

NEWSLETTER

INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN AMERICAN MUSIC

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York - Carol J. Oja, Director

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REMAKING AMERICAN OPERA

History unfolds with surprises, and such is certainly the case with the recent spate of innovative American compositions for opera. Wanting to explore this trend, I.S.A.M. gathered together four composers in the vanguard of opera production—John Adams, Anthony Davis, Meredith Monk, and Tania León—for a public symposium. The event was moderated by K. Robert Schwarz, former I.S.A.M. Research Assistant and active free-lance music critic. It took place on 9 November 1994 at the CUNY Graduate Center. Following are snippets from a lively, often hilarious discussion. Also featured that evening were video and audio clips from each of the composer's operas, ranging from Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986), to Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987) and Monk's *Atlas* (1991). León's *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (1994) was the most recent work discussed.

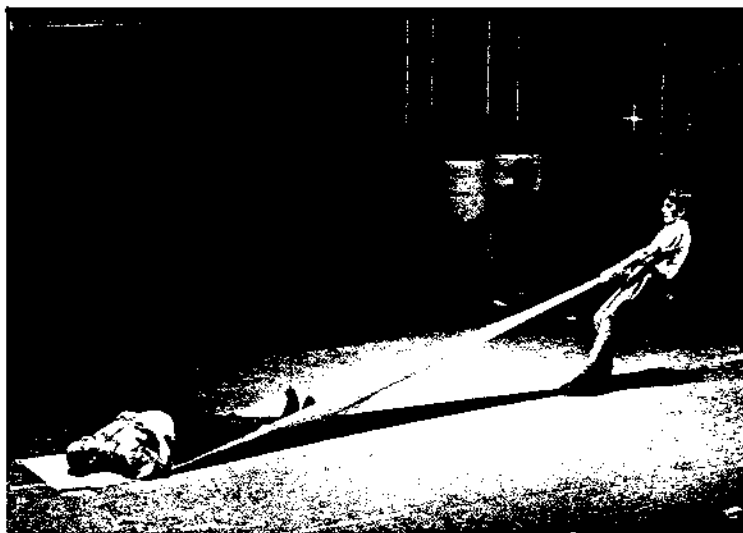
K. Robert Schwarz: American opera has enjoyed an extraordinary rebirth over the last ten years. You don't have to take my word for it. I've hand-picked two quotes to show you how much things have changed. The first comes from John Rockwell's *All-American Music* of 1983: "Because of the moribund conservatism of its patronage and audiences, traditional opera today is even more sterile than instrumental classical music. Frozen out of regular opera houses, experimental composers with an instinct for music theater turned to different forms—the whole melange of mixed-media events, happenings, video, and various collaborative ventures of the '60's and '70's." So in 1983 we have "moribund conservatism." Philip Glass, in 1987, recalled in his autobiography a day back in 1978 when the director of the Netherlands Opera asked him to write an opera for conventional vocal and orchestral resources. That opera became *Satyagraha*. Glass had a negative reaction: "The operatic tradition seemed to

me hopelessly dead, with no prospect for resurrection in the world of performance in which I worked. To me, it seemed a far better idea to simply start someplace else." And Glass ended his book—remember, this was 1987—by saying: "I don't doubt that the world of traditional opera will eventually be dragged—

probably screaming—into the 20th century with the rest of us. Of course by then it will be the 21st century, and that will be a whole new story." Well, it's not the 21st century. It is 1994, and we have with us four composers who have been busy writing successful and popular operas for the past decade. In fact, things *have* changed. One more piece of proof might be the fact that Philip Glass's own opera *The Voyage* was commissioned and premiered at none other than the Metropolitan Opera in 1992. So, I think we can agree that things have changed for the better. Assuming that as our premise

this evening, I thought I would ask you all, "What is opera in America in the 1990's? What does the word 'opera' mean to you? How do you define the genre?"

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Sanford Sylvan and Keith Sabado in a scene from John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*
Photo by Hermann J. Baus

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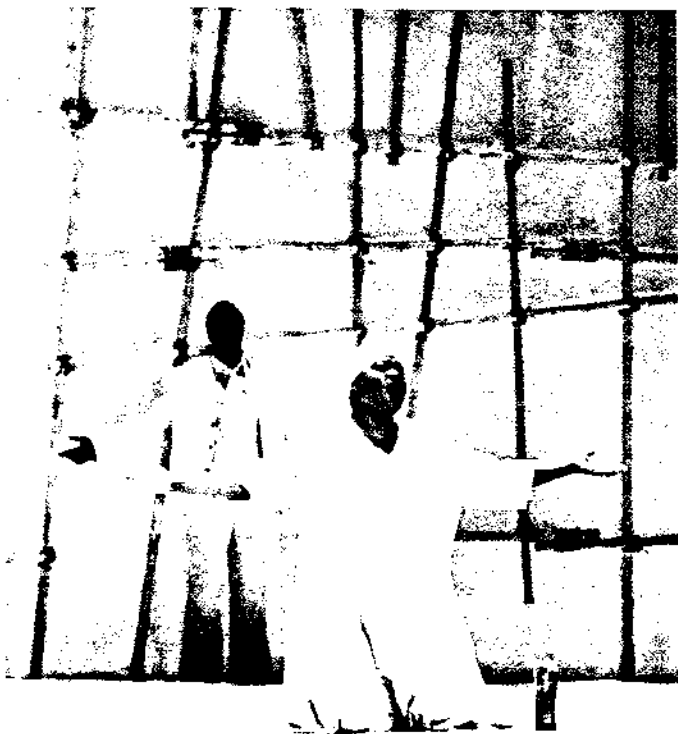
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REMAKING AMERICAN OPERA *(continued)*

Meredith Monk: Well, I can say what opera means to me. I have always been very interested in a form that has the possibility of combining music, dance, and visual images, and so for many, many years I have been calling my works "opera" even though they're not really opera within the European tradition. They're much more attempts to integrate all human resources into one form. I think about my works as affirmative life forms which pull together a lot of elements from our fragmented world and of the performance situation as a healing ritual. The integrating of many components can happen also in film, but live performance is something you can never replace—the figure eight of energy that goes between audiences and performers is something we need in our lives. That's why I've tried over the years to weave all these different elements together into a form that stimulates the audience to utilize all their powers of perception.

John Adams: I think very much the way Meredith does. Since the inception of the word, opera has meant the synthesizing of several different art forms. Of course now, with technology being what it is, we are at the beginning of a new millennium. Probably the big trouble for everyone is that the word opera carries so much baggage, and when people hear it they don't think of us. They think of someone else. Maybe we just need to bury the term. It's too much trouble. But I do think that this experience of poetry or text joined to music, as well as to gesture or choreography and visual event, is what we're talking about.

Anthony Davis: In a sense I was drawn to opera *because* of the



*Vanessa Ayers in Tania León's The Scourge of Hyacinths
Photo by Marbeth, 1994*

baggage—which is very funny. In a way, I was interested in the idea of opera when I was reading Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and other things as a kid. I was fascinated with the idea of opera in the sense of combining what Nietzsche described as the Apollonian and the Dionysian. That gave me a great metaphor for looking at American music. The idea of combining a sense of form and structure with the improvised traditions—the passionate tradition of Richard Strauss is in a way symbolic of the Dionysian—gave me a handle on what American opera might be. I like the idea of creating a music drama that, in a sense, deals with a synthesis of these two opposing traditions.

Tania León: Two years ago opera was nothing that I considered composing—not even opening the door and looking at. Meaning that, yes, having gone to the Met I know all the tunes, the Verdi tunes, the Puccini tunes. Who doesn't? But when I had the invitation to write an opera, I almost slammed down the telephone. I just couldn't deal with it. All of a sudden I realized that when I went into the streets of New York, I was watching opera. Opera meant standing at 42nd Street to see what was going on—listening to all the sounds, seeing the lighting and the movement. Everything was part of the scene. It was a matter of extracting a single point of view and expressing that on stage. So I had a tremendous amount of trouble equating my comprehension of what opera could be with what it has been. Witnessing the operas of Philip Glass and John Adams and admiring Meredith Monk and X of Anthony Davis, I felt that I could do something my own way and not have to be explaining so much what I was trying to say.

Schwarz: John said before that most people associate opera with long-gone composers, such as Mozart and Strauss. I remember Steve Reich once telling me he didn't like any post-Baroque opera, which cuts off everything. (Actually, I think he said, "post-Monteverdi.") What attitude does each of you have toward the operatic canon? Is it a tradition you are fond of—that you grew up admiring?

Adams: Well, I never listened to opera or even knew a thing about it until I went to college. My parents were music lovers, but they liked jazz and Mozart. So there wasn't any awareness of opera in the house. When I was a junior in high school, I was invited by a very wealthy man to come to New York and go to the Met with him. Although he lived in New York, he had grown up in the same small New Hampshire town as I did and had read an article in the local Concord, New Hampshire paper about me. He sent me a check for \$100. I had never been to the opera before. My parents bought me a new bow tie and a suit and put me on the Greyhound bus. I stayed at the "Y," which was an adventure. Then I appeared at this man's house and was taken to see, I think, *Aida*. That was my first experience. I really hated it. I'm not being facetious. I mean I *really* did hate it. And I've never liked going to the opera. I live in San Francisco where there is a world-

(continued on page 14)

I.S.A.M. MATTERS

The so-called "Republican revolution" has produced intense debate about proposals to slash all sorts of funding, and as time passes, inflamed rhetoric is hardening into cold reality. Threats to major national programs such as the NEA and PBS have been well-publicized, but smaller entities, such as I.S.A.M., may also be affected. New York's new governor, George Pataki, has proposed a radical plan to reduce drastically the size of both the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY), our parent institution. CUNY has faced wave after wave of financial assault over the last twenty years, but this one could be the breaker. Pataki wants to cut CUNY's budget by twenty-five percent next year, and as we go to press, the outcome for Brooklyn College—and for I.S.A.M.—remains uncertain. A state of fiscal emergency has been declared throughout CUNY and retrenchment committees have been formed. There's been intense lobbying to keep vital programs alive, but a little luck is also needed. So cross your fingers, and stay tuned.

Future Events. *Composing Black*, a conference probing the current environment for African-American composers, is planned for the afternoon of Saturday, 18 November 1995, at Brooklyn College. It will dovetail with a series of concerts, 3-5 November, by the Brooklyn Philharmonic honoring the centenary of William Grant Still's birth. The performers and composers scheduled to take part include Dwight Andrews, David Baker, Don Byron, Tania León, and Diane Monroe. Gunther Schuller, conductor for the Brooklyn Philharmonic's concerts, will also participate.

Springtime Offerings. This past semester, a string of programs at I.S.A.M. have focused, to an unprecedented extent, on the exceptionally rich musical traditions of our urban environment—all of which raise intriguing issues with broad national resonance. The biggest event occurred in late April with *Island Sounds in the Global City*, a conference exploring music-making among the nearly 2 million New Yorkers who trace their heritage to the Caribbean Islands. Exceptionally well-attended, with funding from the New York Council for the Humanities, the panels paired scholars with musicians, the latter ranging from the Haitian-American band leader Jean-Yves Joseph, to TNT, an articulate young Nuyorican rapper from the Bronx.



West Indian steel pan virtuoso Robert Greenidge in a calypso-jazz fusion concert at Brooklyn College. Photo by Ray Allen

In February, we sponsored the fourth annual **Brooklyn College Gospel Festival**, featuring Grammy-winner Hezekiah Walker and his choir from the Love Fellowship Pentecostal Church in East New York, together with a number of high school and community gospel ensembles. . . . In March, the Trinidadian steel pan virtuoso, **Robert Greenidge**, visited Brooklyn College, thanks to support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Arts Partners Program. Renowned as a top-flight arranger for steel band (his pieces have won a series of "Panorama" competitions in Trinidad over the last decade) and as an innovator in fusing Trinidadian traditions with jazz, Greenidge led a workshop with steel-band leaders from Brooklyn's sizeable Trinidadian community. His visit culminated in a stunning performance with local youth groups.

Nearly a thousand energetic **public school students** visited Brooklyn College this spring for two sets of concerts hosted by I.S.A.M. and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The first featured the Manhattan Ceili Ensemble, a group of Irish-American musicians and step-dancers, and the second presented Los Pleneros 21, a group performing Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* repertoires. The schooltime series will continue next fall.

Congratulations! The winner of the second annual I.S.A.M. Composer Award is Ye Sook Lee, a graduate student in composition at Brooklyn College and native of Seoul, Korea. Her work, *As the Thread of Tao*, subtly incorporates a Korean scale within Western scoring for chamber ensemble.

Inside Tracks. I.S.A.M. Research Associate Ray Allen, together with Ashley James, recently produced a documentary film, *We Love You Like a Rock: The Story of the Dixie Hummingbirds*, which was premiered at the 1994 joint meeting of the American Folklore Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology. The film chronicles the gospel quartet made famous to mainstream audiences through a recording with Paul Simon of "Love You Like a Rock." It traces the group from its roots in South Carolina in the late 1920s to its present-day incarnation in Philadelphia.

Next year, I.S.A.M.'s director, **Carol J. Oja**, will be on fellowship leave at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. During her absence, Ray Allen will serve as acting director.

LISTEN UP

Among the labels producing substantial releases in American music—from big-time big businesses such as Koch, to tightly focused smaller firms such as Bridge—Albany Records has been steadily devoting itself to the middle ground of U.S. concert music, issuing works by Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, and Robert Ward, among others. Nestled among its releases is *Voices from Lost Realms*, featuring the music of William Mayer (Albany Troy 068). Long before all the recent hubbub about a “new accessibility,” Mayer shaped an approachable style. There are many compelling works on this CD and one real knockout: *Inner and Outer Strings* of 1982, a sumptuously lyrical, thoroughly unhackneyed conversation between string quartet and orchestra.

At another corner of the new-music arena is *Man and Superman* by Noah Creshevsky (Centaur CRC 2126). Intending to “celebrate abundance,” Creshevsky devises the digital equivalent of a crazy quilt by fusing diverse sampling sources with electronic sounds and real live performers. But the bounty spins out linearly rather than vertically. No indulger in thick textures, Creshevsky is a master of economy, focusing on the sound-of-the-moment (or sometimes split-second). The result is alternately witty and contemplative, always deftly crafted.

One of the more checkered legacies in twentieth-century concert music is that of Virgil Thomson—revered for his music criticism, respected for his innovative operas, and relegated to a less-than-first-string status for the bulk of his compositions. He deserves a better shake, and a new recording, *Virgil Thomson: Mostly About Love (Songs and Vocal Works)* (Northeastern NR 250-CD), displays one of his most highly touted strengths—a way with words. Spearheaded by Anthony Tommasini, who is pianist and producer here, the singers Nancy Armstrong, D’Anna Fortunato, Frank Kelley, and Paul Kirby present Thomson’s songs from 1926 (*Susie Asado*) to 1963 (*Praises and Prayers*). A highpoint comes with his audaciously simple vocal quartet, *Capital Capitals*, set to a text by Gertrude Stein in 1927. A warm-up for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the work brims with impish audacity, rapid shifts of style, and a deadpan text delivery that turns Gregorian chant on its head.

Simplicity in a latter-day, West Coast guise appears in the meditative tranquillity of *Compositions/Improvisations (Asian Improv)* by composer and koto virtuoso Miya Masaoka. A Japanese-American, Masaoka is schooled in traditional koto techniques; she has also studied composition with Alvin Curran and collaborated with a number of jazz musicians, most notably Pharoah Sanders. Like a session with a first-class yogi, these tonal contemplations convey inner poise and spiritual serenity. Especially striking is her improvisation on “Come Sunday” from Ellington’s *Black, Brown, and Beige*, where East and West fuse to the advantage of both. Masaoka’s CD is available by writing: San Francisco Gagaku Society, 797 Hampshire Street, San Francisco, CA 94110; 415-282-5263.

—C.J.O.

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SISTER MARTHA EXPLAINS IT ALL

It is becoming difficult to recall that only yesterday music criticism was dominated by notions of formalism and aesthetic autonomy. Today, politics is the name of the game and an entire spectrum of Zhdanov wannabes has taken the field. Those who consider this an unmixed blessing should take note of Martha Bayles's *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Free Press, 1994; \$24.95). Despite its grandiose ambitions—Bayles sets out to explain no less than all of twentieth century music—this book is most interesting as an example of the new (post-Newt) Beltway sophistry. As someone once put it: "You don't need a weatherman..." Bayles, who for six years was the TV and arts critic for the *Washington Post*, blows at gale force.

It's a strange read. Despite her given subject—the supposed decline of popular music—Bayles is more interested in scoring points off various cultural critics than in listening perceptively to any music. She tries for a Pauline Kael-ish breeziness. But by constantly nitpicking with the Brahmins of the neoconservative cultural establishment, she turns her book into an academic version of the Family Feud. Although she aligns herself with Allan Bloom and Hilton Kramer, Bayles also differentiates herself from them. For starters, she claims to be a "dues paying member of the 60s generation." Does inhaling thirty years ago bequeath moral authority now? Or is Bayles taking credit for the civil rights movement?

Bayles, to give her due credit, has a thesis, and for once the word "totalizing" seems none too modest. As in *Dodge City*, her protagonists dress in black or white moral drag. The Good Guys are jazz musicians; the Bad Guys are perverse modernists. Bayles weaves a simple moral fable. African-American music—so long as it is not appropriated by perverse modernists or reined in by zealous nationalists—has impeccable moral credentials. "Afro-American music is sometimes erotic, but it is never obscene, because there is always a larger whole—whether spiritual ecstasy, physical exuberance, or emotional catharsis—to which its erotic qualities are joined." This moralized, sanitized landscape will make the most devoted jazz fans blush. But isn't it just an update of the "noble savage"? Jazz is the Man Friday of Bayles's moral crusade. Its pure African-American essence is under attack both from rapaciously appropriating whites, who use it only to indulge their sexual and racial fantasies, and parsimonious blacks, unwilling to share their cultural wealth with well-meaning whites like Bayles.

If you find this moral gavotte tricky, try following the logic of Bayles's history of modernism. In the white hats are "extroverted modernists" who, Bayles claims, "are neither aggressively radical nor arrogantly dismissive of tradition." In the black hats are the "perverse modernists" who are "committed to obscenity as the only reliable way to get a shocked reaction from the public." In the gray hats are the "introverted modernists" (like Schoenberg and Webern) who pursued, we are told, art for art's sake and withdrew from the public sphere. Not surprisingly they turn out to be unconscious fellow travelers of the "perverts."



Hezekiah Walker, who performed at Brooklyn College's fourth annual gospel festival in February.

Interestingly Bayles has trouble specifying which "extroverted" modernists she likes. Stravinsky, Copland, Ives and Milhaud [!] are praised in passing, without much conviction. But she has no difficulty filling out her list of offending perverts, who, it turns out, are responsible for everything wrong with culture today. A music critic who can barely differentiate Webern from NWA can hardly be trusted for fine distinctions. But Bayles's criticism is really name calling. Most of it reads like hog calling.

With her moral longitudes and latitudes in place, Bayles can draw a map of the popular musical world, and it is quite a feat of globe hopping. Pick your favorite band and hear Bayles knock them off. "Prince's goatishness is preferable to the icy decadence purveyed by Madonna." "Nothing aroused Zappa's ire more than the thought that somebody besides himself might be making money in the music business." "Nirvana has been wrestling with success in a way that reveals the punk legacy at its most stultifyingly antimusical." Zap, you're dead. If you happen to share Bayles's biases this may sound like criticism, but it is really a combination of personal gripes and music industry gossip. Not surprisingly for a self-described ex-flower child, she runs out of artistic sympathies just about the time she turns thirty. Nihilistic dadaisms creep in from British art school—those Brits have much to answer for. Heavy metal serves up a satanic brew of sex and violence. Soul gives way to funk, funk to disco, disco to rap—and Bayles is not amused. For the last part of the book she sounds like a disapproving parent, wringing her hands over a teenage child's depraved musical tastes for punk, metal, and rap. It's a scene from an early evening sitcom. Despite all her displays of moral revulsion, her interest in music which is in no way addressed to her seems prurient. Thirty years ago she would have told her parents to bug off.

The relation of popular music(s) to art music(s) is a complex and fascinating topic, which writers as diverse as Lawrence Levine and Wilfred Mellers have shown. It is far too important to be left to cultural spin doctors like Bayles.

—David Schiff
Reed College

BEHIND THE BEAT *with Mark Tucker*

Recently I showed Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (University of Chicago Press; \$29.95) to a jazz saxophonist friend. Leafing through the hefty volume he kept shaking his head in near disbelief, overwhelmed by its massive size and scope.

Others facing Berliner's study for the first time may be similarly awestruck. For *Thinking in Jazz* represents a wondrously ambitious effort to understand the complex processes of learning, listening, performing, and interacting that define the art of jazz improvisation. Central to Berliner's inquiry is the drive to discover how musicians view the topic. Their voices resound throughout the book, sometimes making it resemble a marathon panel discussion in which Berliner plays the role of moderator, deftly steering speakers from one subject to the next. Similarly ambitious, the "Music Texts" section includes two-hundred-fifty pages of transcriptions—not just improvised solo lines but entire group performances.

With more and more information these days vanishing into the twilight zone of cyberspace, it's somehow comforting to pick up *Thinking in Jazz* and feel the solid bulk of scholarly production. So don't wait for the CD-ROM edition—make room on the shelf now for Berliner's extraordinary contribution to jazz studies.

Young Man with a Horn. *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road* (W. W. Norton; \$29.95), with text by Wynton Marsalis and photos by Frank Stewart, brings readers close to one of the major musicians of our time: a young man from New Orleans who has proven himself to be a dazzling trumpeter, committed teacher, eloquent speaker, and lately, a venturesome composer. Although constantly on the move, Marsalis appears relaxed in these pages. Photographer Stewart's candid shots show the trumpeter and fellow band members riding their bus, meeting fans backstage, sharing meals with strangers, ironing clothes for an upcoming performance. In his prose Marsalis captures the rhythms of musicians talking and the familial tone of their banter. He is by turns witty, reflective, and preacherly ("Practicing is the first sign of morality in a musician"). But there's tension here, too. Posing with his two sons after a concert he looks pained, or maybe just exhausted. And sitting on the bus as it rolls through the American heartland, eyes closed and arms folded, the most public figure in jazz wears a soul-satisfied smile—as though there's no place in the world he'd rather be.

Jazzwomen. In Marsalis and Stewart's book, as in most writing on jazz, women occupy the margins. But in Leslie Gourse's *Madame Jazz: Contemporary Women Instrumentalists* (Oxford University Press; \$27.50) they fill the center. Gourse profiles a number of female players active mainly in the past fifteen years, rounding these out with sketches of a few older, established figures (Marian McPartland, Dorothy Donegan, Shirley Horn) and successful businesswomen in jazz. The musicians interviewed by Gourse speak openly of the prejudice

they've faced in a field defined and dominated by men. They discuss early musical training, important mentors, current projects, and future goals. An appendix gives short bios of over three-hundred women jazz instrumentalists and ensembles. Although useful more as a reference tool than as a study of music and gender, *Madame Jazz* strikes a blow at the pervasive sexism in jazz—the "most macho of all the arts," as Gourse puts it.



Jane Ira Bloom, currently one of the most visible women in jazz. Photo by Tom Lau

Piano Pros, Band Scores. Dick Wellstood, who died in 1987, knew the secrets of Harlem stride piano. He could negotiate its tricky rhythms and perilous leaps with ease and explain its essential traits with regal authority (see his notes to the Donald Lambert LP, *Harlem Stride Classics*, Pumpkin 104). Stride, for Wellstood, was no antique style in need of revival but a living language used for translating all manner of material, from pop songs and jazz standards to Joplin rags and Christmas carols. In *Dick Wellstood Jazz Piano Solos* (Neil A. Kjos Music Company, P.O. Box 178270, San Diego, California 92177-0894; \$8.95), seven of Wellstood's stride-fueled improvisations have been faithfully transcribed by that keyboard lion of Venice, Riccardo Scivales. Like Scivales's earlier collection, *Harlem Stride Piano Solos* (Ekay Music, Inc., 1990), the Wellstood folio offers a passport to those in search of digital thrills and rhythmic revelation.

More on stride—also ragtime, jazz, and pop songs—can be found in *Dick Hyman: Piano Pro* (Ekay Music, Inc., 1992), a volume of scores and entertaining essays by this prolific musician. The writings, most published in *Keyboard* magazine during the 1980s, include technical tips, reminiscences, repertory lists ("Tunes Everyone Should Know"), and wry anecdotes about the profession. . . . New in the Smithsonian's Jazz Masterworks Editions is Duke Ellington's *Sepia Panorama*, transcribed and edited by Gunther Schuller. Both score and parts are available at a reasonable price, together with two earlier publications, Ellington's *Daybreak Express* and Billy Strayhorn's *Take the "A" Train*. Write to Jazz Masterworks Editions, NMAH 4127, MRC 616, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. Phone 202-633-9162.

IVESIANA ON DISK

The past few years have seen a bumper crop of music by Charles Ives issued on CDs, especially songs and chamber pieces but also several major orchestral works. Here are some brief highlights:

Songs. From Albany Records have come, on four discs, *The Complete Songs of Charles Ives* (Troy 077-080), performed by four singers (with four accompanists): Dora Ohrenstein (with Philip Bush), Mary Ann Hart (Dennis Helmrich), Paul Sperry (Irma Vallecillo), and William Sharp (Steven Blier). It is *not quite* complete, but, with 153 songs, near enough—and notable for inclusion of premiere recordings of songs from the recently published *Forty Earlier Songs* (1993). Just as Ives's songs are of a riotous range and diversity, so is the singing here. Ohrenstein's light soprano is sometimes tentative, often undermined; Hart's juicier mezzo has some intonation problems in the upper register; Sperry's aging tenor is not quite offset by high intelligence and wit; Sharp's rich, velvety baritone is the most consistently satisfying. The liner notes by Vivian Perlis, different for each disc, are characteristically intelligent.

Available once again—and how wonderfully welcome—are the 24 Ives songs recorded in 1954 (issued on LP as Overtone 7) by soprano Helen Boatwright, supremely accompanied by the late John Kirkpatrick. We owe the remasterings of these classic readings to CRI (CD 675); they are paired with 22 songs by Ernst Bacon, recorded by Boatwright with Bacon as accompanist.

Chamber works. The sparky group of German musicians named Ensemble Modern, directed by Ingo Metzmacher, has recorded for EMI Classics (CDC 7 54552 2, 1992) a couple of dozen brief chamber works by Ives (the longest being the songs *General William Booth Enters Into Heaven*, in John Becker's orchestration of the mid-1930s, and Ives's last art song, *Sunrise* [1926], with violin). Baritone Henry Herford sings *General Booth* and four other works, and the disc presents virtually all of Ives's instrumental *Set No. 1* and other miniatures, in new editions by West Coaster David G. Porter.

Complementing that CD is *A Set of Pieces* by the Orpheus Chamber Ensemble, a larger group (close to 30 members for some works here) but *sans* conductor. Theirs is an ambitious offering (on Deutsche Grammophon 439 869-3, 1994), including *Three Places in New England*, the *Third Symphony*, all of *Set No. 1* and *The Unanswered Question*. Pianist Gilbert Kalish is on hand for many of the movements, and the performances are crisp, clear, and thoroughly competent. Carol K. Baron has revised some of Gunther Schuller's chamber editing and Kenneth Singleton's of the symphony; she also contributes liner notes.

Remembrance: A Charles Ives Collection (Koch International 3-7182-2H1) is something of a curiosity: the basic recording group is a wind ensemble, the Detroit Chamber Winds. But they are joined by "Friends" who include string players, percussionists, pianists, and a soprano, and all are first-class professionals, many from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Like Ensemble

Modern, they too offer 26 pieces—marches, song transcriptions, chamber miniatures, and the more substantial *Fugue in Four Keys* on "The Shining Shore" and *The Unanswered Question*. The recording sounds cavernous, and no wonder: it was taped at St. Paul's Cathedral in the posh Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe. Energizer of the project, and conductor throughout, is the eminent University of Michigan bandmaster H. Robert Reynolds.

Orchestral Works. The Cleveland Orchestra under Christoph von Dohnányi offers a ravishing performance of Ives's *Symphony No. 4*, lyrical or titanic as the moment requires, on a London CD (443 172-2, 1994). The technology is state-of-the-art, the tape-editing magnificent: never have Ives's "prominence levels" (indicated by him with letters from A to G in the savagely complex second movement) been projected so convincingly. Edgard Varèse's *Amérique*, although at 21'41" almost as long as Ives's Fourth, does not quite make for a full disc, and Dohnányi ruminates on *The Unanswered Question* to fill it out.

"Away With the Ives Myth: 'The Universe' is Here at Last," cried the *New York Times* (23 October 1994) as headline for a review by Richard Taruskin of Centaur CD 2205. "'The Universe'" is Ives's *Universe Symphony*, as completed by Larry Austin and recorded by the Cincinnati Philharmonia Orchestra, with the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music Percussion Ensemble and Chamber Choir, directed by Gerhard Samuel (with four assisting conductors!). (The disc also offers the *Second Orchestral Set* and—yes, yet again—*The Unanswered Question*.) Taruskin was bowled over by *Universe*, which he described as "Ives filtered through a sensibility obviously colored by the 'spatialized' music of the [1960's] avant-garde"—i.e. the sensibility of Austin, a leader of that avant-garde. Many of Ives's sketch pages for *Universe* are lost, but about forty are extant, and for some twenty years Austin had been working with them, composing "fantasies" on them, and finally making a "realization" of the whole work (not an "edition": the source material is both fragmentary and ambiguous).

Taruskin's perception of the realization as Austinized Ives is not shared by Austin: he pleads in his notes for the CD that, "to the extent intended and possible, I have meant this realization . . . to be experienced and appreciated as a 100% Ives composition." Whichever is closer to the truth, one thing is sure: this is like no Ives you've ever experienced before. I have the same reaction to Austin's realization that I did to David Porter's (of the first section only), in a performance at the University of Northern Colorado in October 1993: namely, that Ives meant it very precisely when he wrote, among his extensive comments on *Universe* in his *Memos*, that his plan was to present a "contemplation in tones, rather than music (as such)" (emphasis added), of the Creation and "the evolution of all life in nature, in humanity, to the Divine." This perfectly describes the mystical otherness, the musico-metaphysical elsewhere, of any conceivable realization now or to come, of the *Universe Symphony*.

—H.W.H.

SIDNEY COWELL DIES AT NINETY-ONE

Sidney Robertson Cowell died on 23 February 1995 at her home in Shady, New York, near Woodstock at the edge of the Catskill Mountains. Born in California (San Francisco, 1903), she became best known in American-music circles as the wife of Henry Cowell, whom she married in 1941. A staunch promoter of his music and vigilant protector of his legacy, she often worked side-by-side with her husband, most notably in the jointly authored Charles Ives and his Music of 1955. In the 1930s, however, Sidney Cowell had an important independent career as a folklorist. Following is a tribute to her by I.S.A.M.'s longtime director H. Wiley Hitchcock, who helped her administer her late husband's musical affairs. The text below is adapted from Hitchcock's foreword to a collection, edited by him and as yet unpublished, of some hundred anecdotes set down by Sidney Cowell. This "chapbook of cheer," as she liked to call it, reveals a long and marvelously varied life.

Gentlewoman, folksong collector, musician, photographer, author, nature lover, cat fancier, gourmet cook, West Coaster and Catskillite, transcontinental and intercontinental traveler, *citoyenne du monde*—and admiring advocate of the music of her husband Henry Cowell, from their first meeting in California when she was fourteen and through a twenty-five-year marriage and an even longer widowhood.

Sidney Cowell was also one of the great raconteurs. She was endowed with an extraordinary memory and a formidable capacity for speaking and writing, spontaneously and generously, in shapely sentences and rounded paragraphs. (Her marginless, jam-packed elite-typed postcards, about as long as the average term paper, were notorious.) She loved a good story, whether one of her own or that of a friend. She favored recalling those special moments in life that mirror the



A folklorist at work. Undated photo in the Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

absurd, the lovable, the laughable, or the wry in the human condition. I cannot remember a single one of our many conversations, over more than twenty years, in which she did not make me the gift of a cheery, comic, poignant, or provocative vignette (often, more than one).

Right up to her last days—blind and bedridden, more than ninety years old, living alone amid the flora and fauna that surrounded her hillside home in Shady—she savored life to the utmost. Others might find reason for complaint or lament; she never indulged in either one. As she puts it in one tale of her chapbook, she was “well schooled in refusing worry over circumstances [she] couldn’t change.” In another, she tells how, as a little girl, refused candy by her mother, she protested, saying, “I can’t hear you when you say No.”

As I wondered what I might say about Sidney Cowell in a brief foreword to her enchanting collection of recollections, several things said by others about others came to mind. Shakespeare’s “fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” was one; and another characterization by him seemed apt: “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety.” But most insistently there occurred to me Robert Whittinton’s assessment of Sir Thomas More (with due allowance made, of course, for gender substitution):

More is a man of an angel’s wit and singular learning; I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness, and affability? And as time requireth a man of marvellous mirth and pastimes; and sometimes of as sad gravity: a man for all seasons.

Sidney Cowell was a woman for all seasons.

—H.W.H.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD by Sidney Robertson (Cowell)

From 1938 to 1940, Sidney Cowell (then Sidney Robertson) directed the WPA’s Northern California Folk Music Project, based at the University of California, Berkeley. According to Catherine Hiebert Kerst of the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center, this was “one of the earliest attempts at conducting a large-scale ethnographic survey of American folk music in a defined region; . . . no other WPA field collection of folk music undertaken by a single person was so ambitious or wide-ranging.” Kerst has generously supplied excerpts from field notes by Sidney Cowell, written during the first several

*months of 1939. They convey her vivid ear for language and her talent for storytelling, as well as the intensity of her day-to-day contact with musicians of diverse backgrounds. Now housed in the American Folklife Center’s Archive of Folk Culture, the entire collection of Sidney Cowell’s field documentation will eventually be available online as part of the library’s American Memory Project. For more information about Sidney Cowell and the collection see Catherine Hiebert Kerst, “Sidney Robertson and the WPA Northern California Folk Music Project,” *Sonneck Society Bulletin XX/3 (Fall 1994).**

January 14-19 (Saturday to Thursday), 1939. To Monterey and Carmel to pick up contacts made there several months before the project opened. My list of prospects contained 11 names. Of these, I omitted two of the least likely for lack of time. Of the remaining nine, two men (one Spanish Basque, one Mexican) had just left for a month's work at Treasure Island; one very important source of rare Spanish-California songs (a woman) had gone to San Francisco on a shopping tour for several days; two Spanish women who planned before to record had just lost their mother and "didn't feel to sing"; one Norwegian was in bed with the grippe; one Mexican went into the hospital with a fractured skull due to his having been mistaken for a strike breaker by some fishermen's union members; the Icelander who was to record old chants for me had a bad sore throat; and Mrs. Garcia, the most interesting source of material from Spain, was inarticulate temporarily because she'd just had all her teeth out. The last two recovered sufficiently to record a few songs each on Wednesday night, and I will catch the Basque and the Mexican in San Francisco. But this strikes an all-time low for casualties. They expect me back in two to three weeks, however, and I have been promised some songs by cowboys up the Carmel Valley at the Cochines Ranch, among other things.

February 10 (Afternoon), 1939. To Walnut Creek to meet Mrs. Drury and arrange for recording by her aunt who is of authentic Spanish-Californian descent and knows songs if we can catch her when her mind is clear enough to remember them. (She is 91.) Then to a series of farms near Danville and Lafayette to run down Portuguese singers and players. . . . Then to Concord, where Mrs. De Soto (granddaughter-in-law of Don Salvio Pacheco, who was Spanish grantee of Mt. Diablo at one time) gave us dinner and sang 12 songs for us—the second group of records she has made. We contributed an enlargement of a photograph of her made on a recent trip, and the wine. At the sight of the rather-too-clear photo, she said: "Well! Was the sun in my eyes or am I getting old?!" (She is 75 anyway and admits to 60.)

March 10, 1939. To Martinez to arrange recording with Mr. Lucido, a Sicilian fisherman who has said he will sing for us but has been ill. He is still unwell so we went on to Pittsburg. The group of Sicilian women who we expected to meet were not there at 2:30 but had left word they would return at 4:00. So we went into town to try to locate a Mr. Buffo who we had been told was a fine singer of Sicilian songs. Mr. Buffo still eludes us, but Mr. DeVere unearthed by accident a remarkable fellow, known as the "singing barber," Mr. Russo by name, who sings well and knows the simple old songs we want. Most Italians prefer operatic arias and do not like to record folksongs since the latter fail to "show off the voice." However, Mr. Russo knew just what we wanted and was enthusiastic at the idea that the Sicilians had something we didn't which he could give us. He recorded several songs, his wife sitting by in a wheel chair and several old ladies coming in and out to remind him of songs he knew. . . .

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FIELD NOTES (continued)

From Pittsburg we went on to Brentwood, with the idea of unearthing some Oklahoman and Arkansas fiddle music and songs among the migrants camped there. Hearing there was to be square dancing at the Hi-Way Cafe later in the evening, we arranged to record at the Hi-Way Cafe (whose owners Mr. De Vere, as usual, had known sometime or other, and who were accordingly very glad to accommodate us). There were rumors of a group of gypsies encamped somewhere near Brentwood, but the vans by the roadside which looked exactly like English gypsy vans—high, narrow and luridly painted—turned out to belong to some Oklahomans. . . . Then we took a long drive out through the marshes to Farrar Park on Bethel Island in search of Hindus who at one time had been farming there. At the Farrar Park Bar an inquiry about Hindus produced Mr. Singh, a wealthy farmer who launched into a characteristic East Indian dissertation upon the Five Districts of India and offered to help us get songs from each District when we returned to Antioch for supper, and then on to Brentwood for the dance. I wanted to record the dance calls and the fiddle tunes and the general shuffling and shouting of the dancing, but constant interference by a drunken individual who told me he was half-owner of the cafe but turned out to be merely the barber from next door, made it impossible to get anything natural from the group, so I made one record and arranged to meet the orchestra early on another Saturday and record any old tunes they know. The caller is a fine-looking Oklahoman who knows songs as well as dance calls which he'll be glad to record. By the time we had treated to beers all around and got packed up again it was midnight, and we got back to Berkeley about 1:30 a.m.

May 6, 1939. To Woodside to record the liritza [lirica] playing of Mr. Dedo. We had to move out to the concrete floor of Mr. Dedo's unused garage because he stamped his foot so hard keeping time that he ruined the first record we made. He had just finished putting in a sewer for his neighbor, and his neighbor and a dozen or so Slavonians gathered around to listen. An Italian plasterer emerged from somewhere and insisted upon hearing his voice recorded. The Slavonians bore with him as one does with a spoiled child but I was pleased to find that he knew some quaint songs in *French* about Garibaldi—unexpected bounty. Later I took Mr. Dedo with me to San Mateo to record the gusle playing of my blind friend, old Mr. Boro. He was in fine fettle and played and sang to make what I consider the greatest "find" in the way of recordings in California. He had to borrow a friend's gusle because the horse hairs which make the single string (as well as the bow) of his gusle had worn out. Before I go again I have undertaken to rob a horse's tail of about 40 strands of hair! They must be from a young horse so they will be fine enough, and must not be white, because white hairs are weak. The spectacles from "Mr. Kress" were a great success. He is an exigent old party but he can lead me about by the nose if he likes, so long as he continues to record the Serbian heroic ballads that he knows which have come straight down from the troubadours of the Middle Ages.

NEWS OF NOTE

Cage Archived. In mid-January, the Music Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center announced with considerable fanfare that it had acquired the John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, and many breathed a sigh of relief. Defying rumors about a possible sale to far-off lands, Cage's musical legacy has found a permanent repository in the city that was his longtime home. Besides completed manuscripts, the collection also includes drafts, sketches, and preliminary compositional notes. Eventually, the library aims to make it accessible electronically.

Before boarding a plane to New York, however, scholars might want to consult a typescript catalogue, *John Cage: Music Manuscript Collection*, completed in October 1993, that the New York Public Library soon plans to make available on-line. It was compiled by Laura Kuhn, Executive Director of the John Cage Trust, together with Paul van Emmerik, Martin Erdmann, James Pritchett, and András Wilhelm, and contains "a list of manuscripts in the possession of the estate of John Cage (including manuscripts previously housed at Cage's publisher C. F. Peters and at Margarete Roeder Gallery) and a list of locations of all manuscripts known or assumed to be in existence."

... **and Celebrated.** Cage's geographic identity might best be described as "bicoastal." While his music rests on the Atlantic, his achievements will be explored on the Pacific in an interdisciplinary festival and conference titled *Here Comes Everybody: The Music, Poetry, and Art of John Cage*, which will take place at Mills College, 15-19 November 1995. Participants will include composers, together with several generations of Cage scholars. For more information write: David Bernstein, Mills College, 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, CA 94613.

Shrewd Estate Planning. The John Cage Trust is but one example of a growing trend in the late twentieth century: for composers to set up foundations to promote their music and oversee their estates. Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson are two other notable cases. These posthumous entities tend to be of two types, either fervently focused on their man (alas, the gendered reference applies) or determined to help the ongoing struggle for many types of new music. The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, Inc. is a striking example of the first sort, with its sizeable staff, newsletter, scholarly editions, and other activities directed toward keeping Weill's work alive. True to its consistent first-class profile, the foundation has published a handsome *Guide to the Weill-Lenya Research Center* (\$5). It cites materials in the center (located in Manhattan), as well as in the Weill-Lenya Papers at the Yale University Music Library and the Kurt Weill Foundation Archives. To obtain a copy, write the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, Inc., 7 East 20th Street, New York, NY 10003 or phone 212-505-5240.



Composer John Cage in 1991
Photo by Betty Freeman

More Historicizing. From Albany, New York comes news of an **Electronic Music Foundation**, founded "to disseminate important information and materials related to the history of electronic music." The foundation plans to sell CDs, form a photo archive, and establish a center for disseminating information. The president and founder is Joel Chadabe. For more information call 518-434-4110 or e-mail <EmusF@aol.com>.



P.C. Prose. Editors and writers grappling with the diversity of modern America might want to sample a useful new style manual, *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing*, prepared by Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-Free Language of the Association of American University Presses (Indiana University Press, \$15/\$5.95). It sensibly lays out practical solutions for problems such as finding alternatives for generic male pronouns; distinguishing between the usage of "race," "ethnic group," and "minority"; and dealing with "hyphenated identities."

Sister Society. The Society for Ethnomusicology plans its annual meeting, 19-22 October 1995 at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. Preconference symposia will focus on Bartók and music and technology. For more information, contact Victoria Lindsay Levine (Program Chair), Music Department, Colorado College, 14 E. Cache la Poudre, Colorado Springs, CO 80903.

—C.J.O.

MUSA'S DEBUT

Music of the United States of America (MUSA) is a series of scholarly editions sponsored by the American Musicological Society and dedicated to publishing hitherto unavailable works reflecting the diversity of American music. Richard Crawford is editor-in-chief and Jeffrey Magee is executive editor. The first three issues have appeared in large-format paperbound scores, handsomely published by A-R Editions of Madison, Wisconsin. All include extensive introductory essays and appropriately detailed editorial notes. All feature music from the first three decades of this century, illustrating the variety of American voices in that period.

Tin Pan Alley is represented by *Irving Berlin: Early Songs, 1907-1914*—three hefty volumes compiled by Charles Hamm. They include songs published prior to 1915 for which Berlin wrote words (40), music (3), or both (29 with collaborators, 114 alone). There are also a few variant prints, piano arrangements, and unpublished lead sheets. Hamm's detailed introduction offers a short course in popular music of the time, defining the genres of popular song and presenting tables to place Berlin's songs in the appropriate type. The songs then appear in chronological order, making it possible to trace Berlin's development.

The source for each song is the earliest sheet music deposited for copyright. Since manuscripts have not survived and later printings were not corrected, collation of sources is not an issue. But the original prints did contain obvious errors and inconsistencies, and all the songs are newly engraved here in corrected versions. Misprints and other issues are noted in the critical commentary, which also provides variant lyrics from archives and contemporary performances.

The collection includes Berlin's first hits, such as "Alexander's Ragtime Band," yet its real merit lies in bringing to light less-well-known songs. Not all are great, but they provide an overview of Tin Pan Alley style and a window onto American culture. Some harken back to the nineteenth century, but the most successful address the people and problems of contemporary urban life. I have a special fondness for the songs that use borrowed material in clever ways, such as "That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune," and I was pleased that the critical commentary includes lists of quoted material for more than two dozen songs with borrowed music or words.

The concert tradition is represented in these first volumes of MUSA by works that embrace opposite tendencies of the 1920s: Amy Beach's *Quartet for Strings (in One Movement)*, a romantic work on American Indian themes, and Ruth Crawford's ultramodernist *Music for Small Orchestra* and *Suite No. 2 for Four Strings and Piano*. These have not been published before, although all three have been recorded: the Beach by the Crescent Quartet (Leonarda LPI 111, 1981) and Crawford's *Music for Small Orchestra* by Boston Musica Viva (Delos DEL 25405, 1975) and *Suite No. 2* by the New Music Consort (New World Records NW 319, 1984).

Beach's *Quartet* (1921-29) is in a modified arch form. It includes three Alaskan Inuit tunes, stating the first almost unchanged in the outer sections as a declamatory incantation, modifying the second as a lyrical contrasting theme in the first and middle sections, and reworking the third as the main theme of the *Allegro molto*. While the Inuit tunes are tonally simple, Beach's harmonic approach is chromatic and dissonant, avoiding resolution for long stretches; the central fugue, for example, begins with entrances on F, A, C#, and F, traversing a circle of four major thirds.

Adrienne Fried Block's introductory essay recounts Beach's career, traces her interest in folk and Native American themes, and describes the structure of the quartet and its use of the Inuit tunes. The edition is based on Beach's holograph, occasionally clarified by comparison with a copyist's score. An appendix presents the earlier draft score in facsimile with extensive commentary, affording a rare opportunity to study Beach's revisions.

Interest in Ruth Crawford's music has focused on the abstract constructivism of her *String Quartet* (1931). But as Judith Tick notes in her introduction, the two works in this edition exemplify Crawford's first mature style, marked by a pluralistic, eclectic approach to post-tonal music. Tick's essay puts both works in the context of Crawford's career and describes the circumstances of their composition and first performance. Each was edited by Tick and Wayne Schneider from a single extant score (with the *Suite*, there was also a set of string parts).

Music for Small Orchestra (1926), in two movements, is scored for flute, clarinet, one or two bassoons, eight violins in pairs, two cellos, and piano. An unevenly pulsing tone initiates a shifting series of textures, with sustained chords and smooth ostinatos forming a background from which melodic ideas briefly emerge. The music rises to a climactic unison in the strings over ostinatos in the other instruments, then it fades to a close. The second movement pursues a similar strategy with a very different character, as angular melodies dance impishly over a bed of staccato ostinatos. *Suite No. 2 for Four Strings and Piano* (1929) was composed just after Crawford moved to New York and began to study with Charles Seeger, and it shows an interest in the dissonant counterpoint promoted by Seeger. It is in three movements of increasing activity, joined in a cycle by the recollection of the slow introduction to the first movement at the ends of the other two.

In all three publications, the editorial methods are sound, the music clear and easy to read, and the presentation luxurious. With these exemplary editions of little-known but significant works by important American composers, MUSA is off to an excellent start.

—J. Peter Burkholder
Indiana University

SO LONG, JESS

I felt an acute sense of loss this past January when I learned of the passing, at age 90, of Jess Stacy, a jazz pianist best known for his work with the Benny Goodman Orchestra in the 1930s and 1940s. I first discovered his recordings some ten years ago, and they have been favorite companions ever since. Responding to my early frustrations with ensemble playing, a drummer friend of mine, Hal Smith, enthusiastically suggested Stacy as a model. Here was a player somewhere between the stylish grace of Teddy Wilson, the daredevil antics of Earl Hines, and the powerhouse attack of Joe Sullivan (to name the other great pianists I was discovering at the time), a musician who listened closely to his "quiet, firm inner voice" (as Whitney Balliett once put it) and swung like mad while doing so. Stacy became an important influence on me, and I still remember the grin Hal flashed over the back of the piano one night, as I worked in a Stacy-esque tremolo behind the clarinet.

A few years later, Stacy and I had a memorable phone conversation. I was nervous about invading his privacy, but within minutes we were chatting away like old pals, comparing hand size, discussing piano technique (or "*technic*," as Stacy called it), and sharing our deep love of music. Though I never met the man, in the years after our exchange I always considered him a kindred spirit. His death felt oddly like that of a close friend.

I have been able to ease the sadness by listening to *Jess Stacy: 1935-1939* (Classics 795), a recent reissue that includes all the pianist's solos from the four-year period, as well as a series of

recordings made in 1939 with members of the Bob Crosby Orchestra. The irrepressible good humor of "Ain't Goin' Nowhere" and the delicate intimacy of "Ec-Stacy" (a slow blues) are as moving as ever, and his affectionate, lightly swung treatments of three rambling solo pieces by Bix Beiderbecke are a delight. Yet despite the charm of these performances, I have always felt that Stacy's talents shone brightest in an ensemble setting, where he was called upon to (as he put it) "melt with the band," accompany singers and instrumentalists, and play an occasional solo chorus. Fortunately, the second half of the CD does justice to this facet of Stacy's talents. In "What's New" he rescues Carlotta Dale's dreary vocal with a joyous countermelody of right-hand octaves. "Clarinet Blues" creates the casual atmosphere of a late-night jam session; Stacy's subtle improvisations pick up where "Ec-Stacy" left off, and he provides some Hines-like tremolos behind saxophonist Eddie Smith's relaxed chorus. And "I Can't Believe That You're In Love with Me" is a treat from start to finish, with Stacy playing an inventive chorus and peeking through the ensemble texture now and then behind Billy Butterfield's lovely muted trumpet solo. In such settings this gentle pianist emerges as a gifted and imaginative musician whose contribution to jazz—though not often acknowledged—is undeniable. Stacy, however, viewed himself much more modestly. "Well, I don't know," he mused to me on the phone. "I thought I played sort of simple. I never threw in a lot of *technic*. I just played and tried to swing."

—Jeff Taylor

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REMAKING AMERICAN OPERA (*continued*)

famous opera house. I rarely go. It's not my idea of a night out. But I do love the literature, and I love certain operas. I like Wagner very much. I like Mozart, and *Pelléas et Mélisande*. I would say there are maybe ten operas I love, and they have changed my life, in a sense. But I feel that in the world of opera, the values are completely backwards. The attention is given over to everything but the music—to the production, to what it looks like, to who's singing that night. Of course, you can't have successful opera without great singing. But it is an area of cultural activity that embarrasses me. This may seem a little disingenuous coming from someone who has spent a part of his career writing opera. But I think that it's going to be a long time before the works that we're composing get absorbed into that tradition, if they ever do. In the meantime, I am striking out into another area—being, for example, very inspired by the kind of work that Meredith Monk is doing. She has, I think, basically said, "to hell with that tradition" from the start and simply bypassed it.

Schwarz: Meredith, do you agree with that? Have you rejected the tradition entirely?

Monk: I have to tell my childhood story first. When I was about 10, I saw "The Great Caruso" and I really wanted to be Mario Lanza. Then I realized I would never be a tenor, so that wouldn't work out. My mother was a singer. She was the original Muriel Cigar on the radio. She was doing pop singing during the 1940's and 1950's, and she was also doing classical music and recitals. So I had a rich musical background. After deciding I wasn't going to be Mario Lanza, I did go to one opera in the sixth grade. I had a hard time with it because I found it static and really unsatisfying, and I couldn't understand what they were saying without having to look at the libretto in my lap. Thinking about it now, I realize that's one of the reasons I usually don't have words in my operas. To me, the voice itself is a language which is more eloquent than words, and I am more interested in gestural narrative because I feel the body doesn't lie. I try to make the situations simple and essential enough so that anyone can easily understand what is going on. The emotional aspect is dealt with in the voice, which bypasses words and actually gets to a deeper spiritual level.

In terms of opera as a form, I have always liked the idea of it, and I have loved some of the literature. But I agree with John that the manifestation has been discouraging. I often think about what dissatisfies me about the actuality of opera. It has the potential of being a multidimensional form, which can really affect people. The origins of opera come from the European court tradition, as does ballet. It's a very particular tradition, based on a proscenium stage, with a style of singing that has great beauty but is only one style. To me, the voice has limitless possibilities, not just one model, such as a pear-shaped tone. The same goes for movement—ballet was first based on the positions of sword-fighting, which implied that the human being was always in a kind of geometric relationship to a rectangle. In a

sense, that's the same kind of presentation opera has always had; it's in a frame for court people to watch.

Schwarz: Anthony, when you began writing your first opera, which was *X*, what sort of American models did you feel you had?

Davis: That's a very complicated question. In a way you can make an argument that there's a big division in American opera in the thirties with *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Porgy and Bess*, both of which were performed by black singers. I have been more drawn to *Porgy and Bess* in certain respects—not that I tried in any way to emulate Gershwin musically. But I felt that, in a sense, Gershwin and Joplin before him were pioneers in exploring the American vernacular in opera. But I felt that I had to reinvent opera by not only digesting those influences but also the whole American jazz tradition. I was reminded that Ellington intended to write an opera when he composed *Black, Brown, and Beige*. I felt that opera gave me an avenue to tell stories from our experience—the African-American experience, particularly. Malcolm X was a perfect vehicle for that.

My initial response to opera was the same as John's and Meredith's. I was turned off to it. I remember the only person in my family who liked opera was my grandfather who also liked gospel music. Everything beside it and opera was profane to him. So when I would play Beethoven sonatas for him, that wasn't cool. In college I studied a lot of Wagner opera. I was intrigued by it and insulted by it and bemused by it. So I proceeded to write parodies of it. Try to imagine the Ellington model merged with the Wagner model—that's the idea.

Schwarz: John, did you find an American operatic tradition you could relate to, or did you feel you were creating it fresh?

Adams: I didn't really find any American operatic tradition. I'd never seen *Porgy and Bess* on the stage—still haven't. So I only knew the tunes, which I love. I guess I didn't have any American models.

Schwarz: How much do opera composers working in the 1990s accept conventions of vocal production and vocal technique, and how much do they reject them?

Monk: I don't like heavy vibrato. I'd rather have a clear kind of sound. With *Atlas* I tried to audition people—we did a really long audition that lasted months and months. I think I heard about 400 people. We started in Houston where people seemed to have a kind of disembodied voice. I was not just listening to the voice but watching the whole performer. I realized it wasn't going to work to use the people down there. So we auditioned in New York, and I did long workshops giving an extended vocal warm-up and a physical warm-up. Then I would teach them a traditional round, and I could hear their intonation and how well they worked together. I was also concerned about how much people were holding onto certain rigid ideas of themselves. My work demands being both a soloist and part of an ensemble.

Davis: When I came to writing opera and working with opera singers it was like having a new toy. But I also came to opera from the jazz tradition of singing—particularly with rhythm. I found that opera singers, a lot of them, had a rigid sense of time that could destroy the whole energy of my music. A lot of my music is based on interlocking rhythms and propulsion. Another problem with opera is the whole star syndrome. A lot of composers today are interested in a more democratic way of looking at music. I write a lot of really complex ensemble music. When you go to an opera company and say, "Well, a lot of the really difficult music is for the ensemble," they say, "What? Are you insane?" That means ninety days of rehearsal or something, and your piece never gets done again. Which happens.

Schwarz: Tania, your opera calls for singers who must have, I would imagine, a diverse range of vocal background and training—both Western and non-Western. Tell us about the vocal techniques that your opera requires.

León: All my singers were hand-picked. Half of the opera was actually written before I chose them. However, once they appeared, the rest of my imagination unveiled. I looked for singers who would have the expertise of doing jazz, gospel, rhythm-and-blues, as well as opera. In fact, one of the soloists had just come from making a tour with Harry Belafonte singing all kinds of different materials. The entire opera takes into effect twelve different scenes, and each of these scenes has totally different musical material. For me, the voices must portray the emotion. You know, I'm not so keen about the melody line or the words. But if the emotions are actually portrayed, musically speaking, at a certain level, that is how I want it to work. With Vanessa Ayers, who played the mother, she was spiritually immersed in what she was doing, and it didn't seem written down. It happened as though it had come from inside her. For me, that's what opera is all about.

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