

There may come a day when Arthur Berger, with his twin talents as composer and critic, will be regarded as his generation's Robert Schumann, who likewise excelled at both. Their impact on the music and thought of their respective eras is similar. Both have composed works of great beauty, while maintaining a keen ear for the musical achievements of others—Schumann instrumental in Brahms's success, Berger championing the work of Ives, Copland, and many others.

Arthur Berger (born 1912) studied theory and composition with Vincent Jones, Walter Piston, Nadia Boulanger, and Darius Milhaud. The scholars D. W. Prall at Harvard and Meyer Schapiro at NYU were also early influences, and Berger shared friendships with the poet Delmore Schwartz and the painter Robert Motherwell.

Berger began composing in his teens, and he began writing music reviews for the *Boston Transcript* while he was studying at Harvard in the thirties. After a fruitless apprenticeship in France with Boulanger (Berger found her too authoritarian), he taught briefly at Mills College (where he met Milhaud), Juilliard, and other universities. He settled in New York and joined the *New York Sun* in 1943. Virgil Thomson subsequently recruited him for the *New York Herald Tribune*, where Berger remained as associate music critic from 1946 to 1953. In that year he gave up reviewing and returned to academia, taking a post in the music department at Brandeis University, where he stayed until his retirement. In 1979 he took a joint appointment at the New England Conservatory as well. Berger also founded and edited two small but influential publications: the *Musical Mercury* in the thirties and *Perspectives of New Music* in the sixties, in addition to contributing to general interest magazines like *Saturday Review*.

Berger's compositional output is small. These five short works—none longer than fifteen minutes—comprise his entire orchestral effort, and several of these pieces are themselves re-workings of previous settings. He admits that his distaste for the politicking involved in landing commissions is probably the single biggest reason for his modest body of symphonic work: "Orchestras of quality played very little new music, and competition to get played was keen. Competing and promoting are not my style."

Berger freely acknowledges beginning his mature career as a neoclassicist—taking the lead from Copland and mid-century Stravinsky—then shifting his methods to twelve-tone processes in the mid-fifties, influenced by Schoenberg and Webern. But ferreting out supposed influences proves nothing more than intellectual name-dropping with a composer like Berger, whose own voice is so distinctive. Berger's synthesis of neo-classical and dodecaphonic approaches marks him as the foremost arbitrator between the two camps.

In fact Berger was never doctrinaire, composing within his own rigorous personal system. "Certain forms may be the same from one work to another," he says, "but then I distort them, even destroy them, to make certain specific qualities of timbre and texture."

These compositions span five decades, yet Berger's language has an unmistakable underlying consistency. Two identifiable ingredients characterize these symphonic works: beautiful surface textures juxtaposed with adventurous rhythmic and harmonic experimentation. The former make each work compelling from the first listen; the latter reward careful study and reveal the depth of Berger's craft. The difficulties lie mainly in the lack of repeated material, and impetuously brief development. One early reviewer wrote that in Berger's music "there are no filler parts, few silences, no obvious sequences or repetitions where the mind can momentarily rest and re-gather its powers of concentration."

Traditional forms abound, but are only hinted at, or dispatched with Weberian brevity. Take, for example, Berger's first symphonic work, *Ideas of Order*, with its vague use of theme and variation. Dimitri Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra commissioned *Ideas of Order*, and the conductor is also the dedicatee. It takes its title from Wallace Stevens's second book of poems, published in 1936 while Berger was a graduate student in Cambridge. In one continuous movement, less than a dozen minutes long, *Ideas of Order* is scored for a small ensemble of strings, winds, horns, timpani, and harp. Berger began composing the piece in the summer of 1952 and completed it in November of that year. It was premiered at Carnegie Hall on April 11, 1953, with Mitropoulos on the podium. The event received a full-page review in *Time* magazine—a rarity then, unheard-of now.

Berger notes that no specific inspiration can be traced back to Stevens, but that “poet and musician are identified in their quest for ordered arrangement within the realm of imagination.” An insurance executive by day and a poet by night, it comes as no surprise that Stevens sought an orderly poetic life to match his in-box/out-box daytime occupation.

Berger's idea of order doesn't take long to present itself. In the second measure, three notes in the winds trace the intervals of a whole step and a minor third—E flat, F, and A flat, later recurring in its inversion, B flat, A flat, and F. These intervals form the “theme” of the set, but only in an abstract way. The notes return throughout, in different order or with octave transposition. The possibilities suggested by the three notes are not explored systematically; they simply offer suggested melodic lines and harmonic possibilities. These suggestions get examined in turn by all the sections. But while the writing is quite sophisticated, *Ideas of Order* maintains a Copland-like airy simplicity.

Berger's own description—“a large number of diatonic interval permutations, comprising the stock from which to draw”—works as well as any. One reviewer at the premiere wrote that *Ideas of Order* “was as simple and charming as a Haydn symphony,” a comment that most likely would satisfy both composer and poet.

Perspectives II (1985) is a revision of the second movement of the Chamber Concerto, written in 1959 and since withdrawn. *Perspectives II* was premiered at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge by Alea III, Theodore Antoniou conducting. *Perspectives II* can be performed by full orchestra, or with a reduced string section. It has one movement, less than ten minutes long, featuring woodwinds with excellent parts for horns and percussion as well, and string accompaniment.

The Chamber Concerto (1959) had been written within a rigorous pre-compositional system, which involved placing specific pitch-classes over a wide range, maintaining their relative positions. Dissatisfied with the result of such a strict adherence to a system, Berger revised the score to create *Perspectives II*, modifying notes according to his ear. Alternating forte and piano nearly every measure, Berger gains maximum musical mileage from a minimum of material.

The fragile melody remains in the horns and winds; strings and percussion provide accents. It's actually not so much a melody as the hint or outline of one, forcing the listener, in a sense, to connect the dots. The dialogue continues throughout, with all the winds getting to solo with the theme, strings and percussion answering, sometimes stridently, sometimes sweetly. Piano and celeste get put to particularly good use here. A shift from 4/4 to 3/4 midway through subtly alters the soundscape, but the tempos remain relaxed. *Perspectives II* closes with the quietest and most deliberate gestures, a single note (with grace introduction) for the bassoon.

Serenade Concertante is scored for solo violin, woodwind quartet, and an orchestra of strings, two horns, and trumpet. It was first performed on October 24, 1945, simply as *Serenade* by the Rochester (New York) Symphony Orchestra, Howard Hanson conducting. Berger revised *Serenade* in 1951 into its present form for Bernard Herrmann's television series "Invitation to Music." Its new title reflects the composer's use of the concertante device that pits solo instruments—here horns and violin—against an ensemble.

Milton Babbitt and others have pointed out *Serenade Concertante's* homage to Webern, while Berger himself considered the finished piece typical of his neoclassical style. Peggy Glanville-Hicks's 1951 review reconciled the two conflicting opinions, providing perhaps the best appreciation of *Serenade Concertante*. "It is the pointillistic surface that recalls Webern, while it is the diatonic planning in back which links that style also to neoclassicism, in particular Stravinsky."

The work is in one movement, with an introduction, a sonata-type form with several themes, a slow section, and a coda. Consistent syncopation creates a staccato effect, further emphasized by Berger's first exaggerating unresolved chords, then contrasting that with understated resolutions. The balance of *Serenade Concertante* shifts from brash orchestral displays to moments of chamber music-like delicacy. For all its complexities, however, the work maintains its calm exterior.

Prelude, Aria & Waltz, written for string orchestra in 1982, is another reworked piece, this being a revision of 1945's Three Pieces for String Orchestra. The orchestral version was given its debut performance in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on October 17, 1985, at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, John Harbison conducting. The three movements form a set of character pieces that largely explore the same melodic material. The outer movements scurry along with engaging forward propulsion, while the inner *Aria* proceeds slowly, contemplatively.

Prelude opens stridently with unison chords, but then quickly breaks into a carefree melody introduced in the upper strings and buttressed by pizzicato accents in the basses. The violins alternate solo and tutti, with each at turns strident and then sweet. The opening chords return as pizzicati at the conclusion, mellowed and quiet. *Aria*, marked *poco adagio*, proceeds at the stateliest of paces. It begins with a gorgeous melody in the upper strings, with the basses and cellos plucking accompaniment. When the lower voices finally take up the melody, they do it quietly, with great restraint. Short solos for violin and viola elaborate the main melodic idea. *Waltz* presents a vigorous dance. The fluid melody begins solo in the upper instruments, then gets interrupted with sharp tutti accents, strongly bowed. The mellow mood returns briefly, and the work concludes with vigorous unison bowing.

Polyphony was written in 1956, and received its premiere that year on November 17, with Robert Whitney conducting the Louisville Orchestra. It is scored for orchestra. *Polyphony* is the longest of Berger's symphonic works, at just over thirteen minutes. It has one movement, with strings, horns, and winds sharing the workload equally. The horns are instructed early on not to cover up the other instruments, creating equanimity in the sonic landscape.

As in all of Berger's symphonic works, underneath a taut surface alternates an admixture of quiescence and turbulence. *Polyphony* moves from energetic sections with greater rhythmic stability to quiet sections with greater rhythmic irregularity. In a sense the rhythmic regularity of the active sections eventually settle the work down, causing the music to become calm, more reflective. But just as this happens rhythmic disturbances are reintroduced, causing the music to veer toward turbulence again. This makes *Polyphony* the best example of what Berger means by distorting or destroying certain forms he creates.

For all of its Stravinskian allusions—the jagged texture, quick cuts, dissonances, and rhythmic inventiveness—this music is all Berger. His deft use of musical space to accent beauty—leaving complexities well below the surface—engages the listener from the first bar, and maintains that interest throughout. *Polyphony's* appeal grows with each listen.

—Keith Powers

Keith Powers covers classical music for the *Boston Herald*. His features and reviews have also appeared in *Chamber Music*, *Musician*, *Bolshoi*, the *Quarterly Review of Wines*, the *Improper Boston*, and *Portfolio* magazines.

Arthur Berger has been an influential composer, critic, and teacher for more than half a century. Born in 1912 in New York City, he received his musical education at New York and Harvard Universities, pursuing further studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and at the Sorbonne. By his early twenties he was accepted into the circle of avant-garde New York composers and became a member of the Young Composers Group that revolved around Aaron Copland as its mentor. In his capacity as critic, Berger became one of the chief spokesmen of American music for that period.

Although Berger has made notable contributions to the orchestral repertory, he has devoted the major share of his compositional activities to chamber and solo piano music. Virgil Thomson called his Quartet in C major for Winds “one of the most satisfactory pieces for winds in the whole modern repertory,” and his String Quartet received a New York Music Critics Circle Citation in 1962.

Among Berger’s numerous published critical and analytical articles, his seminal study “Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky” applied the expression “octatonic” to the 8-note scale that has since become conventionally known by that term. At a time when Stravinsky’s so-called neoclassicism was under attack, Berger wrote extensively and cogently in its defense. He was one of the first to write about Charles Ives and the first to write a book on the music of Aaron Copland. This study, which had occupied him since the early 1930s, was published by the Oxford University Press at a time (1953) when there was no precedent for books on American composers dealing as he did with their musical technique. In 1990, *Aaron Copland* was reprinted by Da Capo Press.

When Berger received an award from the Council of Learned Societies in 1933, it turned out to be but the first in a long series of honors bestowed on him by prestigious organizations over the years: the Guggenheim, Fromm, Coolidge, Naumburg, and Fulbright Foundations; the NEA, League of Composers, and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts & Humanities, to name a few. He is a Fellow of both the American Academy & Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Berger started his college teaching career in 1939 at Mills College, where the following year Darius Milhaud joined the faculty. In 1943 Berger became a music critic for the *New York Sun* and in 1946 accepted Virgil Thomson’s invitation to join the *New York Herald Tribune*. After a decade as a full-time daily music reviewer in New York City, he resumed teaching in 1953 at Brandeis University during the formation of its graduate music program. Following his retirement from Brandeis in 1980 as the Irving Fine Professor of Music Emeritus, Berger taught at the New England Conservatory of Music until 1999. Coinciding with his ninetieth birthday, Berger’s book *Reflections of an American Composer* was published by the University of California Press in 2002.

The **Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP)** is one of the few professional orchestras in the United States dedicated exclusively to performing music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Founded in 1996, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's mission is to illuminate the connections that exist naturally between contemporary music and contemporary society by reuniting composers and audiences in a shared concert experience. In pursuit of its mission BMOP has produced more than thirty concerts of contemporary orchestral music, featuring more than one hundred works by American composers; presented twenty-six world premieres, including twelve commissioned by the orchestra; recorded more than thirty works previously unreleased on commercial recordings; produced three successful outreach initiatives; and launched Opera Unlimited, a new festival of contemporary chamber opera. A six-time winner of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming of Orchestral Music, BMOP has been presented by the FleetBoston Celebrity Series, Tanglewood, and the Boston Cyberarts Festival, and has performed at such venues as Jordan Hall, Symphony Hall, New York's Miller Theater, and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. BMOP recordings are currently available from Chandos, New World, Naxos, and Oxingale.

Gil Rose is the founding Artistic Director of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP), a professional ensemble devoted to the performance of twentieth-century orchestral works and Music Director of Opera Boston. Known as a champion of new music Mr. Rose has premiered dozens of new pieces and worked on recordings with such composers as Arthur Berger, John Harbison, Lee Hyla, Steven Mackey, Tod Machover, Bernard Rands, George Rochberg, and Gunther Schuller.

Active as a guest conductor, Mr. Rose has led the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra in the Czech Republic, the Warsaw Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine, the American Composers Orchestra in New York, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, the Netherlands Radio Orchestra, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra Chamber Players.

Mr. Rose received his undergraduate training at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. His Master of Fine Arts degree and Artist Diploma are from Carnegie Mellon University, where his teachers were Samuel Jones, Juan Pablo Izquierdo, and Robert Page.

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Chamber Music for 13 Players. Columbia Chamber Ensemble, Gunther Schuller, conductor. CRI 622.

Composition for Piano Four-Hands. D. Kopp, R. Lister, piano. New World 80536-2.

Duo for Cello and Piano. J. Krosnick, cello; G. Kalish, piano. New World 80360-2.

Duo No. 1 for Violin and Piano. J. Smirnoff, violin; C. Oldfather, piano. New World 80360-2.

Five Pieces for Piano. R. Miller, piano. New World 80308-2.

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Quartet for Winds. S. Henze, flute; P. Lanini, oboe; D. Stewart, clarinet; R. Wagner, bassoon. New World 80360-2.

Septet for Flute, Clarinet, Bassoon, Strings and Piano. The Contemporary Chamber Players, A. Weisberg, conductor. New World 80308-2.

Suite for Piano Four-Hands. D. Kopp, R. Lister, piano. New World 80536-2.

Trio for Guitar, Violin, and Piano. J. Smirnoff, violin; D. Starobin, guitar; G. Kalish, piano. New World 80360-2.

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Producers: Joel Gordon and Gil Rose

Engineer: Joel Gordon

Production Asst: Matthew Packwood

Digital mastering: George Blood Audio, L.P.

Ideas of Order recorded May 9, 1999, in Jordan Hall, Boston. *Perspectives II* recorded January 22, 2001, in Jordan Hall, Boston. *Serenade Concertante* and *Prelude, Aria and Waltz* recorded January 20, 2002, in Mechanics Hall, Worcester. *Polyphony* recorded January 14, 2000, in Jordan Hall, Boston.

Cover art, including size, gallery credit, date, format of art (pastel, etc):

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

This recording was made possible by grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the Music Department of Brandeis University, the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, and the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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1. *Ideas of Order* (1952) 11:53
(publ. by C. F. Peters Corp.)

2. *Perspectives II* (1985) 9:40
(ms)

3. *Serenade Concertante* (1944, rev. 1951) 10:24
(publ. by C. F. Peters Corp.)

Joanna Kurkowicz, violin; Ann Bobo, flute; Peggy Pearson, oboe; Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Ronald Haroutunian, bassoon (soloists)

Prelude, Aria and Waltz (1982)
(publ. by C. F. Peters Corp.)

4. *Prelude* 2:45

5. *Aria* 5:01

6. *Waltz* 2:56

7. *Polyphony* (1956) 13:18
(ms)

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