

SEBASTIAN CURRIER
Vocalissimus

New World Records 80527

Often enough, the annotator to a disc of new music is the first listener to arrive on the scene. From that position of early privilege, two broad perceptions: The first is of a musical idiom's accessibility in the happy absence of compromise; the second, somewhat subtler, detects an implicit coherence. I refer to Sebastian Currier's fascination with variations on a theme—themes in these present instances having less to do with manipulation of musical motives than, if you will, the human condition. *Vocalissimus*, for example, examines a short poem through a multiplicity of personalities. One is reminded of the second and most transparently programmatic of Carl Nielsen's symphonies, *The Four Temperaments* of 1902: "I think that whenever a composer sets a text he cannot help but form an interpretation of the text through his musical choices. There is no such thing as an objective setting . . . Whether consciously or unconsciously, every word, every phrase, every idea in a poem must be affected by the composer's highly subjective interpretation before it [takes on] a musical shape." For its peculiar cement and purpose, *Theo's Sketchbook* looks in a roughly similar manner at the "musical development and growth of an imaginary composer through a collection of pieces which span [his] lifetime. . . ." *Whispers* witnesses the collision of personalities, in Currier's analogy, as a "lively conversation with a friend in an environment—a library, say—where you must refrain from raising your voice."

I spoke with Sebastian Currier in a vacant classroom at Juilliard, the nation's foremost music conservatory, tucked within the Officially Significant façades of that mother of all culture malls, Lincoln Center. The composer fielded my prefab questions in a sportsmanlike manner in order to talk about matters, it delights me to report, of rather more immediate interest. To my initial provocation, in keeping with broad-band predictions of classical music's imminent demise, Currier replied that,

Things might get worse before they get better, but I'm optimistic about classical music's ultimate fate. For one thing, I notice an interesting phenomenon: New music is actually doing better. There's the perception that new audiences need to be recruited. In order to accomplish this, we need to create new life, and one of the ways to do this is with new music. As good a sign as this is, it's a limited success because it has to take place within a context where things unfortunately are not going as well as they could.

Which do you see as successful venues for new music?

Well, opera used to be closed to new music. Now companies are planning commissions that actually do quite well. This is happening across the country. For orchestras, we had the Meet the Composer Residency series. In the wake of Gorecki's Third Symphony, recording companies have been trying to re-create that success by, among other things, finding some niche where new music fits in. It's clear that record labels are looking for alternatives. Perhaps they're willing to take more risks because the business in general faces obvious difficulties.

With my money on the doomsayers still, I remind myself that I am here to elicit opinions rather than opportunities for debate. So then, *What are the composer's responsibilities? If, in order to follow one's star, one repels the audience, is this appropriate behavior?*

I really don't see it as a question of audience. A composer's responsibility is primarily to himself. Every artist has to work at finding the right balance. The idea of the artist-hero is a leftover from the nineteenth century, and it's something we may have to replace with a more rational viewpoint. One naturally wrestles with his relationship to the audience and, I might add, to himself. Whether or not what he does reaches out to large bodies of people, fidelity to one's goals is the only way to go about making music. I don't mean "to please oneself" in some superficial way. One strives to reveal those things that have personal meaning. And then too, there's the dynamic of what you're doing. I was just reading the poet Ted Hughes on Shakespeare. It's very interesting to me that Hughes talks about the fact that in Shakespeare's work one finds manifestations of his public's structure. Shakespeare was writing for two audiences, one well educated, the other, less so, or maybe not at all. You'll find within a single line two adjectives, one polysyllabic, the other in common parlance. And in the end this contributes to the richness of Shakespeare's language. Similarly, we can experience a Beethoven symphony on several levels. This availability to a multiplicity of perceptions is something for a composer to strive for. Look, things wax and wane—they're in and out of fashion. In five or ten years, who knows what we'll be hearing? Music that may go into some kind of brief eclipse in the long run remains with us. Especially those things that respond honestly to their composers' aspirations.

Whom do you most admire? Conversely, who, in your opinion, does harm to music?

No, no—ultimately, there's no such thing. I don't think anyone does *lasting* harm. I'd much prefer to concentrate on the first part of your question. I come from a family of musicians. Both my mother and brother are composers. My father's a violinist. I was fortunate to grow up in a rather special environment. Both my brother and I studied violin, and for a period there, I wanted to be a rock musician. [*I would never have guessed it!*] Yes, well, it was a phase. I worked it out. And I see the interest now as a positive thing. We used to write our own stuff, being creative in that way rather than just playing an instrument, where everything's so spelled out, so particular. We had a house full of records, and I was soon drawn to classical music. Not especially to the twentieth century. Beethoven more than most. At home, my father would stage informal string quartet readings, Haydn and Mozart, and I'd come downstairs and join in and involve myself in great music. Things like that in one's youth have real significance.

As a composer, what would you most love to do?

That's really an internal matter. The freedom to explore, obviously. Of course, all of this goes hand in hand with commissions from performers. I see more and more that performers my age—well, we build close relationships, and it's mutually beneficial. It helps them, and they seem to enjoy engaging in a new and different process.

What connects this CD's program?

Let me respond to that indirectly. *Vocalissimus* and *Theo's Sketchbook* relate to two other pieces, *Entanglement* and *Quartetset*. I've even considered giving them a title as a group. It's a question of stepping back in order to see ways to a more objective approach. We could go so far as to call it "music in the third person"—something like that. When we think of a composer writing a piece, we normally think of him in the second person, or the composer of himself in the first person.

And yet we accept that a writer creates a novel sometimes in the first person, certainly. In the third person, however, he's able to realize differences in characters who together create a world within the novelist's understanding. Each in its way, these pieces do similar things. In *Vocalissimus*, we've the same poem, but set from different perspectives. In *Theo's Sketchbook*, we've a fictional biography that covers a lifetime's creative perspectives. For me, the impetus is that quality in music we perceive as maturity. Conversely, we feel sometimes that something we're listening to is young, whatever it is that makes us notice those things. *Entanglement*—it's a piece for violin and piano—operates on the premise that two composers work with the same schematic, so to speak, for a four-movement sonata. That is, they follow certain established guidelines. But as people, as personalities, they're entirely different. Anyone who has tried to do something creative knows that nothing ever comes out exactly as you'd intended it to. In *Entanglement*, the two sonatas intertwine in accordance with these two characters as aspects of these very different personalities. In all these pieces, the idea is to step back and look at things a little differently. [*You see music as would a novelist?*] Yes, perhaps, but it's not the narrative so much as a way of thinking about dealing with opposing—differing—idioms and making sense of them. [*Well, let's go back to Theo's Sketchbook. Is it Theo's interest in Eskimo music or yours?*] His! I don't claim to know much about Eskimo music. I hit on this to fulfill a function, a picture in a sense of Theo's life and work as a struggle. You have the private pieces for his family, and then there are the public pieces with their learned and formal exteriors. Later in the work we find these different talents coming together. In *Vocalissimus* it's the same sort of thing—different voices interpreting a poem. We see in Schumann the Goethe texts Schubert would certainly have set differently. If there were a roomful of composers here and I asked them to set the same lines, the results would be entirely different and of course each composer would offer good reasons for what he or she did. Most interesting of all, their reasons, and of course their results, tell us more about themselves than about the single poem they set. Besides following through with that kind of investigation, I'm interested in devices that bring together disparate elements. When he hears the piece, I want the listener to focus on the course of the work's diversity. I hope that by the time he comes to “Lunatic” and “Child and Dying Woman,”—the one chaotic, the other simple—that he perceives these sharp contrasts as entirely natural. As something one would not think to question.

Vocalissimus (1991), for soprano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and percussion, explores the interpretation of a single text from different viewpoints. When a composer sets a text, "he cannot help but form an interpretation of the text through his musical choices. There can be no such thing as an objective setting." Consciously or unconsciously, his subjectivity affects the poem the composer hopes to clothe in a musical shape. *Vocalissimus* operates as a fantasy on this ineluctable quality. Wallace Stevens' *To the Roaring Wind* consists of a question "followed by a command (or is it a plea?). The question is unanswerable and the imperative, futile." The unknown separates the speaker from the wind he or she addresses. "As children we question why things are as they are. At our last gasp we still have hardly a clue." It is this questioning posture that seemed to Currier particularly appropriate to multiple settings. Each song carries a title which corresponds to a character type through whom the poem must ultimately pass. "Because it is essential to understand to whom the poem is addressed, the first song (*Entitlement*) sets only the title. The last song (*Last Call*) is basically a restatement of the first, except that now the text has changed."

Theo's Sketchbook (1992), for piano, traces an imaginary composer's growth. Three distinct strains weave

among thirteen short movements: the first relates to his private life; the second, to his academic persona; the third, to his interest in Eskimo culture. For the first of these, the personal, we hear a piece Theo wrote for his wife on their wedding night, an elegy on his father's death, a birthday ditty for his daughter, and lullaby for his granddaughter. For the academic aspect, we've *Clock Time*, *TimePiece*, and *Shattered Hourglass*, all of which look to Theo's interest in time's place in music. *TimePiece* emphasizes structure as logical transformations at emotion's expense. From quite the opposite pole, *Shattered Hourglass*, with its erratically unmeasured shifts in tempo, cavorts through the disparate, frequently tossing up shards of quotations of earlier pieces.

In their rather less formal way, the Eskimo pieces also skirt the personal. Underlying all is the timelessness of storytelling. *Eskimo Song* accompanies an Eskimo melody about two hunters on a long journey that connects to another, directly related line. The hunters had warned their sisters against trying to follow along steep cliffs. The two girls disregard the warning, and one falls to her death. *Ridicule Song* does not quote any actual Eskimo tune; it serves rather as an occasion for extra-ethnomusicological revenge. If someone insults an Eskimo, the injured party is free to concoct a ridicule song which, if it's good, can drive the object of its not so tender attentions from the village permanently. Here, one of Theo's colleagues (or Currier's perhaps?)—the hapless soul remains unnamed—is mocked with mischievous abandon. In *Sila* (an air spirit), ostensibly connecting to hunting rites and power songs, Theo achieves a balance between received Eskimo melody and original materials. *Snow*, with no apparent reference to Eskimo folklore or melody, invokes winter's bleakness.

Whispers (1996), for flute, cello, piano, and percussion, is the musical equivalent of tones of voice. Quick, accented whispers dominate the central section, *Repressed Intensity*, which has the performers playing with great vitality, but at first pianissimo. A generally reposeful quietude frames this sense of repressed urgency. Sebastian Currier composed *Whispers* for its present performers.

—Mike Silverton

Mike Silverton writes for *Fanfare*, a bimonthly record review, *Esquire*, and *The Absolute Sound*, an audiophile publication. An epic-length poem by Silverton's immured twin, *Irving Washington (né Scardanelli)*, Airscoop Destin, a Narrative in Vers Atroce with Magic-Lantern Slides awaits celebration.

Sebastian Currier was born in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania in 1959. He is a faculty member at The Juilliard School and composer in residence at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival. Currier's honors include several American Academy of Arts and Letters awards, a Friedheim Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Tanglewood. Currier has received commissions from the Fromm and Koussevitzky foundations, the Barlow Endowment, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and the American Composers Orchestra, and has held residencies at the MacDowell and Yaddo colonies. Upcoming projects include a CD of works for string quartet performed by the Cassatt Quartet; the Carnegie Hall premiere of *Microsymph*, by the American Composers Orchestra in December, 1997; a piece for the Verdehr Trio, and a work for cello and piano for a consortium of cellists, John Whitfield, Colin Carr, and Erika Duke.

MOSAIC is a quartet of well-known and expert musicians in a unique combination: flute, cello, percussion, and piano. There exists no other chamber group today with this specific makeup. MOSAIC is committed to commissioning new works for this combination and presenting works of the

20th-century to a variety of concert audiences. MOSAIC has performed concerts and residencies throughout the country and has also inspired young listeners and musicians through residencies and workshops. With the generous support of The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and the Greenwall Foundation, MOSAIC has commissioned two works for the group. The first, *La Cifra*, by Martin Matalon, was premiered at the Kathryn Bache Miller Theatre in New York in 1994; and *Whispers*, by Sebastian Currier was premiered at Bowdoin College in 1996. MOSAIC is developing intra-arts projects with the goal of expanding the audience for American chamber music. The blend of artistic disciplines is a trend that is taking us from the 20th to the 21st-century—a journey that MOSAIC is uniquely suited to join.

Zizi Mueller, flutist, studied at The Juilliard School of Music with Julius Baker and Samuel Baron. While still a student, she appeared at theaters and festivals throughout Europe and the United States. In 1978, Ms. Mueller won the Artists International Competition and thereafter accepted the position of principal flutist with the National Orchestra of Colombia. During this time, Ms. Mueller founded the Colombian Group for Contemporary Music and toured as a soloist throughout the country. Upon returning to the U.S., she gave her New York solo debut in 1985. She is a founding member of MOSAIC. Ms. Mueller was Musical Director and flutist for Wilford Leach's ETC Company and Andrei Serban's production of *Elektra*, commissioned by Jean-Louis Barrault for the Paris Festival d'Automne. She toured with these companies throughout Europe and the Middle East. Ms. Mueller has recorded for the Vanguard, CRI, Newport Classic, and New World labels. She released a CD for Premiere Records entitled *The American Flute*, Volume I, and is presently working on Volume II. Ms. Mueller has been on the faculty of Fairfield University and has coached chamber music at SUNY Purchase.

Fred Sherry, cello, has played with various orchestras and appeared at major festivals throughout the world. He has traveled to concert halls on four continents, forty-nine states, and through four centuries of composition. He is equally comfortable with the music of Monteverdi, Mozart, and the moderns. He has worked with composers such as Luciano Berio, Aaron Copland, Lukas Foss, and Toru Takemitsu, as well as with jazz pianist and composer Chick Corea. Besides performing, he created the series Bach Cantata Sundays at St. Ann's Church in Brooklyn; he was also a founding member of TASHI. He has performed with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since the early 1970s, and was their Artistic Director from 1989 through the 1991-1992 season.

Emma Tahmizian, pianist, won First Prize in the Robert Schumann International Competition at age nineteen and has subsequently won prizes in many international competitions, including the Van Cliburn, Leeds, Tchaikovsky, Montreal, and Pro Musicis. Ms. Tahmizian has appeared as soloist with the Moscow Philharmonic, the Leningrad Philharmonic, the Halle Philharmonic, and the East Berlin Symphony, among others. In 1985 she emigrated to the United States, settling in New York City, where she received her Masters of Music Degree from Juilliard. Her musical activities have included performances of chamber music as well as contemporary music at such venues as the Distinguished Artists Series at the 92nd Street Y, the Great Performers Series at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award Concert, and BargeMusic. Ms. Tahmizian's has appeared in recitals at Merkin Concert Hall, Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Boston's Jordan Hall, The Smithsonian Institution, and the Los Angeles County Art Museum. She is a faculty member of the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival.

Daniel Druckman, percussionist, is active as a soloist, chamber and orchestral musician, and

recording artist, concertizing throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan. He has appeared as soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the American Composers Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic's Horizons concerts, the San Francisco Symphony's New and Unusual Music series, and in recital in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Tokyo. A member of the New York Philharmonic, Speculum Musicae, and The New York New Music Ensemble, Mr. Druckman has also made guest appearances with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Da Capo Chamber Players, the Group for Contemporary Music, Steve Reich and Musicians, and the Philip Glass Ensemble, among others. Mr. Druckman is currently coordinator of the percussion department and Director of the Percussion Ensemble at The Juilliard School. He has recorded for the Columbia, Angel, Teldec, DGG, CRI, Nonesuch, Bridge and New World labels. He attended The Juilliard School where he was awarded the Morris A. Goldenberg Memorial Scholarship in 1977 and 1978, and the Saul Goodman Scholarship in 1979. Additional studies were undertaken at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, where he was awarded the Henry Cabot Award for outstanding instrumentalist.

Martin Goldray, conductor, received a B.A. from Cornell University, an M.M. from the University of Illinois, and a Doctorate in Piano from Yale University; he subsequently studied in Paris on a Fulbright Scholarship. His teachers have included Malcolm Bilson, Carlos Buhler, and Yvonne Loriod, and his earliest musical studies were at the Dalcroze School of Music in New York City. He has appeared as soloist and chamber musician with groups such as Parnassus, the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, The New Music Consort, Speculum Musicae, the Consortium, the Group for Contemporary Music, and the League/ISCM, and has premiered works written for him by Milton Babbitt, Augusta Read Thomas, and many others. He has been a member of the Philip Glass Ensemble since 1983. He has also conducted the premieres of several of Glass's operas. He has recorded for CRI, SONY, and New World, among other labels. He has been a visiting artist in the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, and since 1991 has been on the faculty of the Composers Conference at Wellesley College.

Susan Narucki, soprano, holds a B.A. in Music from San Francisco State, completed advanced work at the San Francisco Conservatory, and was a student of Janet Parlova. Her repertory ranges from Mozart and Handel to the foremost composers of the twentieth century. She has appeared as soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, Parnassus, Speculum Musicae, Concentus Musicus Wien, the Ensemble Modern, Schoenberg/Asko Ensembles, the London Sinfonietta, the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, the Hungarian National Philharmonic, and RAI Turin, among others. Her contemporary festival appearances include the Aspen Music Festival, the Ojai Festival, the Holland Festival, the Munich Biennale, the Musica Festival, the International Bartók Festival, the Berlin Festwochen, the Monadnock Festival, the Orlando Festival, Wolf Trap, and the Meltdown Festival (London). She has recorded for Nonesuch, Philips, SONY, Bridge, and New World.

Ayako Oshima, clarinet, graduated from the Toho School of Music in 1983 as a student of Koichi Hamanaka and Kazuko Ninomia. In 1985, she came to the United States as a special student of Charles Neidich at the Eastman School of Music. She is the winner of numerous international competitions, including the 55th Japan Music Competition and the Winds and Percussion Competition in Japan. She has performed in Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe, at the Casals Hall and Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo, and with the Hiroshima and Osaka Symphonies. She was a featured artist at the 1990 International Clarinet Festival in Quebec and has performed with the SeaCliff Chamber Players and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. She is a founding member of the contemporary ensemble L'Art Respirant and a

member of the period instrument ensemble Mozzafiato. Ayako Oshima has recorded for Toshiba EMI, Victor Japan, and SONY. She is on the faculties of The Juilliard School of Music, Queens College, and the State University of New York at Purchase. With her husband, Charles Neidich, she has written a book on the basics of clarinet technique.

Rolf Schulte, violin, was born in Germany. After winning top prize in the Munich International Radio Competition, he came to the United States to study with Ivan Galamian at the Curtis Institute of Music. His other teachers include Yehudi Menuhin and Granco Gulli. He has performed with the Berlin Philharmonic, the Munich Philharmonic, the Bamberg Symphony, the Philharmonica Hungarica, the Orchestra del Teatro la Fenice of Venice, and with the radio orchestras of Berlin (RSO), Cologne (WDR), and Stuttgart. In the United States Mr. Schulte has appeared with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and with the Seattle, Vermont, and New Hampshire Symphonies. He has played numerous premieres, including Tobias Picker's Violin Concerto, Milton Babbitt's *The Joy of More Sextets*, Mario Davidovsky's *Synchronisms No. 9*, and the American premieres of Elliott Carter's *Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi* and Gyorgy Kurtag's *Kafka-Fragments*. Mr. Schulte has recorded for all the West German radio stations and the BBC London, and for Bridge, Centaur, CRI, New World, and Wergo.

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SEBASTIAN CURRIER (b. 1959) 80527-2

Vocalissimus (unpubl. manuscript) (32:58)

1 Entitlement 1:22

- 2 Recluse 0:56
- 3 Formalist 0:35
- 4 Optimist 2:03
- 5 Pessimist 3:11
- 6 Miser 0:10
- 7 Satirist 1:36
- 8 Introvert 2:03
- 9 Extrovert 1:27
- 10 Chameleon 1:08
- 11 Somnambulist 2:49
- 12 Scientist 0:58
- 13 Mystic 3:07
- 14 Interrogator 1:17
- 15 Lunatic 1:25
- 16 Child and Dying Woman 3:44
- 17 The Poet 2:50
- 18 Last Call 1:30

MOSAIC; Susan Narucki, soprano; Ayako Oshimo, clarinet; Rolf Schulte, violin; Martin Goldray conducting

Theo's Sketchbook (unpubl. manuscript) (32:38)

- 19 **I Juvenilia** 1:42
 - 1 Little Music Piece
 - 2 [Untitled Fragment]
- 20 **II Youthful Works** 5:23
 - 3 Clock Time
 - 4 Eskimo Song
 - 5 Wedding Night [to his wife]
 - 6 Elegy [for the death of his father]
- 21 **III Mature Works** 8:50
 - 7 TimePiece
 - 8 Happy 13th [for his daughter's birthday]
 - 9 Ridicule Song
 - 10 Sila [air spirit]
- 22 **IV The Last Year** 16:02
 - 11 Shattered Hourglass
 - 12 Snow
 - 13 Lullaby [for his granddaughter]

Emma Tahmiziani, piano

23 *Whispers* (unpubl. manuscript) (13:31)

MOSAIC

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Zizi Mueller, flute

Fred Sherry, cello

Daniel Druckman, percussion
Emma Tahmizian, piano

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