

MILTON BABBITT Sextets, The Joy of More Sextets

New World Records 80364

Professor at both Princeton and Juilliard, Milton Babbitt is--by almost unanimous consent--America's most important composer of twelve-tone music. Yet for over three decades Babbitt's music has been more talked about, often in heated controversy, than heard or understood. The situation is changing. Expertly performed recordings of his music are less rare than they were, and the recent publication of his University of Wisconsin lectures, *Words About Music*, offers an engaging summary of his musical views for those nonplussed by his daunting theoretical articles. A 1982 Pulitzer citation and a 1986 MacArthur fellowship acknowledged an influence on American music that few composers have equaled.

Born in Philadelphia in 1916, Babbitt grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, where his interests were mathematics (his father's profession) and popular music. ("I know the lyrics of every popular song between '26 and '35," Babbitt has boasted, and after the war he tried his hand at composing musical comedies.) When Arnold Schoenberg arrived in New York in October 1933 to escape the Nazis, a friend of Babbitt's, the conductor Lehman Engel, gained Babbitt an introduction. The meeting was decisive; Schoenberg's music provided a system in which the logic Babbitt so loved could be applied to music. By 1948 he had become the first composer to structure rhythm the way twelve-tone composers structured pitch (in Europe, Olivier Messiaen independently duplicated the feat a few months later). Babbitt turned to electronic music in an attempt to realize rhythms that performers in the 1950s weren't prepared to handle, and with two works for soprano and synthesized tape--*Philomel* and *Vision and Prayer*--he established himself in the forefront of both electronic and serial music.

The stringent logic of Babbitt's music has been the source of myriad misunderstandings, including the idea that he is a "mathematical composer." In truth, his logic differs only in degree, not kind, from the logic great composers have used since Bach. All composers, Babbitt loves to point out, operate within logical constraints of which they are not always aware, and the composer most aware of his constraints will have the most freedom. To read Babbitt's startlingly insightful analyses of Bach, Beethoven, and early Schoenberg is to realize that he is no revolutionary inimical to the past, but rather the culmination of a long and august musical tradition.

Sextets, Babbitt's first solo string piece since the Composition for Viola and Piano of 1950, dates from 1966, and immediately follows such important works as *Philomel*, *Relata I*, and *Post-Partitions*. The title, a strange one for a duo, is a typical bit of Babbitt word play, and refers to the sixes that run through the work. The opening phrase, for example, consists of six piano gestures, each ending in a single violin note. *Sextets'* explosive abstraction is typical of Babbitt's music of the sixties: almost every note carries its own dynamic marking (from *ppppp* to *fffff*), requiring a virtuosity beyond fingerwork and rhythmic precision. Like all of Babbitt's mature music, *Sextets* is written in twelve-tone system, but to listen to it intelligently one must put aside common misconceptions of how twelve-tone music works--such as the idea that octaves are forbidden, or that no note can be repeated until the other eleven have been stated. Note repetition is a playful aspect of this music, which continually stabilizes around certain pitch areas. For example, in the final pages, the violin pizzicatos its way through repeated A-flats, to As, to B-flats, before closing with a series of low Fs and C-sharps.

Such concerns in so unfamiliar a context raise the question of how to listen, and, as with any other music, there is no "right" answer. Throughout, however, pitches remain temporarily suspended in

certain octaves, returned to again and again. The piece challenges us to hear those connections on a long-term basis, to fill in a kind of fragmented voice-leading. Beethoven's late sonatas often leave a melody hanging in an upper register only to resolve it measures later, and Babbitt expands that principle into a fundamental means of continuity. The stratification of dynamics, too, invites the listener to follow lines that may overlap in pitch, but are associated by being louder or softer than the other notes. The piece also has rewards for the less active listener. Babbitt's vivacious, nonmelodic writing combines the austerity of the sixteenth-century polyphonic mass with the dramatic intensity of the nineteenth-century sonata and a sense of elegant note-shaping that is entirely of the twentieth century.

Written twenty years later, *The Joy of More Sextets* (again, punny Babbitt) represents, in comparison with its predecessor, the ever-increasing lucidity of Babbitt's late style. Fragmentation is no longer an issue, and dynamics change, not note by note, but in shaped phrases. Like *Canonical Form* of 1983, the piece is audibly built of trichords (groups of three pitches). More superficially, it shares the elegant lyricism of the Piano Concerto of 1985. If *Sextets* tried to occupy the entire keyboard at once, *The Joy of More Sextets* limits the registers it plays within; as in *Canonical Form*, lines repeat themselves with only their rhythmic values changed, and for one sizable section the piano and violin pursue permutations of pitches within one octave. The texture rebounds among insistent sonorities whose returns are fascinating to follow.

The uninterrupted length of both *Sextets* and *The Joy of More Sextets* recalls Schoenberg's early one-movement forms (*Pelleas*, the first string quartet), but is nearly unprecedented for a single movement in a violin-and-piano work. The combination of length, logic, and complexity makes these pieces two of the most intense chamber-music experiences ever devised. As Gregory Sandow once wrote, Babbitt and his music "are products of the 1950s, as much symptoms of the eruption of tumultuous subterranean forces into above-ground life as monster movies, rock-and-roll, the beat generation, and abstract expressionism." For all his celebrated objectivity and precise musical logic, Babbitt has written some of the most absorbing--even exhausting--music of any recent composer.

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann is a composer, music critic, and new-music columnist for *The Village Voice*.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

A discography complete through 1986 is provided on New World 80346.

All Set. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg conducting. Nonesuch H-71303.

Arie da capo. Group for Contemporary Music, Harvey Sollberger conducting. Nonesuch H-71372.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. Alan Feinberg, piano; American Composers Orchestra, Charles Wuorinen conducting. New World 80346.

Paraphrases. Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. CRI SD 499.

Philomel. Bethany Beardslee, soprano. New World 80307.

Phenomena. Lynn Webber, soprano; Jerry Kuderna, piano. New World 80466.

Piano music: *Three Compositions; Duet; Semi-Simple Variations; Partitions; Post-Partitions; Tableaux; Reflections; Canonical Form; Lagniappe*. Robert Taub, piano. Harmonia Mundi HMC 5160 [LP], 90.5160 [CD].

String Quartet No. 2. Composers Quartet. Nonesuch H-71280.

A Solo Requiem. Bethany Beardslee, soprano; Cheryl Seltzer, Joel Sachs, pianos. Nonesuch N-78006.

Vision and Prayer. Bethany Beardslee, soprano. CRI SD 268.

Rolf Schulte, violin, a native of West Germany, studied at the Robert Schumann Conservatory in Dusseldorf and with Ivan Galamian at the Curtis Institute of Music. As top prize winner at the 1968 International Radio Competition in Munich, he recorded with all of the German radio stations and the BBC London. He made his orchestral debut in 1965 with the Philharmonia Hungarica, and his New York debut was at Town Hall in 1971. Among other orchestras, Schulte has performed with the Berlin Philharmonic, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Munich Philharmonic, with such conductors as Christoph von Dohnanyi, Dennis Russell Davies, Max Rudolf, and John Nelson. He has given premieres of works by Babbitt, Tobias Picker, and Mario Davidovsky. Schulte recorded Henry Cowell's *Quartet Romantic* for New World (80285).

Sextets was premiered in New York City by Paul Zukofsky and Robert Miller on February 18, 1967. *The Joy of More Sextets*, commissioned by the McKim Fund, was premiered by Rolf Schulte and Alan Feinberg at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., on April 24, 1987.

Alan Feinberg, best known for his interpretations of contemporary music, has been featured in many leading festivals, including those at Edinburgh, Santa Fe, and New Music Los Angeles. He has also performed on the contemporary series of the New York Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and presented recitals at the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, the 92nd Street Y, and the Kennedy Center, as well as throughout Europe. In 1987 Feinberg became the first American pianist to be invited by the Union of Soviet Composers to give Soviet premieres of American music. Feinberg has previously recorded for New World on 80313, and was the soloist in Milton Babbitt's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (80346).

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Milton Babbitt
1- The Joy of More Sextets (25:28)
2- Sextets (16:57)
Rolf Schulet, violin
Alan Feinberg, piano

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