

American Brass Quintet  
New World 80377-2

The notion of a brass quintet having its own repertoire is a fairly recent one, born of the boom in chamber music since World War II. Even today, few composers just sit down and write a brass quintet; members of such ensembles have become accustomed to building this repertoire themselves, whether from transcriptions or from commissions like those on this recording. In asking William Bolcom, Ralph Shapey, Maurice Wright, and Jacob Druckman to write works for them over the past twenty-five years, the American Brass Quintet has added to the repertoire four quite diverse compositions that all will captivate listeners and challenge players with their demonstrations of a brass quintet's timbral richness.

A vernacular American spirit in the Brass Quintet of **William Bolcom** puts this work at home beside any Sousa march or Ives symphony. Even the titles of the six sections of the work are peculiarly American in their celebration of Bolcom's family tree, spread out across American history. As Bolcom has explained, the five sections following the introduction are named after individual ancestors, among them a vegetable-cart peddler in San Francisco in the 1830s and the composer's grandfather, a lumber magnate in Seattle.

Bolcom was born in Seattle on May 26, 1938. A student of Darius Milhaud, he absorbed his teacher's enthusiasm for jazz, cultivating along with it a passion for ragtime piano. Bolcom handles brass with the same easy command that he has shown in his writing for orchestra and piano. Hints of popular music flavor the Brass Quintet, but behind the eclecticism that has been his trademark the composer has a firm grip on traditional technique. A town band floats in and out of earshot *a la* Ives; a military quickstep is tinged with dissonance; lines sway *alla Mexicana* or freely in the mixed meter of a Renaissance canzona. In homage to his grandfather William Marshall Bolcom, who supposedly once hired a company from New York to perform Verdi's *Rigoletto* in Seattle, the composer quotes from the opera's opening ballroom scene. In such passages it becomes clear that this reflective work has more in common with Bolcom's gently nostalgic piano rags than with his harder-edged Pulitzer Prize-winning *Twelve New Etudes*.

The brass quintets of Bolcom and **Maurice Wright** have a common link with the American Brass Quintet through the Aspen Music Festival. The ABQ premiered Bolcom's work there on July 7, 1980. A few years later, while attending a performance by the Emerson Quartet at Aspen in 1983, Robert Biddlecome of the ABQ first discovered the music of Wright (born in Front Royal, Virginia, on October 17, 1949). After the concert, Biddlecome asked Wright if he had written anything for brass quintet. Wright hadn't, but "right then and there," he says, the two of them agreed that he would compose a work for the ensemble. He completed the Quintet in the summer of 1986; later that year the ABQ premiered the piece at Merkin Hall in New York.

Wright first became known for scores using tape, works in which he often blended art forms from disparate eras. In the Cantata of 1974, for example, he set poems by Robert Herrick (1591- 1674) for voice and instruments mixed with tape. These days, the associate professor and chairman of the Department of Composition and Jazz Studies at Temple University divides his time between acoustic and tape projects.

With the Quintet, Wright shows an affinity for full brass sound that plays up the blend of the five instruments. In the first movement he opens the floodgates with thick, organ-like scoring. And for sheer use of color, the second movement offers a tenor trombone solo that flows against imitative lines played by the horn and bass trombone. The third movement features crisply articulated writing that contrasts with the more legato, smoothly rolling style of the fourth movement.

**Ralph Shapey** (born in Philadelphia on March 12, 1921), leans toward the opposite end of the color spectrum; bright timbres dominate in his Quintet of 1963. Once a student of Stefan Wolpe, he has been a forceful, iconoclastic figure in the performance of new music. Since 1964 his Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago have provided a steady flow of adventurous music, often from Shapey's own extensive catalogue. His music characteristically features dense configurations structured to varying degrees along serial principles. There is nothing casual or vernacular about this writing.

The music reflects the man. In 1969, disgruntled with the state of music in the United States, Shapey withdrew his works. It wasn't until 1976 that he officially allowed them to be performed again, although many performers, including the American Brass Quintet, ignored the ban. As Robert Biddlecome remembers, "The group believed in the piece, and we continued to perform it during the ban even though every time we did we received a form letter with the words 'Please don't perform my music; I have withdrawn it' underlined in red ink."

Shapey's standards for the players of his Quintet are high, and he expects much from the listeners as well. For example, the massed build-up of sound and the effects such as rips and whooshes created from instructions to "suck in sound" leave the listener with an eerie sense, almost like being in an anechoic chamber with a "funnel-shaped" gust of sound whizzing by. And there are other challenges throughout; although the motive that opens the first movement does return to open the third, this work as a whole hinges on sound shapes and overall impressions rather than on individual themes that could be identified and used as guideposts.

Like Wright, **Jacob Druckman** (born in Philadelphia on June 26, 1928) spent part of his creative life in the electronic music studio. A student of Aaron Copland at the Berkshire Music Center, then Peter Mennin and Vincent Persichetti at the Juilliard School, Druckman, in his first electronic composition, *Animus I* for trombone and tape, captured the late-sixties spirit of experimentation with the pops, blips, and otherworldly roars in the new medium of tape, combining it with the theatrical presence of the live performer. By 1980, when he wrote the orchestral *Prism*, Druckman had broadened his resources even further to embrace the music of Cavalli, Cherubini, and Charpentier, quoting and blending it in a format that incorporated the sound world of electronics.

With *Other Voices*, premiered at Aspen on July 20, 1976, Druckman again shows the influence of the electronic music studio by writing parts for acoustic instruments in which they make tapelike sounds. The opening tumult of quickly alternating open and closed Harmon mutes provides but one example of his imaginative success. In the second movement Druckman takes the idiomatic style of the bass trombone into account in a rare extended solo for the instrument. By having the other players create a wash of melody in the background behind the bass trombone, he creates the impression of remembered or dreamt music without actually quoting. Even fanfares are updated here; at the beginning

and end, one of the trumpets plays his heroic call from offstage. The cathedral of the past is transformed into a futuristic chamber in which sonorities ring out, then are vaporized. Sometimes called a New Romantic because of his use of quotation and tonal language, Druckman shows the breadth of such a term when applied to a work as virtuosic and inventive as *Other Voices*. Echoes of the past may filter through, but only in the spirit of the present day.—ELAINE GUREGIAN

*Elaine Guregian is the editor of The Instrumentalist magazine.*

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

##### **William Bolcom**

Symphony No. 4; *Session I*. Joan Morris, mezzo-soprano; Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin conducting. New World 80356-2.

*Twelve New Etudes for Piano*. Marc-André Hamelin, piano New World 80354-2

##### **Jacob Druckman**

*Animus I* for Trombone and Tape. Andre Smith, trombone, included in the collection *Electronic Music III*. Turnabout TV 341775.

*Prism*. New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta conducting. New World 80335-2.

Also see New World 80318-2

##### **Ralph Shapey**

*Concertante No. 1 for Trumpet and 10 Players. Kroslish Sonate*. Ronald Anderson, trumpet; University of Chicago Contemporary Chamber Players, Ralph Shapey conducting; Joel Krosnick, cello; Gilbert Kalish, piano. New World 80355-2.

*Rituals* for Symphony Orchestra; String Quartet No. 6. The London Sinfonietta, Ralph Shapey conducting; The Lexington Quartet of the University of Chicago Contemporary Chamber Players. CRI SD 275.

*Incantations* for Soprano and Ten Instruments. Bethany Beardslee, soprano, with the University of Chicago Contemporary Chamber Players. CRI SD 232.

Also see New World 80254-2 and 80333-2

##### **Maurice Wright**

Cantata. The Twentieth Century Consort/Vol. II. Christopher Kendall, Artistic Director. Smithsonian N027.

Chamber Symphony. The Twentieth Century Consort, Christopher Kendall, Artistic Director. Smithsonian N022.

Sonata. Marc-André Hamelin, piano. New World 80378-2.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

*For articles on each of the four composers represented on this recording, see The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. London and New York. Macmillan, 1986.*

Chase, Gilbert. *America's Music*. Revised third edition. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Cowell, Henry. ed. *American Composers on American Music*. New York: Ungar 1933.

Rockwell, John. *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century*. New York: Knopf, 1983.

THE AMERICAN BRASS QUINTET

Raymond Mase and Chris Gekker; *trumpets*

David Wakefield, *horn*

Michael Powell, *tenor trombone*

Robert Biddlecome, *bass trombone*

THE AMERICAN BRASS QUINTET was founded in 1960, and has distinguished itself as a leading international ensemble. The Quintet regularly tours in the United States and Europe and has performed throughout the world, including a recently completed tour of Japan and the People's Republic of China. In addition to the pieces on this recording, the ABQ has commissioned works from Gilbert Amy, Elliott Carter, William Schuman, Robert Starer, Virgil Thomson, George Tsontakis, and others, and has contributed its own editions of Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces to the brass repertoire. It is ensemble-in-residence at the Juilliard School and at the Aspen Music Festival and School. The Quintet has produced twenty-eight records, including a previous New World release, *The Yankee Brass Band* (80312-2). The American Brass Quintet is funded in part by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

THIS RECORDING WAS MADE POSSIBLE WITH GRANTS FROM THE  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL  
ON THE ARTS, AND FRANCIS GOELET

Produced by Arthur Moorhead

Recording engineer: Paul Goodman

Recorded at RCA Studio A, New York, October 10-12, 1988.

Editing: Everett Porter, Henk Kooistra, Soundmirror, Inc.

Cover art: Sidney Gordin. *Construction, Number 10*, 1955. Painted steel, 36 x 41 1/2 x 27 in. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art. Purchase 56.10

Cover design: Bob Defrin

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William Bolcom:

1 Quintet (12:35)

(publ. E. B. Marks Music Corp.)

(*In one movement, with six sections*)

I. Introduction—Remembered Fathers

II. Alexander Balcom (1645-1711)

III. Joseph Chandler Bolcom (1806-1882)

IV. Henry Cable Bolcom (1833-1899)  
V. William Marshall Bolcom (1866-1944)  
VI. Robert Samuel Bolcom (1911-1970)  
    Deploration

Ralph Shapey: Quintet  
(publ. Theodore Presser Co.)  
2 I. (4:31)  
3 II. (2:57)  
4 III. (2:49)

Maurice Wright: Quintet  
(©Maurice Wright)  
5 I. Bold and strong (3:29)  
6 II. With a subtle pulse (6:11)  
7 III. Brisk (2:41)  
8 IV. With great energy (5:57)

Jacob Druckman: *Other Voices*  
(publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)  
9 I. (7:00)  
10 II. (3:16)  
11 III. (4:34)  
12 IV. (3:44)

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