the cello, succeeded by the violin, then by the piano, and closing with the cello. They are set off against a backdrop of sparsely-distributed, repeated, *pianissimo* pitches. These *pianissimo* pitches are transformed to appear as fortissimo patterns of rapidly repeated tones, counterpointed by sharp chords, in Section A of part three: *Allegro energico*—a rondo—vacillating between sections of energy, playfulness, and lyricism. A coda, reminiscent of part one, ends the work in a whisper.

—Ursula Mamlok

Panta Rhei was commissioned by *Sigma Alpha Iota* for its 76th convention, held in Washington, DC, in August, 1981.

Variations for solo flute (1961)

This was Mamlok’s first twelve-tone piece. Written in 1961, it is cast in that most well-ordered of classical forms, theme and variations. The theme is palindromic in form, and there are twelve variations. The work makes great demands on the soloist, and is packed with emotional power. Mamlok provides a hint for the listener:

An analysis of one’s compositional method may be of some interest to other composers, but will fail to be helpful to a listener on first hearing a new work. More important to him should be the variation of gesture, tempo, melodic shape—in short, the character of the music.

[From the composer’s original liner notes] The theme, and first three variations, consist of a row and its

retrograde. The theme becomes divided through this procedure into two symmetrical parts, the second being a mirror of the first. The transformation of the various elements takes place gradually: at first only the rhythmic shapes are altered, the pitch-order remaining intact. As the work progresses, however, only segments of the original row are used. The final variation restores the rhythmic contour of the initial theme, but the row itself has taken a different form; this is in order to transform the character of the opening statement.

—Ursula Mamlok

Variations for solo flute was commissioned by Sophie and Harvey Sollberger, and premiered by Sophie Sollberger at Carnegie (now Weill) Recital Hall, New York, in 1961.

When Summer Sang (1980)

Mamlok is a master of contrasting moods, colors, and textures. Not surprisingly, several of her compositions are infused with the sounds of nature. *When Summer Sang* is a quintet for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano.

I began work on the piece after a severe illness, while I was spending the summer in the country, and enjoying the serenity of nature. The title is a reflection of how I felt at the time. There are many imitations of bird sounds. I used the piano in such a way that a certain note will sound like knocking: it’s done with a technique where you put your finger on the strings, and then play on the keyboard. The sound (like a mockingbird) is less pronounced as a tone, but the process gives it extra color.

[From the composer’s original liner notes] The quintet consists of two short, interconnected movements, the first of which begins with a soft, slow duo, for flute and violin, followed by six trios for various combinations of the instruments. The piano, which is present throughout, plays music that is independent of the other two instruments. Now and then, a piano string is stopped, and struck repeatedly, suggesting the insistent knocking of an early-morning woodpecker. The structure of this movement is like a set of phrases, or a stanza: the motives of the initial melodic lines are rotated, so that new melodies arise in each trio. The tempo speeds up gradually, then slows down, leading into a second duo, which is related to the opening. Joyful, homophonic music, followed by a transformed reminder of the opening section, creates a bridge to the second movement, a rondo in which there is almost constant interplay among all five instruments. Especially noteworthy in the recapitulation of the rondo, is the transformed reappearance of the opening duo from the first movement, the theme now floating airily in the clarinet part.

—Ursula Mamlok

When Summer Sang was commissioned by the Da Capo Chamber Players, and premiered by them in April, 1981.

Stray Birds (1963)

Color and instrumental virtuosity complement the challenging vocal-writing in *Stray Birds*, a setting, for soprano, flute, and cello, of five aphorisms by the Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore. The work was completed on November 22, 1963, the day President Kennedy was assassinated, and was dedicated to his memory. Mamlok’s vocal and instrumental writing artfully conjures up shifting moods and emotions, with hypnotic effect.

[From the composer’s original liner notes] Here the instruments are not supplying mere accompaniment for the vocal line, but participate, often with great virtuosity, in expressing the character of the poetry, as it suggested itself to me. Structurally the work is based on a twelve-

tone set. It is the textural structure, above all, which gives a certain, and distinct, character to each song. These settings proceed from utmost density, and rhythmic complexity, to greatest spaciousness.

—Ursula Mamlok

Stray Birds was commissioned by the Group for Contemporary Music, and premiered by them on January 17, 1963, at McMillin (now Miller) Theater, Columbia University, New York.

Sextet (1977)

Mamlok's 1977 sextet features instrumentation (winds, strings, and piano) that would not have been out of place in the classical era. The work is in three distinctly different movements, and is capped by a rondo-like finale.

[From the composer's original liner notes] My sextet is built around a central tempo (72 quarter-notes per minute). In the first movement, marked *with fluctuating tension*, four interrelated tempos are active at the same time, creating a dense texture similar to a rapid discourse among six people. A contrasting section follows, a thinner texture of solos and their "mirrors" that preserves the four tempos of the preceding section. The first section is then repeated with varied details. A transition leads to the second movement. This movement, an ABCBA form, presents a very calm and lyrical opening (part A), which gives way to a section of intense five-part counterpoint (part B). After a dance-like ostinato section (part C), transformed versions of B and A return. A violin harmonic acts as a bridge to the third movement, marked *light and airy*. This cheerful rondo has a bravura conclusion, *fortissimo*, that leaves the flute and clarinet lines suspended in mid-air.

—Ursula Mamlok

Sextet was commissioned by Parnassus, which premiered it in 1977.

Since its founding in 1970, the **Da Capo Chamber Players** has established itself as one of the foremost new music groups in the United States. Winners of the Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1973, they were subsequently sponsored by the Naumburg Foundation for a second concert in Alice Tully Hall in 1980, in honor of their tenth anniversary. Over the years, more than eighty chamber music works have been written especially for Da Capo by composers ranging from Philip Glass, to Milton Babbitt, Joan Tower, Jeffrey Mumford, and Su-Lian Tan. The group divides its time between New York City, and Bard College, where the ensemble took up residence in 1982.

Parnassus was founded by Anthony Korf in 1974 from the cream of New York's freelance musicians. Noted for commissioning and performing new music, Parnassus has premiered nearly 150 works, more than fifty of which were composed for the ensemble, from established American masters such as Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, Donald Martino, and Charles Wuorinen, to international luminaries like Thomas Adès, Jonathan Harvey, and György Kurtág. Korf is also artistic director, and composer-in-residence, of the Riverside Symphony.

Flutist **Samuel Baron** (1925-1997) was a revered teacher, chamber musician, and soloist. He was a founding member of

the New York Woodwind Quintet, and the flute soloist and music director of the Bach Aria Group. He was a professor of music at SUNY Stony Brook, chair of the woodwind department at Juilliard, and also taught briefly at Yale and Mannes. Baron, who served as president of the National Flute Association in 1977-1978, was a recipient of its 1996 Lifetime Achievement Award.

Phyllis Bryn-Julson is an internationally known soprano with over sixty recordings and two Grammy nominations to her name. Noted for her performances of contemporary repertoire, much of which was composed for her, Bryn-Julson has premiered works of composers such as Bernstein, Boulez, Del Tredici, Penderecki, Rorem, and Wuorinen. Her recording of Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, with Simon Rattle, won the 1995 "Best Opera" *Gramophone* award. Bryn-Julson currently serves as chair of the voice department at the Peabody Conservatory, in Baltimore, MD.

Cellist **Chris Finckel** is well known for his performances of contemporary music. As a member of the Atlantic Quartet, the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Parnassus, the New York New Music Ensemble, and the Composers Conference at Wellesley, MA, he has participated in countless premieres, and in tours of Europe, Australia, and the Far East.

Violinist **Benjamin Hudson** has received consistent critical acclaim from the New York press for his solo and chamber music performances with *Speculum Musicae* and the Group for Contemporary Music, as well as the Columbia String Quartet. He has toured internationally as a recitalist, and has been awarded grants from the National Endowment of the Arts, and the Martha Baird Rockefeller Foundation.

Pianist **Aleck Karis** is a well-known member of the New York musical community and an active performer on all continents. Karis has presented numerous premieres, including works by Wuorinen, Babbitt, Davidovsky, and Subotnick. He is the pianist for *Speculum Musicae*, the League-ISCAM Chamber Players, and SONOR. Karis is currently a member of the faculty at University of California, San Diego.

Cellist **Fred Sherry** has introduced audiences on five continents to the music of our time through his close association with such eminent composers as Babbitt, Berio, Carter, Davidovsky, Foss, Knussen, Takemitsu, and Wuorinen. Sherry was a founding member of *Speculum Musicae*, and Tashi. He has been a member of the Group for Contemporary Music, Berio's Juilliard Ensemble, and the Galimir String Quartet. Sherry has been an active performer with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since the 1970s, an artist member since 1984, and was artistic director from 1988 to 1992. He is a member of the cello and chamber music faculty of the Juilliard School.

Composer, conductor, and flutist, **Harvey Sollberger** co-founded (with Charles Wuorinen) the Group for Contemporary Music, in New York; he directed that ensemble for twenty-seven years. Sollberger is currently on the faculty of the University of California at San Diego, where he is conductor for SONOR, the faculty new music ensemble, and for Sirius, the graduate student new music ensemble. He has taught at Columbia University, the Manhattan School of Music, and Indiana University.

Production Notes

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