

ROBERT PALMER

PIANO MUSIC

ADAM TENDLER

PIANO





Photo by Sam Hood, 1943.

## *How did we forget Robert Palmer?*

**R**obert Moffet Palmer, born 1915, studied at Eastman and founded the DMA program at Cornell. A student of Aaron Copland, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, and Quincy Porter, a teacher to Ben Johnston, Christopher Rouse, and Steven Stucky, he got good reviews, he was admired by his peers, he was published and recorded, and for all of that, he has nevertheless fallen into obscurity.

When Copland singled out seven young American composers “as representative of some of the best we have to offer among the new generation” in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine*—the other six being Alexei Haieff, Harold Shapero, Lukas Foss, Leonard Bernstein, William Bergsma, and John Cage—Palmer was already, Copland points out, the oldest, and also “perhaps the least well known.” He goes on:

In recent years too much of his energy has gone into his teaching at Cornell University, but teaching is a familiar disease of the American composer. Thus far in his career Palmer has enjoyed little public acclaim; nevertheless, if he has the capacity to endure and to develop, his future seems to me assured.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't. Perhaps Copland was right that Palmer was too distracted by academia, or perhaps Palmer's writing was itself too academic—not “academic”

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Copland, “The New ‘School’ of American Composers,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 14, 1948, p. 18. <https://www.nytimes.com/1948/03/14/archives/the-new-school-of-american-composers-young-men-now-maturing-says.html>

in the high-modernist, composer-as-specialist sense that the term tends to be (mis)used, but instead, “academic” in the sense of composition that, by studying musics of the past, develops the apparatus for composing a music for the present. Or, to use another word, “classical.”

Because unlike Cage or Bernstein, Palmer was not inspired by Europe’s atonal innovations to break with the musical past, nor to react against atonality with effusions of Mahlerian affect. He was not the iconoclastic genius who diverts the course of history by pushing back against the current, or by racing forward to carve a path ahead of it. Robert Palmer instead found his style right there within the flow of history, and so history has simply—to its detriment—flowed on around him.

### **Toccata Ostinato (1945)**

As for the specifics of Palmer’s style, it can be defined, like anything, by its boundaries: What is kept in; what is kept out. Composed for William Kappell, the *Toccata Ostinato* has been referred to more than once as a “boogie-woogie” movement in 13/8, but this label seems intriguingly inadequate when one compares the movement to the music of peers like Conlon Nancarrow, whose own experiments with boogie-woogie may more audibly represent the vernacular style.

As the title suggests, the pianist plays as if fixated on a short musical cycle in the left hand, and that ostinato figure likewise recalls the structure of vernacular dancing music. And the cross-relations of the scale Palmer uses often hint at the “blue notes” of black American music. The eight eighth notes in a measure of American music are often syncopated according to the 3 + 3 + 2 “clave” rhythm that undergirds so much music of the African diaspora; Palmer’s meter sees that 3 + 3 + 2 and raises it by another 3 + 2, as if writing for a swing dancer with two left feet.

While Palmer’s style can easily assimilate the syncopated cross-rhythms of Afro-American music, it must reject the foursquare meters of the American vernacular in favor of changing and “complex” meters. And while he hints at blues tonalities, even shifting the tonal center of the melody from C to F in a nod at the I-IV change that opens the standard 12-bar blues progression of boogie-woogie music, Palmer must break from the relative stability of these opening sections for a searching, contrapuntal development section by way of contrast, to satisfy a distinctly classical need for formal balance.

### **Second Sonata (1948)**

The Second Sonata is an exercise in just that sort of balance. From his correspondence with John Kirkpatrick, who premiered this piece—and with whom Palmer collaborated closely on so many of these piano works—we know that Palmer decided against using the formal structure of a Prelude and Fugue for this sonata, but nevertheless retained the musical ideals represented by the opposition of “prelude” vs. “fugue” as a sort of guiding notion for the diptych. He writes:

I think Roy [Harris]’s conception of the fugue as a principle is the only possible and fruitful one now. There will always be, as long as music as we now know it exists, two poles represented crudely by the vertical and horizontal aspects of musical organization, the quintessence of the vertical, song form, sonata, sectional; and the opposite quintessence, canon, fugue, or free polyphony.<sup>2</sup>

In that same letter, Palmer goes on to list a handful of composers whose responses to the question of “fugue” in the 20th century he finds

<sup>2</sup> Robert Palmer, letter to John Kirkpatrick, August 2, 1944.

especially fruitful (Harris, Bartók, Shostakovich) or especially arid (Hindemith, Piston), before concluding:

Is it not . . . stupid to call the current solutions “fugues,” when the essence of the fugue is the *tonal* and *real* answer [emphasis his], seldom ever used in the forms of today. The same applies to “sonata-form,” which I think should be generalized to “sonata-principle,” in which the classical tonal-relationships are not preserved and more subtle and complex, but possibly quite as good or better exist instead.<sup>3</sup>

While thus resisting strict fugal form, the Second Sonata plays out the contrast between these horizontal and vertical aspects of musical organization, balancing the two ideals not only between the two movements but within them. The first movement opens by luxuriating in widely spaced, slow-moving modal harmonies, strumming arpeggios to explore a rhythmic idea in 5/8. But after this “vertical” introduction, the introduction of a lyrical melody soon develops into quasi-fugal counterpoint, each statement of the melody being imitated at increasingly close intervals before dissolving again into those ringing arpeggios.

Conversely, the second movement opens with an unmistakably “horizontal” energy, opening with an octatonic melody whose curves all but spell out the words “fugue subject”—but the movement develops according to a much freer logic than a strict fugal form, breaking down into aggressively chordal writing and then into interludes of lyrical, largely diatonic 5/4 passages that recall the serenity of the opening movement.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

### Three Epigrams

Palmer would go on to compose further Epigrams, but these are the three “well-constructed” (Alvin K. Fossner) movements that composer Julius Eastman performed at his 1966 Town Hall recital. Joseph Kubera tells us that Eastman had “a great regard for Palmer”<sup>4</sup> and it is fascinating to imagine what the attraction of Palmer’s music—guardedly witty, abstract, and largely conservative—might have been for the younger composer. Eastman’s music, after all, is currently enjoying a revival thanks to a radical frankness of sexuality, emotion, and politics, and an experimental aesthetic charged with raw rock energy, qualities that seem diametrically opposed to the ethos motivating these Epigrams.

In **Epigram No. 1** (1958), the polyrhythmic scheme has the right and left hands working at cross-rhythms and at cross purposes, like the gaits of a pair of amiable drunks helping each other down the street. The harmonies too are a near miss, the pitches in the left hand aiming for the pitches in the right but coming out a little pinched here, a little splayed there, and the effect is a kind of musical smirk, neither warm triadic harmony nor expressive dissonance but instead the flat, ironic affect of an observer at a slight remove.

The structure of **Epigram No. 2** (1958) spills out from an unfolding, irregular rhythmic idea, hesitating a few times before building the excited motoric drive it needs to escape into the next passage. But each time, the piece returns obsessively to that opening tattoo.

**Epigram No. 3** (1957), while rhythmically lively and varied, is more an essay in melody than in syncopation, opening with soaring, diatonic lyricism before straying chromatically into new key areas, finally ratcheting up by semitones to the climax of the piece—and, with the only *ff* dynamic marking among them, the climax of these three Epigrams.

<sup>4</sup> Kyle Gann, <https://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2014/03/a-long-lost-name-resurfaces.html>

What drew Julius Eastman to these pieces? A simple and unsatisfying answer lies in Palmer's discipline as a composer—these pieces are indeed “well constructed”—but we also celebrate Eastman's music for the very rigidity of his rhythms, for the obsessive energy of his repetitions, and for his incisive, ironic wit, and it is tempting to imagine that he found a kindred spirit here.

### **Three Preludes (1941)**

It is difficult to find a point of comparison for the effects Palmer achieves in these Preludes without verging on hyperbole. The illusionistic quality of his rhythms and counterpoint suggest examples in Bach where the clear implications of the sounds that reach the ear are deftly inverted by a new piece of musical information.

The tune to **Prelude No. 1** is lyrical and diatonic, the accompaniment quietly relentless, and the two parts combine to form a translucently simple texture that nevertheless slips just out of the listener's grasp. Where are the barlines? What meter is this music actually in? Without following along in the score, it becomes difficult to tell.

**Prelude No. 2** spins its lines into counterpoint so elaborate that it blurs into Escher-like illusions, from the very first instant of the piece. It begins with a 4/4 bar of sixteen 16th notes from the left hand, followed by a dramatic pause, followed by sixteen more 16th notes—or so the listener might think. But when the right hand enters, we can hear that the piece is in 17/16 time, with each measure of the ostinato figure in the left hand beginning with a 16th rest.

Over this figuration, Palmer spins out one of his metrically supple melodies—but with leaps in register that create the illusion of a duet between two melodic voices. Tandler's performance here limns the counterpoint gracefully enough that as the melodic leaps come more quickly, we can hear the notes in the right hand diverging into a sort of hocket between the two lines.

From there, the piece spins out further into a passage of arpeggiations that interweave like fine lacework, and when the melody finally emerges again, it's the ostinato in the left hand that offers the other half of the duet, that hidden voice now in simultaneous harmony with the tune, closing the movement as if bringing together the two singers of an operatic love duet. In the coda, that illusory second voice becomes real, the right hand permitted at last to play simultaneous harmonies against its own melodic line.

**Prelude No. 3** begins where the second left off—with a breathless intensity, melody singing against countermelody atop a rushing ostinato. In the left hand, strings of four *fff* eighth notes grow immediately overexcited, speeding from sets of four into sets of three, and then holding back at the end of the measure into a set of five before plunging forward into the next sets of four. The time signature reads 11/4, but the left hand subdivides it into 2/4 + 9/8 + 5/8.

This being Palmer, the voices in the right hand of course subdivide the bar differently from the accompaniment and from each other, immediately plunging the listener into contrapuntal information overload. Palmer holds nothing back here, bringing the triptych to a dizzying *fff* climax.

### **Sonata for Two Pianos (1944)**

Critic Paul Rosenfeld, for his part, described Robert Palmer as being less of a Bach than a Handel, and insofar as Handel–Bach as a dialectic is more useful for musical analysis than Meyers–Briggs or the signs of the zodiac, it is tempting to recall this comparison in examining the three movements of this sonata. Palmer always delights in polyphony and imitative counterpoint, but here, he seldom delves too deep for too long before allowing the audience to come up for air.

So much of the music on this album demands that the pianist use every finger to communicate a greater density of musical information. But

with greater resources at his command, rather than creating music yet more complex than his works for solo piano, Palmer relies heavily on octave doublings, emphasizing and coloring the voices in the score, and thereby lending it greater transparency. This is not pious or academic counterpoint as an end unto itself, but rather as a show of virtuosity for performer and composer, and as a means to delight the ear.

This is another Palmer score that held special appeal for Julius Eastman—he brought it to Joseph Kubera, and it is Eastman’s copy (with Eastman’s fingerings) that was used for this recording.

### **Morning Music (1973) / Evening Music (1956)**

Although separated by nearly two decades, *Morning Music* and *Evening Music* make for a tidy diptych. *Morning Music* opens with a sprightly, irregular dance rhythm, jolting between beats of two and three eighth notes, and collapsing periodically from dissonant chords into unison melody. But its fluid middle section maintains a steady triple meter, with moments of imitation between the right and left hands, before reprising the opening section.

*Evening Music*, by contrast, opens with a fluid, steady triple meter, the hands answering each other in inversion, then shifts into a 9/8 time that is divided into alternating twos and threes. Where one piece is bright and energetic on the outside, with a moment of introspection, the other is languid and meditative, with a moment of upbeat extroversion. Each movement, in other words, explores Palmer’s “vertical”/“horizontal” binary, but as a negative image of the other, like the two sides of an embroidered emblem.

### **Sonata for Piano (1938, rev. 1946)**

Palmer’s First Piano Sonata is an intimidating work by any measure—even by that of its own composer, who confessed to Kirkpatrick, “I often feel as if I

couldn’t write anything even as good as the sonata or quartet”<sup>5</sup>—meaning his first string quartet, composed the next year—and later, once he had performed the piece himself:

I can completely sympathize with you now as a fellow sufferer with the Sonata. I’m not at all sure I would have written the blamed thing if I had thought I would have to play it. The memorizing alone is no small feat, and for me was like learning a strange piece.<sup>6</sup>

And the score is remarkable for its density. The lively first movement and the lyrical second each introduce a pair of contrasting themes, and then develop them according to contrasting principles—reminiscent of Palmer’s horizontal/vertical binary—while the third resumes the vivacity of the opening movement before it gradually loops the listener back to a snappy rhythmic motif echoing the sonata’s opening fanfare.

But each section of each movement follows the same trajectory, moving constantly towards greater and greater complexity, towards polyphony and polyrhythm. No matter how transparent a musical idea might seem at its start, everything is constantly building and growing, never simply stated or repeated but always developing, with what we can only imagine is a young man’s ambition, furiously searching, pushing, and proving himself as an artist.

### **Transitions (1977)**

Composed by a much older man, for the retirement of Cornell President Dale Corson, the manuscript for *Transitions* bears a quotation from the poem

<sup>5</sup> Robert Palmer, letter to John Kirkpatrick, November 6, 1939.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Palmer, letter to John Kirkpatrick, February 2, 1941.

“Corsons Inlet” (no relation) by their colleague, A.R. Ammons, excerpted from the closing stanza:

I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will  
not run to that easy victory:  
still around the looser, wider forces work:  
I will try  
to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening  
scope, but enjoying the freedom that  
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,  
that I have perceived nothing completely,  
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.

The poem describes a waterside walk and the speaker’s attempts to take in the whole view without mentally trying to shoehorn the unruly shapes of nature into manmade conceptions of form.

The implication of the epigraph, in light of Corson’s retirement, is to urge, gently, a serene acceptance of the ebb and flow of time, celebrating retirement not as the end of a career but the beginning of a new journey. (Palmer himself would retire just three years later.) The form of the piece attempts to embody the same idea, casting off development and large-scale rhetoric entirely in favor of a series of episodes—so that the listener, too, is urged to accept each moment as it comes, and remain open to the next.

### **Interrupted Tango (1984)**

The last piece on this album, chronologically, the *Interrupted Tango* makes for a nicely matched bookend to the *Toccata Ostinato*. Four decades later, the composer returns to a vernacular dance rhythm over an ostinato in the left hand, its simplicity gently deformed by harmonic and rhythmic experimentation. Here,

however, the distortions seem less like derangements and more like hesitations. When the tango is interrupted one last time, there remains the hope that has not quite ended, only paused, and that we could return to the piece after an interval of a few seconds, days, or even years, and find that it is ready to resume again.

—Daniel Johnson

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### **Who is Robert Palmer?**

*Adam Tandler*

I first heard Robert Palmer’s *Toccata Ostinato* as a teenager on a scratchy live recording by William Kapell. An instant fan, I pantomimed the piece in front of the mirror as if singing into a hairbrush, and spent months tracking down the score. It wasn’t until my late twenties that I finally decided to learn the showpiece as an encore for an otherwise meditative recital program. After each concert, audiences wanted to know only one thing: *Who is Robert Palmer?* I realized I had nothing to tell them, so I started digging. Even the most superficial biographies told of a complex man who passed away in 2010, whose star rose in the 1940s and 50s only to be followed by a kind of puzzling obscurity later, a composer who produced many works but saw too few of them published or recorded. I began asking the same thing: *Who is Robert Palmer?*

I routinely scoured libraries and the Internet for scores and recordings, acquiring anything I could find, and discovered a motley crew of artists drawn to Palmer’s music before me, including Julius Eastman, Claudio Arrau, Yvar Mikhashoff, Kyle Gann, Ramon Salvatore, Steven Stucky, and Hunter Johnson, with whom Palmer corresponded from the 1930s to 1990s.

Most importantly, I began communicating with the libraries at Cornell University. With their help, I started to receive the unpublished works, many still written in Palmer's hand. Every score seemed like a revelation. The music leapt off the page with originality and a disarming emotional frankness. I started programming it whenever I could.

I visited Yale to leaf through the correspondences between a young Palmer and pianist John Kirkpatrick, Palmer's first true champion, experiencing a meteoric rise in fame himself after premiering Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata*. The letters reveal a composer, recently graduated from Eastman School of Music and working in a grocery store, eager for guidance, sending patches of music with each letter, and yet also holding tight, some might say stubbornly, to his own musical ideals. Ruled by principle, it's likely that Palmer later distanced himself from the same composers who might have served as his most valuable allies, including Aaron Copland and Elliot Carter, both early enthusiasts. One former student, now an esteemed composer, told me that he and Palmer never quite recovered after a disagreement they had over a modulation discussed in class.

In the letters I also saw a vulnerable, often lonely individual, confused about how to make his way in the world. "I have had a long standing suspicion that many people—people I admire and respect a great deal, are disappointed in me after they know me," he wrote to Kirkpatrick in 1939. "I don't understand completely what it is, and . . . I'm not sure whether I am to blame or not." This can't have all been in his imagination. When Copland included Palmer on his famed 1948 list of seven composers he considered "the best we have to offer among the new generation," he made sure to note that Palmer's "outward appearance simply did not jibe with the complexities of the metaphysical music he was writing at that time."

Palmer might have been first to acknowledge the dissonance between the imperfect person he felt himself to be and the perfect music he hoped to compose. Even in the pained letter to Kirkpatrick above he declared, regarding his music, "unless I grow, it cannot." In passionate letters to his fiancée, Palmer confessed that his anguish being away from her also ultimately disrupted his composing. "Something stops inside me when we're apart and I can't do anything." In another letter, Palmer seemed indifferent, perhaps relieved, to be "rejected permanently, (4F), for psychological reasons" following a military eligibility exam, freed now to "plan more intelligently" for a productive year ahead. Like the man, the musical pendulum swung between red-blooded emotion and cool logic, and many of the pieces feel like a wrestling match between the two. This is the same composer who interrupts the finale of his First Piano Sonata with a four-part fugue only to, a few bars later, order the pianist to "slam the hell out of" a chord that sends the piece catapulting toward the end.

Learning that piece, I would fall back exhausted and laughing, wondering why it hadn't become one of the few great American piano sonatas. That question would recur in different forms for different pieces. How did the impossibly gorgeous Second Piano Sonata meet rejection from publishers throughout Palmer's life? (Like the First Sonata, it remains unpublished at the time of this writing.) How did the first American composer to be published by Edition Peters, this Fulbright Scholar, this two-time Guggenheim Fellow, this "best we have to offer," end up of with a bulk of his music in the Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell? Was his work simply buried by the groundswell of contemporary music trends that eclipsed so many other midcentury tonalists, with audiences fractured in the face of new fascinations? Or did he stray too far from the vigorous style that first made him famous—perhaps becoming *too* cool and distant? Or was he just happy to stay

within the safe confines of Cornell in the department he built, where to this day people still call him “Bob”?

There are things we’ll never know and a world of what-ifs, but Palmer would likely urge us to consider these questions secondary to the music—so much of it still waiting to be discovered, performed and heard. This album is a start, a labor of love that started over twenty years ago with me dancing to *Toccata Ostinato* in front of the mirror, to recording these works on an empty stage under the guidance of legendary producer Judith Sherman, to you, listening now. It’s a dream come true to finally share this music by a composer who captured my heart and who, at long last, deserves a few more fans.

**Robert Palmer** (1915–2010) was born in Syracuse, NY, to a musical family, his mother a piano teacher and father an amateur singer employed by a local woodworking equipment manufacturer. A graduate of Eastman School of Music and student of Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, and Quincy Porter, Palmer produced more than ninety works throughout his career, earning a reputation in the mid-twentieth century as one of the country’s most promising, daring and appealing modernists. A Fulbright Scholar, two-time Guggenheim Fellow and the first American composer to be published by Edition Peters, Palmer created a distinct musical language that combined a deep emotional impulse with complex counterpoint and rhythmic structures. Palmer taught briefly at University of Kansas before receiving an appointment to Cornell University, where he founded the nation’s first doctoral composition program and taught until retirement. Several important pianists have performed Palmer’s music, including John Kirkpatrick, William Kapell, Claudio Arrau, Ramon Salvatore, Yvar Mikhashoff and Jeanne Behrend, and his advocates have included composers as diverse as Elliot Carter, Steven Stucky, Kyle Gann and Julius Eastman.

A 2019 recipient of the Lincoln Center Award for Emerging Artists, pianist **Adam Tendler** is a recognized interpreter of living and modern composers. A pioneer of DIY culture in classical music, between 2005 and 2006 Tendler performed in all fifty United States as part of a grassroots recital tour he called America 88x50, which became the subject of his memoir, *88x50*, a Kirkus Indie Book of the Month and Lambda Literary Award nominee. He now maintains a career as a concert soloist, recording artist, speaker and educator. An active presence in all new music and classical genres, Tendler has also performed the complete major piano works of Aaron Copland and collaborates with the John Cage Trust and Edition Peters in presenting Cage’s work internationally. He published his second book, *tidepools*, in 2019.

Pianist **Joseph Kubera** has been a leading interpreter of contemporary music for the past four decades. He has been a soloist at major European and U.S. festivals and has worked closely with such composers as John Cage, Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, and Robert Ashley. Among those he has commissioned are Michael Byron, Alvin Lucier, Roscoe Mitchell, and David First. He has made definitive recordings of major Cage works, and toured extensively with the Cunningham Dance Company at Cage’s invitation. A core member of S.E.M. Ensemble, he has been active with many New York groups, from Steve Reich and Musicians to the Brooklyn Philharmonic. He has recorded for Wergo, Albany, New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, O.O. Discs, Mutable Music, Cold Blue, and Opus One.

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*Evening Music*: Theodore Presser Co.

*Interrupted Tango*: unpublished, Estate of Robert Palmer

*Morning Music*: Estate of Robert Palmer

Sonata for Two Pianos: Peer International Corporation

Sonata for Piano: unpublished, Estate of Robert Palmer

Second Sonata: unpublished, Estate of Robert Palmer

Three Epigrams: Peer International Corporation

Three Preludes: Peer International Corporation

*Toccata Ostinato*: Theodore Presser Co.

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