MILTON BABBITT

New World Records 80346

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra American Composers Orchestra CHARLES WUORINEN, Conductor ALAN FEINBERG, Piano

The Head of the Bed Parnassus ANTHONY KORF, Conductor JUDITH BETTINA, Soprano

The two works heard on this recording bring together a number of strands in the complex web of Milton Babbitt's compositional concerns. *The Head of the Bed* (1981), commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Baltimore and composed for Phyllis Bryn-Julson, embodies both Babbitt's interest in chamber music and his long-standing affinity for the female voice, previously exemplified by *Du* (1951), *Vision and Prayer* (1961), *Philomel* (1963-64), *Phenomena* (1969-70; 1974), and *A Solo Requiem* (1976-77). The Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, written in 1985 for Alan Feinberg and the American Composers Orchestra, conjoins his massive, intricate vision of the orchestra with the pianistic virtuosity of *Tableaux* (1972), *Reflections* (1974), *Time Cycle* (1978, 1982), and *Canonical Form* (1983). Both compositions manifest the juxtaposition of brilliant virtuosisty against a voluptuous setting characteristic of so many of his works for solo protagonist.

Although both works are structurally complex--among Babbitt's most elaborate extensions of Arnold Schoenberg's breakthrough--each in its own way dramatizes the expressive flexibility and power provided by twelve-tone musical syntax.

While Babbitt is perhaps best known for his chamber and vocal music, there looms over his oeuvre a series of vast monuments for orchestra, alas but dimly perceived due to their infrequent performance and the absence of professional recordings. [ed. note: This is the first of Babbitt's orchestral works ever to be recorded.] The Piano Concerto is the most recent of Babbitt's orchestral works, which include Relata I and II (1965, 1968), Correspondences (1967) for string orchestra and electronic tape, the as yet unperformed Concerti (1974-76) for solo violin, orchestra, and electronic tape, and Ars Combinatoria (1981). In all of these works Babbitt treats the orchestras as a resource for a wide variety of timbres through a full range of dynamics and registers; the interaction of these factors with the solo piano is the crux of the Concerto. Throughout the composition the orchestra is divided into four distinct registers, each of which projects varying versions of a multiply interpreted underlying structure. The various sections of the work are demarcated by the change of ensembles of registers in the orchestra, running through fifteen combinations of solos, duos, trios, and *tutti*. The piano, in contrast, remains constantly active throughout its range, and responds to the orchestra's changes by changing the nature of its own material, now complementing the orchestra's music, now reflecting it in a distorted manner. Although the surface of the music is mercurial, a gradual overall dramatic progression unfolds through the shifting orchestral registers. The Concerto opens with the piano pitted against the lowest register of the orchestra, followed shortly by the highest register; for the first third of the piece no more than two registers are present in the orchestra, and the lowest register is withheld after its initial appearance until the midpoint of the work. From then on, the lowest register is nearly always present, and more

registers are active simultaneously. The gradual accretion of orchestral presence eventually forces the soloist into silence before its full majesty in the penultimate section. The piano reenters, however, casting the orchestra into its highest and lowest ranges to open its own clear passage to the close.

The Head of the Bed is both synthesis and synopsis of Babbitt's vocal and chamber music. The work is a setting of a poem in fifteen stanzas by the American poet John Hollander, who also wrote the text for *Philomel* (80307). The composition evokes a number of Babbitt's earlier works both in large-scale design and in detail. While the vocal writing and text echo several previous vocal compositions, the nature and treatment of the ensemble have their roots in his *Composition for Four Instruments* (1947-48). The present work and the earlier piece employ the same ensemble of instruments, and both contain fifteen sections, each distinguished by a different grouping of instruments (analogous to the play of orchestral registers in the Concerto). In *The Head of the Bed* the fifteen sections correspond to the fifteen stanzas of the poem. The further subdivision of each stanza into fifteen lines allows Babbitt to create a subtle echo between the composition of the vocal part for each section and the over-all deployment of the instrumental groupings. The disposition for *Four Instruments*, reflecting the encompassing compositional vision that has informed Babbitt's music throughout his career. —Andrew Mead

Andrew Mead has published articles on Milton Babbitt, Arnold Schoenberg, and Elliott Carter, as well as on related theoretical issues. Also a composer, he received a Goddard Lieberson Fellowship from the American and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1986.

In a letter to Milton Babbitt on April 29, 1980, John Hollander speaks of the poem:

First of all, in re *The Head of the Bed*, I enclose a xerox of a little thing I wrote for a magazine about dreams--although it's generally about my coming to terms with dream material in my own poetry. I say some things about *The Head of the Bed* that you might find useful.

Otherwise, I think it's best to think of the poem as a journey through a period of day and night, a quest story perhaps, with the goal a matter of waking up into a welcoming and warming reality. "The head of the bed" is the place distinguished by the conventional phrase, but it's also used in the sense of a *Bettesgeist*, a bed-consciousness, a head that is all for, about bed. I've made a few notes, some glossarial, some excegetical, some choreographic, on each of the sections. The protagonist is male, but since you called I've realized that if it's to be sung at all, it must be a woman's voice for the singing narrator. The various stages or progressions of the "story" move through the Sleeper's *hearing* language outside and beyond him (stanza 1): seeing through half-opened eyes--magnified eyelashes, etc.--and then returning to sleep: like other "awakenings." in the poem, these are like distractions in a fable, diverting the protagonist-reader from the journey, but generating significance more in the way of parallels than of digressions (stanza 2): (stanza 3)--the room, the scene outside the window begin to be inhabited by dreamed or remembered presences--etc....The poem keeps revisiting the recumbent body, and yet with the growing sense that the body in the bed is more and more another region through which the sleeper "moves," "goes" or is borne.

I haven't thought about narrative or mythological groupings.

1-3 An introductory group

4-7 A series of fable-encounters

8 A resting-place between the romance-places and the regions free of Lilith
9-12 All these visions of futurity and possibility
13-15 Night sky, day sky, end-of-day This does seem to be right, although I never did more than commit myself to 15 X 15.
[*Please note that each of the fifteen stanzas of The Head of the Bed (track 2) are indexed 1-15.*]

The Head of the Bed

For Robert Penn Warren

At the mountainous border of our two countries there is a village; it stands just below a pass, but some of the older houses lie higher up along the road, overlooking more of the valley than one might think. The border has never been heavily guarded, and our countries are peaceful. Theirs lies beyond the pass; in the other valley a large village looks up toward the mountains and toward us. The border itself is marked only by an occasional sign; but then there is the Trumpeter. His clear, triadic melodies break out through the frosty air, or through the swirling mists. From below, from above, the sound is commandingly clear, and it seems to divide the air as the border divides the land. It can be heard at no fixed intervals, and yet with a regularity which we accept, but cannot calculate. No one knows whether the Trumpeter is theirs or ours.

1

Heard through lids slammed down over darkened glass, Trees shift in their tattered sheets, tossing in Shallow sleep underneath the snoring wind.

A dream of forests far inside such sleep As wakeful birds perched high in a dread wood, Brooding over torn leaves, might mutter of

Rises over the pain of a snapped twig That ebbs and throbs not with a shore rhythm But with the pulsings of dark groves--as if

A bird of hurting swept over hooded Places, fled, and at intervals returned--Clocked by the broken aspirates roaring

Along their own wind, heard within their wood, Their own deep wood, where, fluttering, first words Emerge, wrapped in slowly unfolding leaves.

2

Where, where, where? Where is here? Where is Herr Haar, Tendrils lashing across the light his eyes Open on, Joker of Awakening?

Where is where? Where the cracked suddenness wide On that frail wall, where amber filigree As of an egg's marble vein his pillow; Where webby vines clinging coldly to his White eyeball fall away to dust; where hair Hangs across the world, here is where. And there

Is the acknowledging skull of far wall--Two hollow, shaded windows and a smudge Of dark mirror between. And there is here

No light. Not yet. Deep in the woods' heart, soft, Dim leaves close up again; heat lightning rips Pallid sheets, silent, across roughened sky.

3

Floor lamps and their shadows warmed the room where He lay dead in bed; and then the windows Were thrown open to admit of the night.

Exhalations of buses rose hoarsely Over the reservoir's onyx water Beaded about with lights, an appalling

Brooch clutching the appalling shawl of the Dark park through whose trees no relieving wind Blew. No zephyr sniffed the window curtains

Pushing through the stuff of outer silence That cars coughed in; only an old great-aunt Waited, on her nightly visitation,

Denied again by his awakened, dark Blood, as come bubbling up bone-gathering Trumpetings of unscheduled, sombre cocks.

4

Slanting lean, gray rain washing the palace Steps floods the inner court; Vashti mutters There, dripping among her ancillaries,

Of displeasure, loss, and now a cold walk To distant parts of the palace, gutters Roaring with possibilities, water

Burbling the Ballade of All the Dark Queens--Not the wet abjects, but those who yet reign (*Where is Lilith?*) in that they could refrain--

Not Hagar sent out among the dry rocks,

But Orpah opting for hers, and Martha Answering her own hearth and electing

The bubbling merriment of her pudding, Reading the night-girl Lilith's name in white, Vanishing from her windy, drying sheets.

5

Coarse breath fanning the closed air by his ear Stirred up the swarming night-bees who had been Honeying nearby, where faces blossomed

Out of the darkness, where creepers mingled With long, low-lying trunks, humming among Damp hollows, herding and gathering there,

But unheard by him undreaming, by him Beamed in upon by the wide moon who smeared Light here and there into dark surfaces--

Madam Cataplasma, her anointment Vast, her own outstretched form fantastic there Beside him, as if on awakening

A filthy myth of Lilith would lie spilled Like darkness on the sheet of light. He rolled Out of this bad glade and slept darkly on.

6

He felt his hand feeling another hand Feeling his own: staring up after a Fly's noisiness, his bony image lay

Where he was beside himself, imbedded In the nearby, the space readied and wide And yawning, fed up with the emptiness

Of its tents, rags of cloudy percale hung Over bumps and hummocks. It shaded them, He and he lying and listening while

Kicked fabric fell softly over their bones. Sighing settles: toward what does buzzing fly? About what does the sound of breathing dream?--

An echo fleeing down twisted halls; a Buzzing fly rising over him and his Like something bland and vague deserting them. Down the shaded street, toward an avenue Of light, a gleaming picture receded: The sudden lady, tall, fair and distant

Glided slowly, and her beautiful leg Sole but unlonely, swung walking along Between the companionable crutches,

Flesh hand in hand with sticks. He followed them And waited in a sunny place, and when She halted, there were woods. Turning her head,

She smiled a bad smile, framed by a shadow Flung from a tower somewhere. He dared not move Toward her one leg, toward her covered places

Lest he be lost at once, staring at where Lay, bared in the hardened moonlight, a stump Pearly and smooth, a tuft of forest grass.

8

The Hyperboreans gathered him up And bore him across, out of the shadows, Into their realm of tenderness where there

Is room enough, but where there are no gaps Between the sending and the gathering; Nor wintering, in which recovering

Desire grows in its caves, nor the buzz Of endless August, golden, deified: No need for these. In that bland land he lay--

Envisioning frost and fallen silver, Half hearing the cricket in the parching Oat-straw, feeling tears from his weeping brow,

Dreaming of intervals lost--stretched out on Wastes not of snow, nor sand, nor cloud, he tossed, And knew not why, in that undying noon.

9

Leaving that unfair, seasonless land was More than a traverse of uneasiness; More than an antlike file over glacial

Sheets and then, at last, across the fold of

Pass, pausing above a final valley Shining in a new light, and shivering

At the approach of strange, dark guards; more than Their distrust, and their icy mustaches Masking frowns at our tokens of passage

(He held a light bulb, heavy in his right Pocket, and they, red stones in their left ones) More than making one's way; and returning

Over a way not yet gone over, hurt Like first smashings of light, shrunk to a lamp Shaded, grim, sun-colored at four A.M.

10

Beyond the cold, blue mountain and beyond That, we shall wander on the pale hills when Shadows give over bending along the

Slopes, and the silent midday light, unchanged For hours and days, is pierced only by our Two moving specks, only by the cricket's

Warm humming. Then, what we hear becoming What we see, the gray; the wind enclosing; The poplars' breath; the sad, waiting chambers.

Will there have been room? There will have been room To come upon the end of summer where Clustered, blue grapes hang in a shattered bell,

Or there, in a far, distant field, a swarm Of bees in a helmet, metal yielding Honey, balmy drops glistening on bronze.

11

Half his days he had passed in the shadow Of the earth: not the cold, grassy shade cast By a pale of cypresses, by pines spread

More softly across stony hilltops; not Warm, gray veiling of sunlight that blotted Up his own moving shadow on the ground;

But the dark cloak of substance beyond mass, Though heavy, flung with diurnal panache Over his heavier head, weighed it down. Way down at the bottom of a shaft sunk Through the grass of sleep to deep stone he lay, Draped in the shade cast inward by the place

All outward shadows fall upon, and on His tongue an emerald glittered, unseen, A green stone colder in the mouth than glass.

12

When, as if late some night of festival The skies open, do the insides of stars Turn slowly out? At midnight, once, he finds

Himself looking up a familiar Street and being shown a way of water: Bordering the calm, unsubsided flood,

Gray frame houses with darkened roofs intact, Minding the sky of paler gray; along The surface of gray water, the tracing

Eye's anxious questions--only these have moved. And save where--by a window giving on His sunken yard--someone blind makes wordless

Music while his three graceless daughters wait In the shadows for evening, all is gray Silence, save for his resolved organ chords.

13

He awoke. Low in the sky in August Blown clear by a cold wind, thinned-out clusters Of distant stars whistling through darkness struck

Out at a momentary Jupiter Passing at night, bright visitor, among The passages of his twinkling bazaars.

And saw strung in the Scorpion a jewel Of unmarred garnet, the old, the reddened But not with shed blood, nor with ripening.

And saw and read by the diamonded Harp, By crossbow Swan aimed along the pale stream Southward, by all the miles of undialled light,

By the mark missed, by the unstinging tail,

The moment that was: the time of this dark Light beyond, that seemed to be light above.

14

Grayish flakes like clay are falling as if Of the sky falling at last on Chicken Big, now grown huge and old, examining

The falling daylight from her crowded house, The plausible, settled-for gray, dropping Out of its cloudy, indeterminate

Swirl, its pale precipitate vanishing At the full bottom of its fall, too light To have swerved, too general to pile up,

These flakes of day, in a reaction As if of flakes of, say, fictions taking Place *in vitro*, trembling as the flask shakes--

In vivo then? behind this mottled glass The awakener hears the greasy rain Collapse on unglistening streets below.

15

The bright moon offends him: he plucks it out; He opens all the seals of touch; he hears The whirlwinds of his breathing; then it comes:

At last waking to a trumpet of light From warm lamps turns him over gravely toward Her long, bare figure, Lady Evening,

Who, while he lay unwaking, rearranged Oddments of day on a dressing table, Lowered gentle blinds, letting the night dawn,

And thought of their sole parting, the breaking Of day; his journeys into day's mock night; His sojourn with lilting Miss Noctae, witch

Of windless darknesses; his presiding Eye, and his slowly unwinding heart; Then lay beside him as the lamps burned on.

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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Most of Babbitt's own writings are technically oriented, but two essays address more general issues of writing music today: "Who Cares if You Listen?" (altered from Babbitt's original title, "The Composer as Specialist"), in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs, eds. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967) and "The More Than the Sounds of Music," in *Horizons 84: The New Romanticism--A Broader View* (New York Philharmonic program book), reprinted in *In Theory Only*; 8, no. 3 (1984), pp. 7-10. Sources for Babbitt's technical writings may be found listed in the liner notes to New World Records NW 209 and 80307.

Most writings on Babbitt's music also tend to be technically oriented; in addition to those sources listed on 80209 and 80307, one can find technical articles in *Music Theory Spectrum*, 5, (1983), pp. 89-109, and, in celebration of his seventieth birthday, in *Perspectives of New Music*, 24, no. 2 (1986) and 25, nos., 1, 2 (1986-87). More general writings include Benjamin Boretz's article in *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*, John Vinton, ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974) and the entries in David Ewen, *Composers of Tomorrow's Music* (Nw York: Dodd, Mead, 1972) and *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, H.Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. (New York and London: Macmillan, 1986). There are also a number of published interviews with Babbitt, such as those in the *Music Educators Journal*, 55, no. 3 (1968), pp. 56-61, and 72, no. 9 (1986), pp. 52-53, and in *American Music*, 3, no. 4 (1985), pp. 467-73.

DISCOGRAPHY

(complete as of February 1987)

- All Set. Jazz ensemble, Gunther Schuller conducting. (in Outstanding Jazz Compositions of the 20th Century) Columbia C2S 831.*
- ----. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg conducting. Nonesuch H-71303.
- Arie da capo. Group for Contemporary Music. Harvey Sollberger conducting. Nonesuch H-71372.
- Composition for Four Instruments. John Wummer, flute; Stanley Drucker, clarinet; Peter Marsh, violin; Donald McCall, cello. CRI SD 138 (mono).
- ----, New England Conservatory Chamber Ensemble, John Heiss conducting. Golden Crest NEC-109.
- Composition for Guitar. David Starobin, guitar. Bridge BDG 2006.

Composition for Synthesizer. Columbia MS-6566.*

- Composition for Twelve Instruments. Hartt Chamber Players, Ralph Shapey conducting. Son Nova 1 (mono).*
- Composition for Viola and Piano. A. Loft. viola; Bernhard Weiser, piano. New Editions 4.*

----. Walter Trampler, viola; Alvin Bauman, piano. CRI SD 138.

- ----. John Graham, viola; Robert Black, piano. CRI SD 446.
- Du. Bethany Beardslee, soprano; Robert Helps, piano. Son Nova 1 (mono).*

Duet. Steven Gerber, piano. Opus One 67.

Ensembles for Synthesizer. Columbia MS-7051; Finnadar QD-9010 (quad.).

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Philomel. Bethany Beardslee, soprano. New World 80307.

Phenomena (two versions, with piano and with tape). Lynn Webber, soprano; Jerry Kuderna, piano. New World NW 209.

Piano music: Three Compositions; Duet; SemiSimple Variations; Partitions; Post-Partitions; Tableaux; Reflections; Canonical Form; Lagniappe. Robert Taub, piano. Harmonia Mundi HMC 5160 [Lp], 90.5160 [Cd], 40.5160 [cassette].

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Vision and Prayer. Bethany Beardslee, soprano. CRI SD 268 [LP] and MC-6010 [cassette].

*Out of print

The American Composers Orchestra, founded in 1976, has programmed the works of 160 American composers, given sixty world premieres, and commissioned forty works, including two Pulitzer Prize-winners. The Orchestra's principal conductor, music advisor, and cofounder is Dennis Russell Davies.

Charles Wuorinen, known primarily as a composer, is very active as a conductor and pianist. He has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. A co-founder of the Group for Contemporary Music, he is currently composer-in-residence with the San Francisco Symphony. Wuorinen's *Bassoon Variations* was recorded for New World Records (NW 209).

Alan Feinberg has given premieres of numerous works by such composers as John Adams, Milton Babbitt, Steve Reich, Joseph Schwantner, Ralph Shapey, and Charles Wuorinen. He studied principally with Mieczyslaw Munz, Robert Helps, and Dorothy Taubman. Feinberg has recorded for New World Records (NW 313) and for Angel, CRI, and Nonesuch.

Parnassus was formed in 1974 by Anthony Korf. The ensemble has premiered over twenty works by both established and emerging composers, most of them American. Parnassus has recorded for New World Records (80306) and for CRI.

Anthony Korf received his master's degree in performance from the Manhattan School of Music in 1975 and has studied composition with Harvey Sollberger. His "Symphony in the Twilight" and "Second Symphony" were recently commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra and the New Philharmonia of Riverside, respectively.

Judith Bettina is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music. She has performed as soloist with the Houston Symphony, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Da Capo Chamber Players, Group for Contemporary Music, Sequoia String Quartet, and Speculum Musicae.

Milton Babbitt, born in 1916, has spent most of his career as composer, theorist, and teacher at Princeton University, where he followed his teacher, Roger Sessions, as William Shubael Conant Professor of Music. He has also been for several years a member of the composition faculty at the Juilliard School. His influence has been wide ranging; his students include both Donald Martino and Stephen Sondheim. The recipient of many awards during his career, Babbitt has most recently been named a MacArthur Fellow; in 1986 he was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

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Milton Babbitt 1- Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (25:44) (publ. C.F. Peters Corp.) Alan Feinberg, Piano American Composers Orchestra Charles Wuorinen, Conductor 2- The Head of the Bed (John Hollander) (23:40) (publ. C.F. Peters Corp.) Judith Bettina, soprano Parnassus: Keith Underwood, flute Anand Devendra, clarinet Cyrus Stevens, violin Chris Finckel, cello Anthony Korf, conductor

[Please note that each of the fifteen stanzas of The Head of the Bed (track 2) are indexed 1-15.]

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