Stefan Wolpe & Morton Feldman New World Records 80550-2

Stefan Wolpe (1902-1972), long noted as one of the most important teachers in twentieth century music, is only now gaining recognition as one of the century's important composers. The trajectory of his career took him through many of the most significant events and stylistic developments of his time. Born in Berlin, he early on embraced Marxist socialism, writing songs based on populist themes in a tonal style. In 1920 he attended lectures at the Bauhaus in Weimar, though not officially enrolled there, and thus began his lifelong interest both in modernism and in the visual arts. As a Jew, Wolpe was forced to flee Germany in 1933. He spent a year in Vienna studying with Anton Webern, then emigrated to Palestine. In 1938 he moved from there to New York City, where he remained for much of the remainder of his life. In New York he formed associations with leading figures of the Abstract Expressionist movement, including Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, among many others. From 1952 to 1956 Wolpe taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where fellow faculty members included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Lou Harrison, and David Tudor. Wolpe's career, then, closely resembles that of the émigré Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning: Wolpe ultimately developed his distinct artistic voice during his years in America, but he never abandoned the traditional European modernist training he grew up with.

Wolpe's *Two Chinese Epitaphs*, composed in Jerusalem in 1937, illustrates the composer's deep allegiance to socialist issues. He wrote the work swiftly and in anger, just after learning that the Basque town of Guernica had been bombed by the Fascists the previous week. He chose to set two poems by Louise Peter that decry, in a few short phrases of stark imagery, the atrocities committed against oppressed workers. *Two Chinese Epitaphs* is a work of protest art, then, that stands as a direct counterpart to Picasso's great mural *Guernica*.

The first piece establishes a sound world of barely controlled savagery. The melodies veer angularly in one direction or another, or they lapse into clipped guttural gasps. The choral parts at times behave so independently that they seem to mill about in the manner of an unruly crowd; the sharp, persistent rat-a-tat of the percussion underscores their latent militancy. The harmonies, barely tonal, dissolve habitually into dissonant chromaticism and, indeed, the appearance of polytonality in a few passages reinforces the generally ragged tumult. The energetic forward thrust of this music illustrates an element featured in many pieces by Wolpe.

The music of the second piece adopts a softer character, no doubt because the words here come not from an outside narrator but from the peasants themselves. The choral textures are simpler, spare—at least in the beginning—and the parts behave in a more orderly fashion. Even in the busier passages appearing later Wolpe has chosen a more conventionally imitative kind of counterpoint. The music is steadily tonal as well, lacking the frenzied dissonance of the first piece. The music leaves no doubt about Wolpe's political and social sympathies.

The Four Pieces for Mixed Chorus (a.k.a. Three Pieces for Mixed Chorus) were composed in late December and early January of 1954-55 for a contest sponsored by the government of Israel. As Wolpe scholar Austin Clarkson relates in his preface to the

score, the work did not win the prize because the jury considered it much too difficult for the amateur choir for which it was intended. Nevertheless, Wolpe learned later that the jury considered it the best piece of music submitted for that contest.

The work sets four Hebrew texts—three from the Bible and one from Israeli poet Gershon Shofman (1880-1972). All the texts express hope for the new nation of Israel. Even though Wolpe's main language during these years incorporated complex textures, atonality, and motivic development inspired by his association with Abstract Expressionist artists, he chose tonal materials for this work. This choice probably related to the amateur status of the target choir. Yet, when he had finished composing the piece, Wolpe wrote the following to his former wife, Irma (quoted from Clarkson's preface to the score.):

I was ill on Christmas Eve and composed in bed, structuring, moulding, filing, edging, welding tonal phrases. Oh, how my Hebrew music settles in my blood!! And how this bloodstream, this remarkably ancient, history-filled stream, deepens, mingles wonderfully and is purified. I was truly born for this state of working, to be a rhapsodist, to sing melodies for epics, legends, and true stories.

The text of the first piece, based on a verse from Psalm 122, urges the tribes of Israel toward Jerusalem to pray for prosperity and peace. Wolpe captures the processional nature of the verse in a variety of ways. The gentle, wavy profile of the melodies draws the listener forward quietly yet fervently. The dactyl (long, short/short) flavor of the rhythms suggest the spirit of a march. Perhaps most effectively, gradually thickening choral textures, together with the prevailing chordal (or note-against-note) behavior, brings to mind a growing throng of men and women joined for a great purpose.

Shofman's poem, an invitation to connect with the sacred ground of Israel, provokes a more complicated musical texture. The piece begins fugally and remains contrapuntal most of the time. In one distinct passage, however, the chorus unites with vigorous chords to announce that "Today the land is ours, the sky—our sky." The harmony in places stretches the tonality toward free, nearly atonal chromaticism, and frequent short, energetic rhythmic figures show the kind of forward-driven style that so often characterizes Wolpe's language.

In the final two pieces, Yahweh (from Isaiah) prophesies the new ways he will create for his people, then the Lord (from Jeremiah) calls on his people to celebrate the new nation. Both pieces exhibit great rhythmic energy. The jubilant character of the final piece in particular derives in some passages from the simultaneous juxtaposition of different meters and rhythms; in much of the work a sense of jubilation arises from series of sections that focus persistently on short, simple rhythmic motives. Kyle Gann perfectly captured the nature of Wolpe's music when, after noting that "Wolpe enjoyed watching fish in an aquarium to get his inspirations," observed that this "... helps explain why his notes shimmer, freeze, then dart in a new direction with such spontaneity." (from *American Music in the Twentieth Century*.)

Morton Feldman (1926-1987), one of the leading composers of the so-called New York School that included Cage, Tudor, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff, is now recognized as one of the most distinct and original composers of the second half of the twentieth

century. In 1946, fresh out of high school, he began several years of study with Stefan Wolpe. This association turned out to be vital for Feldman, for it was during the late 1940s that Wolpe—as we noted above—began to discover the aesthetic that would combine his European modernism with the newly emerging American sensibility. The older composer managed to transfer his own interest in the visual arts to the young and undoubtedly impressionable Feldman. By the early 1950s Feldman's own compositional aesthetic, now deeply influenced by such Abstract Expressionist artists as Pollock, Kline, Mark Rothko, and Philip Guston, began to crystallize. Years later, Feldman would reflect that the "new painting made me desirous of a sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed heretofore." For the remainder of his career Feldman continued to adhere consistently to a few tenets learned from the painters. He disliked intellectual system, compositional rhetoric, and past forms of expression; and he preferred abstract gestures set in flat, "allover" planes of time. Moreover, he embraced the physical materials of his art and a belief in handmade methods, and trusted his aural instinct over formalistic construction.

In the early 1950s Feldman's wish to create in sound the kinds of abstract visual gestures he relished in the work of the painters drove him to experiment with highly unconventional methods of notation. Some scores, for example, abandon the traditional five-line stave for stacked boxes that resemble graph paper. The boxes, which demarcate general regions of time and pitch space, allowed him to specify chord densities and instrumental timbres while leaving the particulars of pitch and rhythm up to the performers. Feldman soon realized, however, that these graph notations offered too many opportunities for abuse. As he wrote later, "After several years of writing graph music, I began to discover its most important flaw. I was not only allowing the sounds to be free—I was also liberating the performer. I had never thought of the graph as an art of improvisation, but more as a totally abstract sonic adventure." Thus he all but abandoned the graph scores after 1953. In works of the later 1950s and 1960s he developed a variety of different notational methods, but most of these specify pitch while leaving duration indeterminate.

Feldman's *Christian Wolff in Cambridge* (1963) typifies this later approach. He composed the work for a cappella chorus in the traditional soprano-alto-tenor-bass format. Although the score specifies pitch precisely and awards every sound a whole-note value, the composer nevertheless provided no indication of meter or tempo. The actual pace and duration of the events, then, seem to be left up to the performer. The piece contains two statements of a sequence of nineteen sound events. The sequence altogether includes sixteen haunting, richly harmonized choral chords interspersed in three places by solitary pitches (for bass, alto, then tenor parts). The second statement of the sequence is identical to the first except that Feldman added crescendos in two places. At the composer's direction, the wordless chorus "sings a consistent open hum throughout on the vowel *u*," thus reinforcing the abstract, ethereal quality of the sound.

(1. Some of the material used in this piece comes from the author's article on Feldman for the *New Grove's Dictionary* of Music and Musicians, edited by Stanley Sadie, forthcoming in the Fall of 2000.)

As in most of Feldman's works, the music here is consistently quiet, lacking in dramatic contrast, vertical in orientation, and abstract in spirit. The sustained nature of each event, combined with the fact that each sounds for the same length of time in an

unmetered musical space, invites the listener to experience them as isolated sonorities. At the same time, however, the chords seem to respond to one another, so that one of them might fill a gap in pitch-space opened up by the chord before it, and another might juxtapose a different density of pitches to counterbalance preceding chords. For Feldman, chords harbored a particular "weight," or a kind of aural viscosity. The harmonies are also typical of the composer—atonal entities based on clusters of second-related tones—though, for a fleeting moment, the chords assume a nearly tonal character before returning to the prevailing abstract character.

Feldman wrote his *Chorus and Instruments (II)* in 1967 for chorus, chimes, and tuba. The title he chose for the work demonstrates rather subtly his Abstract Expressionist sensibility. Just as the painters often named their works with straightforward descriptions of the material (e.g., Jackson Pollock's *Number 26A, 1948: Black and White* or Mark Rothko's *Blue,* Green, and Brown of 1949), so too does *Chorus and Instruments* direct our attention to the pure physicality of the music. With his title, then, Feldman tells us not only what we are listening to, but what we should be listening *for*.

This piece, as did the earlier one, offers for contemplation a sequence of solitary, vertically orientated sound events. In his score Feldman specifies pitch and gives a sense of the time relationships, but ultimately he allows the conductor to determine specific durations. The events follow one another in an intuitive, seemingly random manner: conspicuously absent is the kind of developing, left-to-right rhetoric that governs the music of many composers. The events themselves involve a range of thick and thin chords mixed with scattered single tones. Many are struck initially by the monochromatic character of Feldman's music, but careful listeners will gradually hear that each chord sounds very different. Indeed, the chief beauty here is derived, as it was in the piece discussed above, from the variety of colors and chord densities and from the everchanging spatial relations between events.

In his late music (including works composed from about 1978) Feldman combined the quiet, atonal, austere textures of his earlier music with several new elements. The pieces become much longer, the music incorporates minimalist repetition, and single-attack events—the staple of his earlier style—now often give way to bigger (one- or two-bar) gestures. The inspiration for this new style again seems to draw upon extramusical factors: During the late 1970s the composer developed an interest both in the repeated patterns in Persian carpets (which he had begun to collect) and in the arcane, secretive repetitions of Jasper Johns's cross-hatch paintings of that decade.

The music of For Stefan Wolpe (1986), written for chorus and two vibraphones, alternates between vocal and instrumental passages. The two never intermingle, even though Feldman lets the vibraphones ring into the voices. During the course of the piece the dimensions of the choral gestures change. In the beginning the chords appear mostly as solitary entities, although sometimes they join together in pairs. In the middle of the piece, however, they begin to form groups of three, each repeated. This long and gradual progression from disconnected to connected events happens frequently in Feldman's late music. The vibraphone passages also expand during the course of the piece—from short interjections in the beginning to extended sections toward the end—and their material uses a kind of figure found in many late Feldman pieces (Crippled Symmetry, Triadic Memories, For Bunita Marcus). Throughout the piece the two players present tightly bunched clusters of pitches in repeating broken-chord patterns. Careful listeners of this

piece will soon detect its modular structure. Certain chord progressions and vibraphone figures return frequently during *For Stefan Wolpe*, but Feldman constantly reshuffles the order of their appearance to avoid predictability. —*Steven Johnson*

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Zwei Chinesische Grabschriften (Louise Peter)

I.

Zwölf Bauern aus dem Staate Li, Wollten die Not nicht mehr tragen. Hier köpfte und begrub man sie, Mit leeren magen. Es weinte wer dies sah, Ganz China weint vor leeren Töpfen, Zwölf Bauern liegen da, Wer kann ganz China köpfen.

П.

Von eine Handvoll Reis,
Haben wir gelebt.
Um eine Handvoll Reis,
Sind wir gestorben.
Es stahl der Henker noch vorher den Rock,
Er warf uns nackt ins Grab.
Unsere Namen kennt niemand,
Es liegen hier,
Die Herren der Welt.

Two Chinese Epitaphs
Translated by Harold Chaney

I.

Twelve peasants from the province of Li Were no longer willing to endure their misery Here they were beheaded, Tossed into the grave with empty stomachs. Those who saw this wept, All of China weeps before empty vessels. Here lie twelve peasants, Who can behead all of China.

П

By a handful of rice we have survived, For a handful of rice we have died. The hangman stole our garments before Throwing us naked into the grave. No one knows our name, Here lie the lords of the world.

Four Pieces for Mixed Chorus (a.k.a. Three Pieces for Mixed Chorus)

I Psalm 122

- 1. Samahtî beomrîm lî bêt adonay nelekh.
- 2. 'Omdot hayu raglênu bish'arayikh yerushalayim.
- 3. Yerushalayim habnuyah ke'îr shehubrah lah yahdaw.
- 4. Shesham 'alu shvatîm shivtê yah 'edut leyisrael lehodot leshem adonay.
- 5. Ki shammah yashvu khisot lemishpat kisot levêt dawid.
- 6. Shaalu shlom yerushalayim yishlayu ohavayikh.
- 7. Yehî shalom behêlekh shalwah bearmenotayikh.
- 8. Lema'an atjay were'ay adabera na shalombakh.
- 9. Lema'an bêt adonay elohênu ayakshah toy lakh.
- 1. I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
- 2. Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
- 3. Jerusalem, Built as a city which is bound firmly together
- 4. to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
- 5. There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.
- 6. Pray for peace of Jerusalem! "May they prosper who love you!
- 7. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers!"
- 8. For my brethren and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!"
- 9. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

II. Piece by Gershon Shofman

(From the Works of Gershon Shofman, Volume 3, p. 342) Translated by Ruth Samsonov Cooper

- 1. Sh(e)lu na`alêkhem me`al raglêkhem wiyhefîm hushu et hakarka.'
- 2. Hayah asher hayah, y(eh)iyeh asher y(eh)iyeh, hayom artsenu haarets, hashamayim shamênu wehayam yammênu.
- 3. Netse hassadeh wenishteh batsama et loven hamarganiyot badeshe, et zehav hasavyonîm, et retet hatiltan.
- 4. Hineh hayeladîm, shekhurê deror, mesahakîm bakadur bimlo tsahalatam; kodkodêhem mavhîkîm beshemesh avîv we'ên oyev lo teshurem.
- 5. Shehu wenashku et haadamah, al titbayshu ne`arîm masru nafsham `alêha weênam! nashkuha, `alêha be`etsem tummatan natlu ne`arot.
- 6. . . . Admat kodesh hî shelu na`alêkhem me`al raglêkhem.
- 1. Remove your shoes from your feet and barefoot feel the ground.

- 2. What was—was. What will be—will be. Today the land is ours, the sky—our sky, the sea—our sea.
- 3. Let us go to the fields and drink eagerly the whiteness of daisies, the golden buttercups, the shimmering clover.
- 4. Behold the children, freedom drunk, playing ball with great joy. The spring sun touches their heads. No enemy's eye will see them.
- 5. Bend down and kiss the ground, be not ashamed. Young men gave their lives for her and they are—no more. Kiss her, young girls in their innocence died for her.
- 6. The place you stand on is holy ground. Remove your shoes from your feet.

III. Isaiah 43: 18-21

- 18. Al tizkeru rishonot wekadmoniyot al titbonanu.
- 19. Hinenî 'oseh hadashah, 'atah titsmah halo teda'uha, af asîm bammidbar derekh, biyshîmon neharot.
- 20. Tekhabdenî hayat hassadeh, ta(n)nîm uvanot ya `anah, kî natati bammidbar mayim, neharot biy(e)shimon lehashkot `ammî behîrî.
- 21. `Am zu yatsartî lî, tehillatî yesapperu.
- 18. Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old.
- 19. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth, shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.
- 20. The beast of the field shall honour me, the dragons and the owls; because I give waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my people, my chosen.
- 21. This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise.

IV. Jeremiah 31: 6-12

- 6. . . . Ronnu leya `akov simhah wetsahalu berosh haggoyim, hashmî`u halelu weimru hosha `adonay et `amkha et sheerît yisrael.
- 7. Hinnenî mevî otam we kib batstîm miyyarketê arets barn `iwwer ufisseah harah weyoledet yahdaw kahal gadol yashuvu henah.
- 8. Bivkhî yavo`u uvetahanunîm ovîlem olîkhem el nahalê mayim bederekh yashar lo yikkashlu bah, kî hayîtî le yisrael leav weefrayim bekhorî hu.
- 9. Shim`u devar adonay goyim wehaggîdu vaîyyîm mimmer hak, weimru mezareh yisrael vekabtsennu ush(e)maro kero`eh `edro.
- 10. Kî fadah adonay et ya'akov ug(e)alo miyad hazak mimmennu.
- 11. Uvau werinnenu vimrom tsiyyon wenaharu el tuv adonay `al dagan we`al tîrosh we`al yitshar we`al benê tson uvakar, wehaytah nafsham kegan raweh welo yosîfu ledaavah `od.
- 12. Az tismah betulah bemahol uvahurîm uz(e)kênîm yahdaw, wehafakhtî evlam lesason wenihamtîm wesimmahtîm mi(i)ygonam.
- 7. [For thus says the Lord:] "Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, 'The Lord has saved his people, the remnant of Israel.'

- 8. Behold, I will bring them [from the north country], and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her who is in travail, together; a great company, they shall return here.
- 9. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born."
- 10. Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands afar off; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.'
- 11. For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him
- 12. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more
- 13. Then shall the maidens rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

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The Choir of Saint Ignatius of Antioch is an all-professional ensemble whose repertoire is both large and inclusive, ranging from music of the Middle Ages to that of our own time. Over the years the Choir has premiered a number of new American compositions, some of them specially commissioned. This is the Choir's third recording. Saint Ignatius is an historic Anglo-Catholic parish situated in the heart of Manhattan. It was founded in 1871 as one of the first Oxford Movement churches in America.

Harold Chaney has pursued dual careers as an organist and harpsichordist. He earned a doctorate at the University of Southern California, and was a Fulbright scholar at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg, Germany for two years. In addition to numerous performances with the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, Michael Tilson Thomas and others, he has performed with orchestra on the CBS television network and has appeared as a recitalist in Europe, the Far East, and throughout the United States.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Morton Feldman

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Crippled Symmetry. Bridge 9092 A/B.

For Christian Wolff. hat ART CD3-6120.

For Philip Guston. Bridge 9078 A/D.

For Samuel Beckett. hat ART CD 6107.

Neither. hat[now]ART 102.

Piano Works. Mode 54.

Quintet for Piano & Strings. Nonesuch 79320.

Rothko Chapel. New Albion NA 39.

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Words and Music. Montaigne MO 782084.

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Battle Piece. New World 80354-2.

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David Tudor

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Neural Synthesis No. 2. Atonal ACD 3027.

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Christian Wolff

Exercises. hat ART 6167.

For Ruth Crawford. hat ART 6156.

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Piano Works 1976-1983. Mode 43.

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The Choir of Saint Ignatius of Antioch Soprano

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Alto

Denise Kelly Faye Kittelson Karen Krueger Liz Norman

Tenor

Joel Derfner Martin Doner Christopher Howatt L. Dean Todd

Bass

Chad Karl Lorentz Lossius Charles Sprawls Raymond Willingham

Instrumentalists

Benjamin Ramirez, Thomas Kolor, percussion Stephen Foreman, tuba

Producers: Adam Abeshouse and Harold Chaney

Engineer: Adam Abeshouse

Recorded June 10-12, 2000 at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York

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Choral Contractor: Carolyn Braden

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Dedicated to Douglass M. Green, in memoriam.

STEFAN WOLPE (1902-1972) MORTON FELDMAN (1926-1987) FOR STEFAN WOLPE 80550-2

Stefan Wolpe

Zwei Chinesische Grabschriften (Two Chinese Epitaphs), (opus 25, 1937) (publ. Songs of Peer, Ltd.) (chorus and percussion)

- 1. I. Zwölf Bauern (Twelve peasants) 4:17
- 2. II. Von eine Handvoll Reis (By a handful of rice) 4:02

Morton Feldman

3. Christian Wolff in Cambridge (1963) 3:02 (publ. C. F. Peters Corp.) (unaccompanied chorus)

4. *Chorus and Instruments II* (1967) 3:32 (publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)

(chorus, chimes, and tuba)

Stefan Wolpe

Four Pieces for Mixed Chorus
(a.k.a. Three Pieces for Mixed Chorus) (1955)
(publ. Songs of Peer, Ltd.)
(unaccompanied chorus)

- 5. I. Psalm 122 2:28 Samahtî beomrîm lî (I was glad when they said to me)
- 6. II. *Piece by Gershon Shofman* 5:08 Sh(e)lu na`alêkhem (Remove your shoes from your feet)
- 7. III. *Isaiah* 43: 18-21 3:50 10 Al tizkeru rishonot (Remember ye not the former things)
- 8. IV. *Jeremiah* 31: 6-12 4:25 Ronnu leya `akov simhah (Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob)

Morton Feldman

9. For Stefan Wolpe (1986) 31:07 (publ. Universal Edition) (chorus and two vibraphones)

The Choir of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, New York City Harold Chaney, conductor Benjamin Ramirez, Thomas Kolor, percussion Stephen Foreman, tuba

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