

# Institute for Studies In American Music

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

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## The American Musical Landscape: Widening the Lens?

by Mark Slobin

For some years, I have had the opportunity of lecturing to Europeans about topics in American music. I try to explain that in the United States, music offers an arena of exchange and openness not available at many levels in the society, like the classroom, the courtroom, or the newsroom. This is not an easy sell. Europeans, to make a broad generalization, tend to see American music in black and white, perhaps with some splashes of Latin, Cajun, or klezmer color, rather than as a complex social process of multicultural interchange.

I'm not surprised by this, since that is how American music has been, and still is, offered to Americans themselves by the recording industry and the ritualized productions of the media. In my talks, I've used clips from televised gala concerts for presidential inaugurations, as "official" a representation as one can find. I started noticing as far back as Jimmy Carter, the bicentennial-multiculturalist President, that the show tends to focus narrowly on metaphors about America drawn from musical images of Blacks and Whites, ranging



*Puerto Rican Music in Hawaii:  
Accordionist Charlie Figueroa  
Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways*

from depiction of the rural (kiddie Kentucky fiddlers for Bush) to the quasi-minstrel (Ben Vereen doing a Bert Williams number for Reagan), but mostly narrating the stylized story of a race-integrated mainstream: Broadway, Hollywood, top forty, and a touch of classical music. For example, to honor Bush, we see Barry Manilow, the assimilated ethnic, backed by an all-American Marine color guard, on a raised platform singing a very white-bread hymn "to freedom." Suddenly, robed African-American choir members emerge from the audience. Staying below the podium, singing and swaying and clapping, they add "energy" and "rhythm" to Manilow's mayonnaise mainstream, all a handy metaphoric visualization of how America is supposed to work. Almost exactly the same scenario was played out in a recent television benefit variety show hosted by disabled actor Christopher Reeve. At the end, the immobilized white male star was joined by a gospel chorus arriving from within the audience. You can see the same general line of thinking in Superbowl halftime shows, with James Brown interjected into squads of white cheerleaders in 1997 and Motown filling the same slot in 1998.

I would hope that American music studies could go beyond such standardized images, and indeed, there is a good deal of work slowly coming out that offers more complexity. Some scholars have been contributing to those hopes for years. I think of Jim Leary's interethnic studies of the upper Midwest, which he describes as a "creolized cultural space," not the usual terminology for the heartland. Works such as George Lipsitz's *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (Verso 1994), Steve Loza's *Barrio Rhythms: Mexican American Music in Los Angeles* (University of Illinois Press 1993), and Ray Allen and Lois Wilcken's *Island Sounds in the Global City: Caribbean Popular Music in New York* (ISAM 1998) point the way toward more interactive, transcultural approaches to the study of American music making. Things are changing in the American music world—in Sonneck Society programs and in new directions for the journal *American Music*.

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## Widening the Lens (continued)

So I was surprised to notice the lack of width in so deep and brilliant a work as Richard Crawford's *The American Musical Landscape* (University of California Press 1993), the best summing-up we have of how American music has been and might be studied, with a title that promises a comprehensive perspective. Crawford's outline of the historiography of the subject is accurately and somewhat depressingly on the mark in limning a 200 year history of narrow thinking, of arguments between the "cultivateds" and the "vernacularists," between an emphasis on composition and pedagogy on the one hand and the vibrant world of performance on the other. Nowhere in this historiography, nor in Crawford's own trenchant commentary and exemplary case studies of black and white interaction, did I notice any reference to the overall diversity of American musical patterning beyond the already centralized case of "jazz." The book might more usefully have been titled "Some American Musical Landscapes."

Perhaps I am thinking along these lines because I've been spending a lot of time in California. Take the city of Merced, scheduled to be the home of a new University of California campus (which, we hope, will emphasize American music studies), described in a local newspaper article as being one-third south-east Asian, one-third Mexican, and one-third black and white, a revealing bit of regional terminology. Expanded approaches to our field might suggest a new map of the American musical landscape, one that would include all the byways and pathways musicians have cleared and traveled, including the many local sites of meeting and exchange, so different regionally and chronologically yet so similar in their intensity of interaction. My favorite term for this activity is *transcommunality*, coined by the sociologist John Brown Childs. He works with situations where certain members of distinct American communities find it helpful to cross boundaries for common goals, such as gang warfare control. While the term recognizes that communities do exist (hence our usual "village"-centered analysis), it emphasizes that many insiders make natural moves of extension and intersection. Music strikes me as inherently transcommunal in this sense.

Unlike many social nexuses, however, music in America involves commerce, so we have to stretch our thinking even further. For example, what model of American music studies can we use for this item in the *New York Times* (12 February 1998), under the

heading "Country-Indian Channel"?

Willie Nelson has joined with the Kickapoo Indian tribe of Kansas to start the Outlaw Music Channel, a satellite network . . . programming will be a mix of country-music shows from the 1960s and 70s, Indian music and dancing, and documentaries about Indian history.

Cowboys and Indians teaming up as outlaws? Do we try to figure out the intended target market, position Willie Nelson as a side-saddle musical entrepreneur, find commonalities between the two branches of the programming as a carryover of nineteenth-century traditions? The realities of American musical life seem always to outpace our methodologies.

For starters, of course, we need many more high-quality scholarly commentaries and critical-edition CDs to broaden our angle of vision on the American musical landscape. Think how surprising it was when Ted Solis presented something we had never thought of, Puerto Rican music in Hawaii, for Anthony Seeger's Smithsonian Folkways series, which acts so often as the headlights cutting through the fog. Let me make clear that I am not merely advocating more tours of non-mainstream "musical villages," but rather an *overall* perspective on American music's fascinating propensity for interchange.

A look at two books that offer broad surveys shows some shifts in attitude, but also measures the distance yet to be covered. *America's Musical Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Society*, edited by K. J. Bindas (Greenwood Press 1992), puts twenty-eight articles under the following headings: Politics, Class, Economics, Race, Gender, and Social Context. It is highly inadvisable to segment the living experience of American music in such a rubric-ridden fashion. "Race," as usual, is the black-white question, here isolated from all the other five intersecting variables without which the discourse on "race" remains unintelligible. Anyone really tracking the pulse of American music would need more than one finger, or even the six-fingered hand offered here.

A complete guide to category confusion can be found in the most recent edition of David Kingman's *American Music: A Panorama* (Schirmer 1998). The book opens with "Folk and Ethnic Musics," where we find "Anglo-American," "African-American," "American Indian," and "Latino." Tacked on at the end is a brief new section on "Regionalism and Diversity," which highlights Louisiana, the Upper Midwest, and the Sacramento Valley of California. Space does not allow me to unpack the cognitive disorientation about American music such helter-skelter approaches probably create in the minds of students, nor to lay out the range of pre- and misconceptions involved. "Folklore" is for Kingman "a rich humus," some sort of musical compost heap—or set of isolated heaps of four apparently distinct and unrelated groups—that "nourishes" popular and classical music, an amazingly outmoded way to imagine the American musical system. Kingman undercuts his own too-tidy recipe by throwing in an extra ingredient: "regionalism," which may or may not be "ethnic," but which still depends on "the presence of a number of relatively small, self-sufficient communities whose members continue to cultivate

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# Folkways at Fifty

A bona fide May Day celebration of “people’s music” in America ought to include the likes of Pete and Mike Seeger, the SNCC Freedom Singers, and Ella Jenkins. But when the Seegers and their cadre of folk revivalists appeared at a May Day 1998 Carnegie Hall concert honoring the fiftieth anniversary of Folkways Records, they shared the stage with global percussion maven Micky Hart, Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* specialists Los Pleneros de la 21, and Native American songsters Ulali. The evening’s diverse offerings, ranging from protest singers to ethnic dance ensembles, were a fitting tribute to the eclectic vision of Moses Asch, founder and guiding force of one of America’s most influential independent recording companies.

Asch, the immigrant son of a Yiddish scholar, founded Folkways Records in 1948 with the ambitious vision of documenting the entire spectrum of human sound. While best known for his early recordings of urban folk singers Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Huddie Ledbetter, Asch amassed a catalogue of over 2100 recordings that included a rich sampling of American ballads, blues, spirituals, lullabies, cowboy songs, and bluegrass tunes, as well as folk and ritual music from every corner of the world. Looking for Tibetan chants, Hopi folk songs, Vietnamese highland tribal music, Polynesian ceremonial dance, Peruvian panpipe instrumentals, or Jamaican drumming? They’re all on Folkways.

Despite the Folkways name, Asch was never constrained by academic distinctions between high and low art. Next to the fiddle tune and protest-song anthologies stand collections of music by Gottschalk, Ives, Cowell, and Cage. Nor did Asch confine his acoustic tastes to music. Folkways releases include recitations of poetry by Whitman, Yeats, and Hughes, and the spoken words of such American luminaries as Martin Luther King, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carl Sandburg.

Inspired by his father’s keen intellect, Asch saw himself as an educator as well as an artist and businessman. At a time when commercial recordings were accompanied by little if any written commentary, Asch included substantial annotations with most of his releases. Often taking the form of modestly designed pamphlet inserts penned by distinguished scholars like Samuel Charters, Henry Cowell, Harold Courlander, Alan Lomax, and Henrietta Yurchenco, Folkways liner notes described in lush detail the musicians, their music, and their cultures.

Asch viewed his collection as an encyclopedia of world sounds. He insisted on keeping nearly every Folkways record in print at all times, once quipping: “Do you delete the letter Q from the alphabet just because you don’t use it as much as the others?” Happily, this tradition has been kept alive by the Smithsonian Institution since its acquisition of the Folkways collection follow-

ing Asch’s death in 1987. Renamed Smithsonian Folkways in 1988 under the directorship of Anthony Seeger, the label reissues historic Folkways recordings and produces new titles of traditional music. Those Folkways albums that have not been mass-produced for reissue can be custom ordered on CD or cassette tape, packaged with copies of the original LP liner notes. Given the breadth of the Folkways catalogue, this service offers an invaluable resource for teachers, researchers, and folk music devotees.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is difficult to keep up with the rapid pace of Smithsonian Folkways releases, ranging from reissues of Asch’s classic Guthrie, Leadbelly, Bill Monroe, and Elizabeth Cotton recordings to newer compilations of music from Thailand, Indonesia, and Hawaii. One collection that merits special attention is the 1997 reissue of the Folkways *Anthology of American Folk Music* (SFW 40090), originally assembled and annotated for Asch in 1952 by avant-garde filmmaker and eccentric record collector Harry Smith. The

six-CD package, which includes Smith’s original annotation booklet, features eighty-four selections of southern white “hillbilly” and black “race” records made between 1926 and 1933. Among the legion of performers are blues pioneers Charlie Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Blind Willie Johnson; early hillbilly stars Uncle Dave Macon, Charlie Poole, and the Carter Family; banjo balladeers Clarence Ashley and Buell Kazee; and spiritual singers Ernest Phipps, Reverend J.M. Gates, and the Memphis Sanctified Singers. A seamless flow of black and white voices (who are not identified by race in Smith’s original record notes) illustrates the remarkable convergence of European and African folk styles in the southern United States.

Smith’s *Anthology* fueled the post-War urban folk revival, introducing a new generation of middle class listeners to “authentic” folk sounds that were not, in the 1950s, available on commercial recordings. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Dave Van Ronk, and Mike Seeger are among the more noteworthy urban folk singers who were indelibly influenced by the anthology recordings. The irony here is that Smith, the bohemian “artist,” repackaged “popular” commercial recordings of the 1920s and 1930s and successfully marketed them as “folk” music to an urban audience. Such curious cultural mix-ups reveal the shortcomings of our conventional high-brow/lowbrow designations, but underscore too the marvelous dynamism of American music so central to Asch’s Folkways vision.

For catalogue and ordering information contact: Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order, 955 L’Enfant Plaza, Ste. 7300, MRC 953, Washington, DC 20560 (phone 202-287-7298).

—Ray Allen



*Folkways founder Moses Asch  
Photo courtesy of Folkways Archive*

# (Re)discovering Miriam Gideon

Miriam Gideon, composer and teacher, died in New York in summer 1996 at the age of eighty-nine. Having lived and worked in the city since 1926, she left a rich network of friends, former students, and colleagues, as well as a significant legacy to modern music.

Gideon was born in Greeley, Colorado in 1906. Her father, Abram, taught philosophy and modern languages at Colorado State Teachers College, and her mother, Henrietta, taught at a local elementary school. Both were of German-Jewish extraction and spoke German at home. In 1916, the family moved to Yonkers. Gideon studied piano with Hans Barth and took music courses at Yonkers High School, but because her parents did not own a piano or phonograph, her contact with music at home was limited. To provide their daughter with a thorough musical education, Gideon's parents sent her to Boston at the age of fifteen to study music with her uncle Henry, an organist and conductor and music director of Temple Israel. She immersed herself in piano, organ, and theory studies, and continued to live with her uncle while a student at Boston University. There she majored in French and minored in math while taking music courses and studying piano with Felix Fox. After graduating at the age of nineteen, she returned to New York and took courses in music at New York University with Jacques Pillois, Marion Bauer, and Charles Haubiel, planning to earn a certificate to teach in the public schools. Martin Bernstein encouraged Gideon to compose, and after a year at NYU, she aspired to a career in composition and university teaching.

From 1931 to 1934 Gideon studied harmony, counterpoint, and composition with Lazare Saminsky, a Russian emigré composer and conductor who had been a student of Rimsky-Korsakov. At Saminsky's suggestion, Gideon began to study composition with Roger Sessions, joining the ranks of a number of other young musicians including Milton Babbitt, Edward Cone, David Diamond, and Vivian Fine. During eight years of study with Sessions, her compositional style changed markedly, shaking off its tonal foundations and moving towards the free atonal idiom she would maintain through the next five decades.

Gideon entered Columbia University's graduate musicology program in 1942, earning an M.A. in 1946 with a thesis on Mozart's string quintets. She began teaching at Brooklyn College in 1944 and at City College three years later. In 1949 she married Frederic Ewen, a member of Brooklyn's English department and a scholar of eighteenth-century European literature. During the 1950s, many leftist faculty in the City University of New York system were fired or their contracts not renewed because of their politics. Gideon asserted in a 1991 interview that, because of her political views and her association with Ewen, in 1954 "at Brooklyn College, I was told my services were no longer required."<sup>1</sup> She resigned at City College the following year, rather than have to identify other leftist faculty. At the invitation of Hugo Weisgall, Gideon began to teach in 1955 at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, which awarded her a Doctor of Sacred Music degree in composition in 1970. She was reappointed at City College in 1970, where she served until 1976, and also taught at the Manhattan School of Music from 1967 until 1991.

Gideon was particularly interested in vocal music, and set texts by Francis Thompson, Christian Morgenstern, Anne Bradstreet,

Norman Rosten, and others for voice and chamber ensemble or piano. She also composed choral works, synagogue services, a cantata, and an opera, *Fortunato*. Her instrumental compositions are primarily for chamber ensembles, and include a string quartet and a number of piano works. Over fifty of her works have been published and her music has been recorded on New World Records and Composers Recordings, Inc. Gideon received numerous awards and commissions from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, among others. In 1975 she was inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the second female composer to have received this honor (the first was Louise Talma, inducted in 1974).

Gideon frequently resisted the label "woman composer," wanting her profession to be identified without the qualifier of her sex. She made clear her disapproval of concerts and recordings of music exclusively by women, stating that composers should not be segregated on the basis of sex. She remarked further that "For me to talk about the fact that women are discriminated against is unnecessary. They are and have been. But really, I didn't even know I was a woman composer until the [women's] movement in the 1960s."<sup>2</sup>

But Gideon's views on her status as a "woman composer" are multifaceted. In several interviews, she recognized that "women composers" constituted a meaningful conceptual category: in 1976, she commented that

It can't be denied . . . that women have suffered from less attention and recognition as composers. I never thought so in the past. For years people would ask me about the hardships of being a woman composer, and I'd tell them, "I've never suffered from that. I've always had my fair share of recognition." Now I realize that the kind of recognition we don't get is something we very often don't know about. And since serving on many committees and juries, I've come to sense that there is a subtle discrimination against women. It's almost unconscious, but I've recognized it even in myself. When I'm being very honest, trying to nab my prejudices as I come across them, I'm aware of a tendency to be more sceptical about a woman composer than a man. Now if I feel that way, surely my male colleagues do, too.<sup>3</sup>

Milton Babbitt questioned why Gideon "never got a Guggenheim or the conventional breaks so many of the rest of us got." In response to an interviewer's query whether Gideon's career was hindered because of her sex, Babbitt stated, "There's no question that in some ways she and other women have been hurt by this. Certainly her career was complicated by [her] being a woman."<sup>4</sup>

Gideon suggested that in addition to the discrimination some women have faced from award committees and juries, there is a sense in which gender difference may be imprinted on their music: "I strongly believe a woman composer can have something special to say, in that there is a very particular woman's way of responding to the world—and this is in some basic way quite different and yet no less important than a man's."<sup>5</sup>

I am currently examining the question of how that "woman's



way" might inform several works by Gideon, including her song "Night is My Sister" for voice and string trio (1952), a setting of one of Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets from *Fatal Interview*. The text of "Night is My Sister" offers a tale of a drowned woman "weedly washed ashore," one for whom there is "Small chance, however, in a storm so black/A man will leave his friendly fire and snug/For a drowned woman's sake"; it thus provides an opportunity to examine Gideon's music in relation to an overtly gendered narrative. Gideon's turbulent setting effectively underscores a feminist reading of Millay's poignant text, presenting a compassionate portrait of the unfortunate female protagonist while it criticizes the male character's refusal to help her. The violin, viola, and cello establish the song's haunting mood and provide an intensely sympathetic musical commentary on the woman's grim situation.

An instrumental work that further suggests a feminist compositional sensibility is Gideon's *Three Biblical Masks for Organ* (1958). Each movement portrays the biblical figure in the Purim story after which each is named: Haman, who secured a decree from King Ahasuerus of Persia for the destruction of the Jews; Queen Esther, who prevented Haman from carrying out his plan; and Mordecai, who aided his cousin Esther. Gideon's sonic portrayal of Esther begins gently and unobtrusively, *piano*, with the melody tentatively exploring the major second from F to G over static harmonic support dominated by seconds and fourths. The melodic lines soon abandon their initial inclination to explore a fixed melodic space and become increasingly independent and propulsive as the music takes on a bold and assertive character through larger melodic leaps, increased rhythmic activity, and a crescendo to *forte* at the movement's midpoint. Through her musical setting, Gideon thus avoids lingering on those aspects of Esther's character that prove problematic for a female role model in the Jewish tradition—namely, that she is passive and dutiful, having acquired power only through her beauty and familial relationships—and instead emphasizes Esther's transformation into an assertive and authoritative woman who persuades the King Ahasuerus to spare the Jews.

Further explorations of how Gideon's music can be understood to express a "woman's way of responding to the world" are now beginning to appear in print, marking a renewed interest in this fascinating American modernist.<sup>6</sup>

—Ellie M. Hisama  
Ohio State University

*Editors' Note:* Music for Voice and Ensemble in *CRI's American Masters series (CD 782)* reissues a representative selection of Gideon's settings of poetic texts from *The Hound of Heaven (1945)* to *Wing'd Hour (1983)*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Linda Ardito, "Miriam Gideon: A Memorial Tribute," *Perspectives of New Music* 34/2 (Summer 1996), 208.

<sup>2</sup>Lesley Valdes, "...women composers: Miriam Gideon Among Most Honored," *Baltimore Sun* (September 27, 1991), D1.

<sup>3</sup>Deena Rosenberg and Bernard Rosenberg, *The Music Makers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 68.

<sup>4</sup>Valdes, D1.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Weisser, "An Interview with Miriam Gideon," *Dimensions in American Judaism* 4/3 (Spring 1970), 39.

<sup>6</sup>See Marianne Kielian-Gilbert's discussion of Gideon's 1966 piano suite *Of Shadows Numberless* in "Of Poetics and Poiesis, Pleasure and Politics—Music Theory and Modes of the Feminine," *Perspectives of New Music* 32/1 (Winter 1994), 44-67.

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# Crawford's Modern Folk

Judith Tick's magisterial biography, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (Oxford University Press, 1997; \$39.95) explores the many-sided life of one of America's most influential musical figures, while recounting the diversity of American musical culture in the period from the 1920s to the early 1950s. It's a biography, to be sure, but what endeared the book to me is its concentration on the many interfaces between individuals and society. The book goes much farther than many life-and-works presentations to reveal the world in which Crawford lived. The subject of the subtitle—the creation of properly "American" music—provides a kind of recurring motif through the various stages in Crawford's life. Another connecting theme is the use of folk music: as compositional source material, as a research subject, as an energizing force in political and social movements, and as a repertory to be discovered and shared with the urban and formally educated folks. The world of musicians in Germany and France of the 1920s, and in New York in the 1930s and 1940s, receives ample attention. And finally there is the study of dynasty, of an extended family which Crawford joined and eventually energized.

Much more than an analytical study of Crawford's compositions, this is a work about the roles of music and musicians in American society. It deals in substance with the issues facing a woman entering a musical scene largely populated by male composers, and thus contributes significantly to the study of music and gender, a topic of considerable interest in contemporary ethnomusicology studies. It says much about the complex relationship between individual composition, ethnicity, and nationalism. Crawford, we learn, responded to the discovery of folk music much as did many twentieth-century European composers—Bartók, Kodály, Vaughan Williams, and Janáček—who collected, taught, and stylistically absorbed their native traditions as paths to compositional development. But Tick reveals too Crawford's interests in the use of folk music in the radical social movements of the 1930s, as well as her overall contributions to folk music research, her efforts in mediating between scholarship and education, and her participation in the folk song revival.

If American-ness is one leitmotif of this work, a second is Charles Seeger. Clearly, this powerful musical and intellectual leader, who seems to hover over every aspect of twentieth-century American musical life, and who was at various times a catalyst for developments of enormous consequence in musical thought, was also a major influence on his wife. "Influence" is too weak a

word; the book is full of incidents in which she was taught by, collaborated with, and disagreed with Seeger. Tick carefully chronicles their relationship, revealing Seeger's tremendous impact on Crawford's intellectual, musical, and social consciousness. Seeger was older than Crawford, but she was by no means eternally the student. Even so, when I had the honor of meeting the couple in 1950 at the Midcentury Conference on Folklore at Indiana University, Crawford so modestly played second fiddle to her powerful husband that I must admit hardly being aware of her stature as composer and educator. But Tick makes it clear that it wasn't only Seeger who influenced Crawford, but rather, that she did much to help him develop the musical and scholarly positions for which he eventually became known.



*Ruth Crawford Seeger, c. 1925-26*  
Photo courtesy of Judith Tick

Although this is a book with broad historical and geographic sweep, the devil is in the details. We meet many characters—Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, Carl Sandburg, Hindemith, Bartók, and the Lomaxes. The exceptionally comprehensive index is a who's who of American musical life from the 1920s through the 1950s. Tick presents encounters among these characters, largely by citing correspondence, diaries, and documents, by recounting meetings and conversations, and by quoting from interviews with some of the many people who knew Crawford personally. Altogether, this is a book about people, people who make music but who also have significant other concerns. The focus is on relationships between husband and wife, mother and children, and composer and colleagues, much more than on musical scores and sounds. Judith Tick makes Crawford and the supporting cast seem very much alive.

The book is arranged chronologically in sections corresponding roughly to decades and reflecting the sequence of principal locations. Beginning with an account of the Crawford family background in the Midwest, it moves through her education to life in Chicago, Europe, New York, and Washington, the narrative becoming increasingly fleshed out and strengthened by diverse sources. A fascinating story, this is also a work of very solid scholarship, documenting carefully every assertion and every conjecture, and including an authoritative list of Crawford's works. In the end, reading about Crawford's final illness and death, one is led inevitably to think of what might have been, had this distinguished composer and educator continued to live and work, and had she continued to affect her influential husband and the spectacular careers of her children.

—Bruno Nettl

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



## New Music Notes by Carol J. Oja

Ever-higher levels of performance virtuosity abound, turning music once considered impenetrable or raucous into sheer gorgeous sound. A new batch of CDs, all centered around composers labeled for various reasons as “experimentalists,” gives a taste of just how this change is taking place.

In *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Portrait* (Deutsche Grammophon 449 925-2), Oliver Knussen oversees the Schönberg Ensemble and soprano Lucy Shelton, among others, in a brilliantly recorded survey of music by an enigmatic, early twentieth-century modernist. The disc is rewarding on its own, but especially so as a companion to Judith Tick’s biography, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music*. It includes works spanning Crawford Seeger’s career, from *Music for Small Orchestra* of 1926, written while she studied composition in Chicago, to the *Suite for Wind Quintet* of 1952, appearing the year before her death. *Music for Small Orchestra* is one of the highlights, with a murky, ostinato-based first movement and a muscular second; this work, by the way, has been edited by Tick and Wayne Schneider and published in the American Musicological Society’s MUSA series. *Three Chants* for women’s chorus of 1930 are recorded here for the first time in full. Recreating “the heterophony of monks humming and chanting prayer,” as Tick puts it in her liner notes, the works present an imaginary East, both in text and music. Their floating murmurs suggest mystical transcendence, and their text uses a language invented by Crawford Seeger because she could not obtain access to an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. As the *Chants* progress, they move farther and farther into multiple lines of tightly voiced dissonances. This is no blissed-out meditation but a probing search for spiritual meaning. Other exceptional performances include those of *Two Ricercare* for voice, a most unlikely title for settings of texts from the *Daily Worker*; *Andante for Strings*, a sumptuous rescoring of the third movement from Crawford Seeger’s *String Quartet 1931*; and the rollicking *Rissolty Rossolty* of 1939, which declaims folk tunes in an Americana vein, albeit in fractured cells with a covert feminist message (two of the tunes’ texts, as Tick writes in her biography, comment wryly on marriage). Crawford Seeger’s *String Quartet 1931* is also included here, but its most satisfying performance remains that of the Arditti Quartet (released by Gramavision in 1989).

Lou Harrison emerged from the same realm as Ruth Crawford Seeger—that of experimentalist rigor and ethnomusicological outreach—but arrived in a very different place. Ebullient and melodic, he stands as progenitor of Pacific Rim modernism. On *Lou Harrison: A Portrait* (Argo 455 590-2), the California Symphony, conducted by Barry Jekowsky together with singer Al Jarreau and violinist Maria Bachmann, provide exceptional performances of selected Harrison works. *Elegy to the Memory of Calvin Simmons*, written in 1982, pays tribute to the late conductor of the Oakland Symphony. This is a mournful, meandering piece, delivered in ritualistic pacing. Harrison’s Symphony No. 4 (“The Last Symphony”) is a cross-cultural summation of the composer’s irrepressible eclecticism, incorporating Native American traditions as well as music of the gamelan and medieval Europe. And there are engaging new versions of Harrison staples. The first and third movements of *Concerto in slendro* (1961) ex-

plode with rhythmic vigor; the second is sinuously introspective. *Double Music*, a percussion work written with John Cage in 1941, rocks and rolls, bursting forth as the junkyard *tour de force* it really is. As more and more of Harrison’s work reaches the public—both through performances and recordings—we grow increasingly aware of what a prolific and influential composer stands in our midst. No bearer of millennial doom, Harrison celebrates the glories of global diversity.

Cross-cultural migrations also characterize *Tabuh-Tabuhan: Music of Colin McPhee*, recorded by the Esprit Orchestra of Montreal, conducted by Alex Pauk (CBC Records SMCD5181, P.O. Box 500, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1E6). In recent years, Canadians have begun reclaiming their countryman, tending not to lionize McPhee as a local hero but rather to probe, quite frankly, the reasons for his exile. In this case, McPhee is depicted in liner notes by Paul Kennedy of the CBC—and a leader in the Canadian McPhee revival—as having been stifled by the “Victorian morality” of early twentieth-century Toronto. The disc joins that of Dennis Russell Davies and the Brooklyn Philharmonic (MusicMasters) in being solely devoted to McPhee’s music. Opening with a trio of late, obscure works—Symphony No. 2, Concerto for Wind Orchestra, and *Transitions* for orchestra—it concludes with two McPhee gems: *Tabuh-Tabuhan* (1936), a jazz-inflected reconception of Balinese gamelan transcriptions, and *Nocturne for Chamber Orchestra* (1958), an unjustly neglected work that evokes the gamelan as though heard through a scrim. Pauk’s interpretation of *Tabuh-Tabuhan* has the kind of fast-paced exhilaration that the work requires; the gamelan patterns flit past, propelled by syncopations. The *Nocturne* is passionate, nostalgic, with a touch of melancholy.

*John Cage: Two<sup>2</sup>, Experiences, 3 Dances* (CRI CD 732), sympathetically performed by the two-piano duo Double Edge, shows multiple sides of a multidimensional composer. Undulating and aphoristic, *Experiences* of 1945 reveals Cage’s affinity to Erik Satie. It was written for Merce Cunningham. And *Two<sup>2</sup>*, although composed a half century later (1995-96), reflects some of the same sensibility, especially in its leisurely exploration of space. Conceived on the assumption that there is an “inner clock,” as James Pritchett puts it in lucid liner notes, the two pianists each have a series of five-measure events through which they proceed independently; both must move together, however, from one event to the next. The result emerges deliberately, with an unflappable sense of serenity. The ebullient Cage who exulted in clangorous noise—that is, the Cage of *Double Music*—rings out in *Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos* (1944-45). Originally composed for the two-piano team of Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, the work takes off toward the end of the second movement in cacophonous jubilation.

Lenore Von Stein is winner of the 1997 ISAM Student Composition Award for *The Faith of Whores*, a chamber opera that combines improvised and composed music with language and theatrical arts to create an intellectually expressive study of the mysteries of life revealed in poverty, wealth, and the situation of women.



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## The Devil's Instrument

For 200 years, from the mid-eighteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, the fiddle was the most important folk instrument in the upland South. Charles Wolfe's *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (The Country Music Foundation and Vanderbilt University Press, 1997; paper \$18.95) is, in the words of its author, "an interlocking series of studies of fiddlers" from about 1925 to 1955. Limiting himself to those fiddlers who made commercial country music (then known as hillbilly) recordings, Wolfe believes that these fiddlers' "access to mass media at a crucial time in the development of southern music gave them unparalleled power and influence on later generations of fiddlers." In the years between 1922 and 1942, about 300 different fiddlers were recorded by the commercial companies; this book is about their legacy.

Among the fiddlers whose careers and recordings are discussed are Eck Robertson, a Texas musician whose 1920s recordings are pre-



*Eck Robertson, c. 1925*

*Photo courtesy of the Country Music Foundation*

decessors of the now pervasive "contest style" of fiddling; Doc Roberts, a Kentucky musician who learned his style and repertoire from African-American fiddlers; Clayton McMichen, who disliked the hillbilly stereotype and took his music in the direction of jazz; Clark Kessinger, a virtuoso on early recordings who re-emerged, won contests, and turned

heads in the 1960s' folk revival; Arthur Smith, who many credit (and some blame) for changing fiddle styles from hoedown to ragtime; and Bob Wills, the king of Western Swing.

Women are missing from this list, as there were no prominent women fiddlers featured on these early recordings. Why not? It was not thought ladylike for a woman of this time and place to identify herself musically in the company of such ne'er-do-wells as fiddlers. Of course, that did not stop women from fiddling, but excellent fiddlers like Lily May Ledford ran into opposition from the recording industry: she was told to play the banjo instead.

Wolfe's approach here, as in his other books on southern vernacular music, is historical and biographical, grounding ideas about music in people's lives and careers. In this regard he is a painstaking and ingenious original researcher, interviewing and corresponding with musicians' relatives, collecting and interpreting ephemeral written materials, and ferreting out the names, places, dates and events that chart the map of history. He knows that much of country music's appeal comes from musical innovation, yet he realizes that despite each fiddler's achievement of an

*(continued on page 15)*



## Multicultural Mixes

*Musics of Multicultural America: A Study of Twelve Musical Communities* (Schirmer Books, 1997; \$35), edited by Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen, seeks to broaden the teaching and appreciation of American music by focusing attention on a variety of folk and ethnic musics. The emphasis is particularly on the teaching, since the design of the book, and the accompanying compact disc, is for a college survey. The message is hardly new, but to the editors' credit, the groups and the music represented in the collection bring out an ethnic diversity rarely encountered in American music surveys which traditionally have favored elite and popular genres. The editors regard "multicultural" in the title as a signal of the contemporary multiplicity of communities that express themselves through music in America, and they take time in the introduction to think through the implication of viewing and listening to America as a collection of variegated communities. There has been a tendency to see diversity in a "southern" model of red, black, and white, but the editors here offer communities with an assortment of ethnic and racial influences. At the same time they do not assume that "multicultural" necessarily implies an urban beat, and they carefully sample rural as well as city communities. And despite the twelve different communities found here, the editors are quick to point out that this is only a sample of a landscape that includes many more.

One can read about, and listen to examples from, Czechs in Wisconsin (polka), East European Jews in New York (klezmer), Arabs in Detroit, West Indians in Brooklyn (steelbands), Mexicans in Los Angeles (*mariachi*), Pueblos and Hispanics in New Mexico (*matachines*), Tohono O'odham in Arizona (*waila*), Anglo-Celtic settlers in Kentucky (sacred harp), Blacks in Memphis (gospel), and Japanese in California. The book closes with two examples that cross ethnic boundaries and highlight cultural exchange and emergence in America: Asian-American hip-hop music in Philadelphia and female punkers in New York City.

The authors align themselves primarily with ethnomusicology and folklore studies, employing the methodology of "contemporary ethnography" as their essential analytical tool. Indeed, the last theme highlighted by the editors is "the importance and effect of the fieldwork experience in shaping our view of the music." Several directions emanate from this theme. The essay on klezmer offers a life-history of one outstanding musician as a glimpse of the rise, fall, and revival of the music, and assesses the ways that individuals symbolize as well as affect such movements. In several essays, the issue of the commodification of music moves beyond evaluations of tradition to those of representation. One can read this centrally in Deborah Wong's chapter on Asian-American hip-hop music in the recording industry, and in Daniel Sheehy's section on Mexican mariachi music. Conventional multicultural themes of ethnic persistence and community formation are evident, but the editors do not shy away from pointing to challenging matters of cultural exchange among ethnic groups and syncretic relations with the majority society.

The accompanying compact disc greatly enhances the collection. The musical examples are drawn from both commercial recordings (some from 78s) as well as field tapes. As a result the

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## Behind the Beat with Mark Tucker

Stars surely fell on Alabama the night Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount was born. Growing up in Birmingham in the 1920s he immersed himself in music and listened to all the black orchestras that came through town. While a college student in 1936 Blount had a visionary experience in which aliens took him to Saturn and back. Later he claimed Saturn as his home and identified himself as Le Sony’r Ra—or Sun Ra, as he became known. In the 1950s he formed a Space Trio in Chicago, enlarging it to become his Arkestra, also called the Intergalactic Research Arkestra, the Disney Odyssey Orchestra, the Alter Destiny 21st Century Omniverse Arkestra, and many other names. Group members rehearsed religiously and toured widely, some of them living with Ra who served as their musical and spiritual guru. He offered them discipline, regular (if low-paying) gigs, and plenty of cosmic philosophy expressed in gnomic utterances: “It ain’t necessarily so that it ain’t necessarily so.” “I gave up my so-called life by never living it.” “If you can rule yourself, no one else can rule you; or measure you.” Wearing homemade robes and space-age headgear, dancing, chanting, and playing repertory that ranged from abrasive, free-jazz originals to vintage Fletcher Henderson charts to “Pink Elephants on Parade” from *Dumbo*, Sun Ra and his Arkestra hit their stride in the psychedelic 1960s, offering a flamboyant ritualized spectacle that combined elements of avant garde performance art, Afro-Egypto-Christian mysticism, old-time vaudeville, big-band jazz, science fiction fantasies, black nationalism, and unfathomable weirdness. Enduring mockery and disbelief, at times eking out a near-subsistence living, Sun Ra doggedly pursued his cosmic muse to the end of his days, when he died in 1993 after seventy-nine years on the planet.

It’s a true story, in many ways a distinctively American one. Now it’s been told, with deep respect and brilliant wit, by John Szwed in *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (Pantheon, 1997; \$29.95). A cultural anthropologist and music critic, also born in “The Magic City” of Birmingham, Szwed views Sun Ra not as charlatan or clown—as many did—but as a stunning example of black self-invention and creativity. Like the singular sonic realm he and his Arkestra inhabited, Blount designed the “Sun Ra” identity and mythos as tools for survival: “I didn’t find being black in America a very pleasant experience, but I had to have something, and that something was creating something that nobody owned but us.” Interweaving biographical narrative with learned digressions on African-American name-changing, occult and theosophical literature, and downtown New York bohemia of the 1960s, Szwed adopts a deadpan delivery that works to his advantage. Instead of pulling rank as an omniscient narrator, Szwed lets Sun Ra and his disciples speak for themselves. If what they say is confusing or contradictory, Szwed doesn’t always step in to clarify; his tolerance for ambiguity makes him the ideal biographer for the man called “Mr. Mystery” who “detested completeness” and championed the unknowable.

After reading *Space Is the Place*, I’m still not sure how to assess Sun Ra’s music. Szwed dances around this point, concerned more with describing the sounds than with evaluating them critically. But the book has fired me up to explore the recordings and convinced me to take Sun Ra much more seriously than I have in

the past. In Szwed’s sympathetic portrayal, Sun Ra appears as someone who sought to liberate consciousness by erasing boundaries between truth and fiction, reality and dreams, music and noise, black and white. As dancer Judith Holten recalled him: “You could get lost in there, like a hall of mirrors.”

**Mingus and Miles Boxed.** Mercurial, combative, demanding, complex—Charles Mingus and Miles Davis were all of the above, in addition to being among the most gifted instrumentalists, bandleaders, and composers this country has produced. Both gained experience with big bands and bebop in the 1940s and later assumed positions in the vanguard of jazz modernists. Both independently explored modal options in the 1950s, reflecting what Davis called a “movement in jazz . . . away from the conventional string of chords, and a return to emphasis on melodic rather than harmonic variation.” Both brought a workshop approach to their ensembles, favoring a fluid compositional process in which ideas were tried out, redesigned, and transmuted in the heat of performance.

Not that their music sounds anything alike. Two recent compilations—*Passions of a Man: Charles Mingus, The Complete Atlantic Recordings, 1956-1961* (Rhino R2 72871) and *The Miles Davis Quintet, 1965-'68: The Complete Columbia Studio Recordings* (Columbia/Legacy BK 67398)—reveal worlds of difference.

The Mingus set comes from one of his peak creative periods. His sidemen included such luminaries as Eric Dolphy, Jackie McLean, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Booker Ervin, and Jimmy Knepper. All had strong individual voices and knew precisely how to achieve the special blend of discipline and abandon that brought out the best in Mingus’s compositions. And what glorious works emerged during these years: *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, *Tonight at Noon*, *Reincarnation of a Lovebird*, *Haitian Fight Song*, *Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting*, *Better Git Hit In Your Soul*—the titles form a required listening list for anyone interested in Mingus. Four previously unissued alternate takes from the *Blues & Roots* session allow comparisons with familiar versions from that album. Musicologist Andrew Homzy provides cogent annotations, and one disc is given over to an interview with Mingus conducted in the early 1960s by Atlantic producer Nesuhi Ertegun. Mingus spoke with the same impetuosity and bluff humor that marked his music. Though he wrote in his memoirs about having different sides to his character (“In other words, I am three”), this set of recordings presents a more unified image. Both man and music attacked complacency with single-minded determination, affirming the joy and pain and wonder of life with an urgency impossible to ignore.

If Mingus dominated his bands with the sheer force of his personality, Miles Davis cultivated his like a gardener, creating conditions for maximum growth then stepping back to see what would happen. Perhaps at no other time in his career were the results so astonishing as when the trumpeter joined forces from 1965 to 1968 with saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, and the late drummer Tony Williams. This

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# Doctor Jazz

As we near the close of jazz's first century, the awe inspired by a seemingly unending stream of historic recording reissues is balanced by an ongoing sense of loss as early creators and innovators pass on. Each passing severs another direct link to those extraordinary decades of the 20s and 30s, and before long there will be no musicians left who actually heard Armstrong hammer those high C's at the Sunset Café, or who traded blues phrases with Bessie Smith. Trumpeter **Doc Cheatham** was one of the lucky ones who was *there*. But though his death last June was a great loss, it is cheering to remember that, in a musical tradition that has seen the tragic demise of so many young players, Cheatham was with us for nearly ninety-two years. And even in his last decade, far from a dusty relic, he remained an energetic force in the music. It was always a delight to walk by New York's Sweet Basil, see the ad for Cheatham's permanent Sunday brunch gig, and know he was still sharing his gift with new generations of listeners.

A frequent collaborator with Cheatham during his last years was pianist **Butch Thompson**, perhaps best known for his long stint as the house pianist on Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*. The remarkable affinity between Thompson and Cheatham, tempered with mutual respect and good humor, is captured in an engaging CD of duets released in 1994 (*Butch and Doc*, Darling CD 3012). I recently asked Thompson to share a few thoughts about his musical and personal relationship with the trumpeter, and was not surprised to learn the origin of their camaraderie: "I felt a bond with him based on our shared idolatry of Louis Armstrong," he recalled. "Whenever Louis came on the sound system wherever we were, Doc would look at me and smile, because we both *knew*." Cheatham, who occasionally subbed for Armstrong back in the early days, never lost a sense of wonder at the trumpeter's unique talent: asked once about his prescription for longevity, he quickly answered, "I listen to a Louis record every day."

Armstrong's spirit also casts a warm glow over one of Cheatham's last recording projects: an album with twenty-three-year-old fellow trumpeter **Nicholas Payton** (*Doc Cheatham & Nicholas Payton*, Verve 314 537 062-2). Far from a gimmicky "young meets old" exercise, the recording (which once again features Thompson at the piano) provides a fitting coda for

Cheatham's remarkable career. Payton, to my ears one of the most intriguing of the ongoing crop of Wynton Marsalis protégés, was born two years after Armstrong's death, but while growing up in the trumpeter's hometown of New Orleans developed an affinity for his phrasing and sound. Payton's grasp of jazz's early traditions was shown in 1996's *Gumbo Nouveau* (Verve 314 531 199-2), an altogether remarkable transformation of early jazz standards into fresh musical statements.

The tunes on *Doc Cheatham & Nicholas Payton* were all chosen by the older musician, and though there are few surprises in the repertory, the performances never descend to cliché. For the most part, both trumpeters stay clear of the familiar routines that have been layered onto these chestnuts over decades of performance. "Jada," for example, a rather tired staple of many Dixieland bands, is treated as a bluesy ballad, and features a warmly relaxed, partly spoken vocal by Cheatham; when he interprets those silly words—"Jada, Jada, Jing Jing Jing"—he imbues them with a passion usually reserved for a Gershwin lyric. Throughout the album, Payton provides some refreshingly understated solos as well as lovely obligato lines to Cheatham's leads (as on the achingly beautiful "Star Dust," Cheatham's own favorite from the session).

In both the Verve recording and the duets with Thompson, Cheatham's improvisations provide imaginative insights into some very old repertory. But ultimately it is the trumpeter's remarkable sound that lingers in the ear after the last cut, and makes one ponder what is missing in the hollow technical brilliance of so many younger players these days. As Thompson put it, "I found Doc had this in common with Louis Armstrong and other New Orleans musicians I have known over the years: he was most concerned with the sound of his horn. If that were right, details like fluffed endings, harmonic disagreements in the band, and late entrances didn't matter. He always liked what we recorded if the trumpet had that sound. And it was a beautiful sound, not like anybody else's. A lot of younger, flashier players could learn a lot from him." Nicholas Payton is one musician touched by Cheatham's gift. Perhaps the next jazz wunderkind, while running down those modal scales and "ii-V-I"s, will also take time to stop and listen.

—Jeff Taylor



Trumpeters *Doc Cheatham* (left) and *Nicholas Payton* (right)  
Photo by *Herman Leonard*

# Modern Eclectics

New CD releases of symphonic works by Christopher Rouse, Aaron Jay Kernis, and George Tsontakis reflect the climate of stylistic pluralism that has characterized much American concert music of the last two decades. Not only does one hear echoes of other composers of various stylistic orientations, but there is also a wide range of musical vocabularies between specific works by each composer and sometimes even within a single piece. This stylistic eclecticism reflects both an awareness of international trends and the continuing impact of the American symphonic tradition in its diversified currents from Schuman and Mennin to Sessions.

**Christopher Rouse** (b. 1949) is one of the most highly praised American composers of his generation, possessing a formidable technique and a real flair for creating distinctive orchestral sonorities and ensemble timbres. The short outer movements of the **Second Symphony** of 1994 (TELARC CD 80452) demonstrate his skills for disciplined, rigorous counterpoint and succinct development of thematic ideas within a traditional symphonic format. The slow movement also displays a clearly articulated line of development of its opening string theme.

Yet one is left with a lingering impression that the piece is more a competent display of technique than an important addition to the list of distinguished American symphonies. Some themes and gestures sound a bit formulaic (for example, the opening clarinet melody), and Rouse's penchant for wild bombast occasionally produces rather crude gestures that diminish the impact of the piece as a whole. His aesthetic sensibilities are European in orientation (although his stylistic eclecticism embraces the influence of William Schuman in a first-movement string theme), with an obvious affinity for composers who explore extremes of expression. In this respect, he has been influenced by Hartmann and Pettersson, yet their symphonies are more convincing, not least because of their discriminating taste in avoiding the gestures Rouse so willingly embraces.

These gestures are also on display in *Phaeton* of 1986 (and in the other orchestral tone poems *Gorgon* and *Iscariot*) but the approach is marginally more effective in the evocation of programmatic content, as his orchestral imagination finds greater inspiration and outlet in pieces influenced by ancient myths. A disarmingly lighter side of Rouse's musical personality is found in the Flute Concerto (1993), which contrasts outer movements of diatonic lyrical reflection with interior faster movements of more consistently chromatic harmony, drawing on Scottish and Celtic folk elements.

**Aaron Jay Kernis** (b. 1960) shares Rouse's interest in diverse musical vocabularies, textural extremes, and a similar approach to large-scale form. Kernis's generally impressive **Second Symphony** of 1991 (Argo 448 900-2), like Rouse's, frames its

weighty slow movement with relatively brief outer movements that are thematically related; the opening ascending theme of the first movement returns as the subject of a concise set of variations in the finale. Kernis, like Rouse, is prone to occasional rhetorical excess, especially in the Symphony's more militant sections inspired by the Persian Gulf War. The composer also pits extremely chromatic, complex fast sections against slower music of diatonic simplicity, a contrast especially apparent in the block-like *Invisible Mosaic III* (1988).

Kernis's occasional tendencies toward a simplified mode of expression are best exemplified in *Musica Celestis* (1990) which, despite echoes of Barber and Vaughan Williams, has a freshness and lack of contrivance relatively rare in a conservative style that some listeners would all too easily dismiss as reactionary.

**George Tsontakis** (b. 1951) is perhaps the least well-known of the three composers, a situation the present disc may help to change. His *Four Symphonic Quartets* (1992-96; KOCHKIC 7384), a series of four independent but inter-related orchestral pieces inspired by T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, are the work of a significant talent. Tsontakis has an imaginative poetic sensibility encompassing a variety of musical languages, including minimalism and a sometimes hyper-charged, chromatic Romanticism. Yet Tsontakis's composite musical vocabulary is no pastiche, but one where disparate stylistic elements are controlled by a sustained organic growth and continuity

within the musical discourse.

The title of this ambitious fifty-five minute work suggests associations with traditional symphonic form, but each movement possesses internal contrasts of expressive character and tempo which impart a sense of completeness and independence from the whole. Each movement presents simple motives or minimalist-like figures in overlapping sequential patterns, which are sometimes juxtaposed or presented in counterpoint. Characteristically, the shorter motives retain their melodic contours but are presented in changing harmonic and rhythmic contexts, similar to the changing perspectives one gains in viewing an object through a prism at different angles. But Tsontakis also occasionally writes more sustained melodic lines, as in the second movement, "Perpetual Angelus," a trait one might expect of this former pupil of Roger Sessions.

All three discs are recommended as indications of the healthy vitality and diversity to be found in recent American orchestral music. In a period when record companies are becoming increasingly cautious in their exploration of large-scale contemporary works, it is heartening to observe that some labels are still willing to bring worthy new orchestral music to a larger audience.

—Stephen Long  
Capital University



Aaron Jay Kernis,  
winner 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Music  
Photo by Joe Rossi



# Choral Perspectives

David DeVenney's *Source Readings in American Choral Music: Composers, Writings, Interviews and Reviews* (College Music Society, Monographs and Bibliographies in American Music, 1995; cloth \$25, paper \$15) is "the first attempt to present important documents relating to the history and performance of choral literature written in the United States." The essays appear under three chronological periods: music before 1830, music from 1830-1920, and music since 1920. A brief essay helpfully introduces each era and selection. The readings are of three main types: the nature and purposes of choral music, critical responses to landmark works, and performance practice. Essays discuss both sacred and secular works of the classical choral repertoire. The collection opens with a selective "Chronology of American Choral Music" from 1640 (*Bay Psalm Book*) to 1988 (*Argento's Te Deum*). A useful seventeen-page bibliography lists additional readings that treat topics and composers not discussed in the volume.

The general choral essays include those by the Reverend Thomas Walter (on "singing by note"), Thomas Hastings (on the value of singing to infants and small children), George W. Chadwick (pleading the cause of choral music in America), and Virgil Thomson (on amateurism in choral music). One of the best essays is violinist-conductor Theodore Thomas's 1881 "Musical Possibilities in America," a vehement plea for better vocal instruction in U.S. schools. Of practical value for both conductors and composers is Randall Thompson's 1959 address "Writing for the Amateur Chorus."

Among the reprinted reviews of specific works are those of

John Knowles Paine's oratorio *St. Peter* (1873), Amy Beach's *Mass* in E-flat (1892), Horatio Parker's *Hora Novissima* (1893), Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (1971), and Roger Sessions's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (1977), as well as Ernest Bloch's lecture about his *Sacred Service* (1933).

Writings of performance practice interest include William Billings's detailed instructions on choral performance (1770; 1778), Supply Belcher's hints for interpreting choral music (1794), and Dudley Buck's suggestions for accompanying a church choir (1877). An anonymous 1873 *Dwight's Journal* review describes the Fisk Jubilee and Hampton Singers and their music. Singers will be amused by Lowell Mason's "rules" for preserving one's voice (1852).

Several of the essays or interviews present a composer's aesthetic of choral music. Amy Beach's 1943 *Etude Magazine* article describes the inspirations behind her *Canticle of the Sun* and *The Years At The Spring*. An insightful 1973 interview with William Schuman covers a broad spectrum of topics, from his earliest experiences with choral music to his views on choral tone, current performance practices, commissions, music education, conductors, avant-garde choral literature and notation. There is also a 1973 interview with Vincent Persichetti that emphasizes the importance of text selection in composing choral music. Carl Harris's 1985 interview with composer-teacher Undine Smith Moore (1905-1989) includes her personal experiences and philosophy as an African-American arranger of Negro songs and spirituals.

(continued on page 15)

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## Widening the Lens (continued)

music and customs that in the more recent past originated elsewhere." Where else than the United States did "regional" styles like Polish-American polka, Mexican-American banda, or Cajun/zydeco dance music start and flourish? How can one still conjure up "self-sufficient communities" in our transcommunal American cultural space? Kingman simply has no way to deal with, say, the New Orleans Klezmer All-Stars version of Jewish music in his imaginary "Louisiana" region.

A more germane, quite recent example of new thinking is *Musics of Multicultural America: A Study of Twelve Musical Communities*, edited by Kip Lornell and Anne Rasmussen (Schirmer 1997). The editors have assembled case studies of what I have called "micromusics," smaller music systems embedded in the vast American musical space. Many of the excellent articles do cite the overlaps and intersections I am interested in foregrounding, but the editorial introduction remains somewhat rooted in the rhetoric of "multiplicity and diversity" and "the wonderful variety of music in the United States" rather than boldly reaching for a new rhetoric of interactivity. Among the nine overarching themes they cite as conceptual glue for the book, Lornell and Rasmussen lean heavily on "core cultural institutions," "individual musicians," and undefined notions of "community" to make the reader comfortable with the "subcultures" they are presenting rather than trying out macromusical schematics that could push the study of American music farther and faster.

On my last trip to Europe I accidentally tripped the little switch on my new camera that changes the image to "panoramic." On my return, I was amazed at the striking wide-angle shots I had unintentionally photographed. The central image was still there, but there was more in the picture than I thought I had included. American music studies has been slow to widen its lens, but the time seems ripe for moving more quickly into panorama mode.

Wesleyan University

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## Multicultural Mixes (continued)

quality of the individual performances is somewhat uneven, although the overall audio quality is respectable. An accompanying CD booklet offers valuable information on musicians and recording sources, as well as annotations identifying the type of music being heard and its social use. In several notes, there is musicological information on keys, modes, and instrumentation. Texts are transcribed for several tracks and translations are given. The tracks are individually numbered and grouped to the corresponding chapter headings.

While the volume is refreshingly interdisciplinary, I expected more musical transcriptions than are made available. They are conspicuously absent from the chapters on polka, mariachi, *sansei*, gospel, and klezmer music, yet are part of the discussion of Arab, West Indian, and matachines music. Taken as a whole, *Musics of Multicultural America* will provide an excellent primer of the role of music in the social and cultural life in the United States.

—Simon J. Bronner

Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg

## Behind the Beat (continued)

quintet brought new concepts of freedom and fluidity to small-ensemble jazz, showing how five players could share equal responsibility in shaping a performance from start to finish. Thirty years later, the group's rich harmonies, shifting textures, bold formal play, and rhythmic elasticity seem uncommonly fresh.

*The Complete Columbia Studio Recordings* include all six LPs made during this brief period, from *E.S.P.* to *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, together with more material that surfaced in the 1970s and '80s as well as a dozen previously unissued takes. These last can vary dramatically from the masters; in a rehearsal take, Hancock's "Madness" appears as a slow waltz before becoming the fleet version with a different melody heard on the album *Nefertiti*. Such transformations vividly show how Davis used the recording studio as a multi-purpose site for composing, rehearsing, editing, improvising, and close listening.

While many jazz fans and music libraries already have the original Mingus and Davis quintet LPs in their collections, it's worth getting these boxed sets for the improved sound quality, informative liner notes, and newly issued material. Hang the old album covers on the walls and hold onto the vinyl just in case.

**Newer Jazz on CD.** Floating lines, suspended chords, and meditative moods characterize *Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter: 1 + 1* (Verve 314 537 564-2). There are echoes of the 1960s Davis quintet in this duo project, together with a wispy New-Age ambience. . . . Since leaving Joshua Redman's group a few years ago, pianist **Brad Mehldau's** career has climbed steadily. On *The Art of the Trio, Vol. 2: Live at the Village Vanguard* (Warner Brothers 9 46848-2), he brings blistering virtuosity to the fast tunes and delicate restraint to the ballads. Most remarkable are Mehldau's solo cadenzas—like the one on "Moon River"—which undergo wondrous harmonic transformations and unfold like short stories. . . . Mehldau also appears on guitarist **Anthony Wilson's** eponymous debut album (Mama MMF 1018), which showcases Wilson's crisp arrangements for ten-piece band and nods appreciatively toward past jazz masters, Ellington among them. . . . Another young and rising pianist, **Renee Rosnes**, makes a strong showing as composer on *As We Are Now* (EMI 72438 56810 2 8), with originals inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe ("Abstraction Blue") and North Indian geography ("The Land of Five Rivers"), together with a reflective reading of "Pee Wee", the Tony Williams composition first heard on Miles Davis's *Sorcerer*. . . . Saxophonist **Greg Osby** offers a kind of postmodern hard bop on *Further Ado* (Blue Note CDP 7243 8 56543 2 9). Harmonies are tonally anchored yet spiked with dissonance—as though Ornette Coleman had been called upon to reinvent Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Beneath the disjunct lines and popping rhythms a powerful lyrical impulse drives the music forward.

*Editors' Correction: In our Fall 1997 issue we failed to include Karen Ahlquist's institutional affiliation. She is Associate Professor of Music at George Washington University.*



## Choral Perspectives (continued)

A few essays reveal an entertaining period charm or a distinctive point of view. Conrad Beissel's 1747 "instructions on the voice" praise the value of consuming wheat to produce "cheerfulness of disposition and buoyancy of spirit," while "beans are too heavy, satiate too much, and are liable to arouse impure desires" (p. 21). William Grant Still's "An Afro-American Composer's Point of View" is a succinct, personal view of the synthesis of feeling and intellect in notated music. Ned Rorem's idiosyncratic 1972 essay offers an atheist's view of writing sacred choral music. Daniel G. Mason's dated "Music and the Plain Man" (1928), while at times rather elitist in tone, applauds the joys of amateur music-making and warns of the "dangers" of mechanical instruments like the player piano.

The volume is well edited, with minimal typos. A few more editorial notes, bracketed clarifications, or musical examples might have assisted student readers with old-fashioned musical terminologies, as in Billings's discussion of triplets versus dotted notes (p. 29) or in the review of Paine's *St. Peter*, where we read that its second part opens with a "deeply pathetic chorus" (p. 58) and where we hear of a "choral" (*recte* choral[e]) in certain movements.

This unique collection should be on the reading list of any choral literature course or American music seminar with a choral emphasis. Among other things, the documents offer future interpreters of America's wonderfully diverse choral repertoire a better historical perspective.

—Bruce C. MacIntyre  
Brooklyn College

## The Devil's Instrument (continued)

individual musical identity, the pathways of musical influence are crucial to historical understanding. At the same time, he is attuned to the overall impact of the recording industry.

Most impressive is the sheer number of facts at Wolfe's command. But he does not limit himself to a dry rehearsal of details, rather asking the sort of "why" questions that arise from deep immersion and many conversations with thoughtful musicians. For example, why didn't Eck Robertson have a more significant recording career, and why was Arthur Smith's style so innovative and influential? He also asks important historical questions concerning what we can learn about the oldest fiddle styles from the early commercial recordings.

This book is not meant to be a complete history of vernacular fiddling in the South during the period under study. One might hope for more treatment of American Studies themes such as region, class, race, and gender, but this was not the point of the original essays. A complete history, as Wolfe notes, would also have to take into account women fiddlers and bluegrass fiddlers. It would also have to include the numerous local styles, repertoires, and traditions that radio and commercial recordings largely supplanted, and the many outstanding fiddlers who, for various reasons, never made commercial recordings. Within its chosen limitations, this excellent book is a thoroughly researched and satisfyingly detailed discussion of fiddlers and the early country music industry.

—Jeff Titon, Brown University

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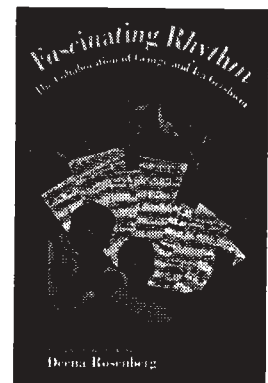


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