

It does the heart good to see this collection of Ralph Shapey's music returning to the active discography. Since his death in 2002, there seems to have been a certain silence, a lack of visibility on major stages and venues, which is a little scary in the wake of a composer's passing. Does it mean that a sort of final forgetting is setting in?

But in Shapey's case, it might also be just a moment for the world to take a collective breath, to gain its composure after the disappearance of such a strong, raging spirit. Shapey was no shrinking violet. He was loud, profane, often angry. He was also sensitive, compassionate, and visionary. He was a richly textured human being, a creator on many levels, and a musician of grand breadth. So perhaps a grand pause has been exactly what's needed, so that we can clear our ears and hear this music afresh, now without any distraction from the presence of that man raging at the world from the shores of Lake Michigan.

Shapey (born 1921, Philadelphia) was precocious, and initially seemed destined for a career as a concert violinist. But he tells a story of performing the Sibelius Violin Concerto, where he had a momentary memory slip. It was so slight that he recovered almost immediately, but afterwards he felt that it was a sign he didn't have the temperament of a solo performer. This was an early sign of the extremely high standards to which he always held himself, but it may also have been a recognition that his involvement in composition was steadily deepening and would require a decision between performance and writing. In fact, Shapey found a perfect blend of the two in conducting. He was surely one of the finest conductors of the modernist repertoire in America in the late twentieth century, first establishing a reputation as a freelancer in New York (after studies with Dimitri Mitropoulos), then finally going to the University of Chicago in 1964, where he was offered a professorship and the direction of the Contemporary Chamber Players (CCP), one of the pioneering professional new-music ensembles based in academia, just then established with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Few conductors knew any score before them more deeply than Shapey, who performed a painstaking analysis on every piece he presented, and whose physically passionate technique conveyed an immense volume of information in every gesture (I, for one, have never seen another conductor who would present a 32nd-note figure with the baton, if he felt it was necessary!). He was the quintessential composer-conductor of the era.

(For a brief moment I need to make a personal disclosure. I studied with Ralph from 1978–83, and was in touch with him up to his death. I came to Chicago specifically because of his music; I'd heard the very recording of the Sixth Quartet in this collection, on the original CRI LP, and was overwhelmed. I felt I needed to pick this composer's brain . . . and spirit. I was not only his student in lesson, but for a year I served as the managing director of the CCP, which was a grand title for essentially being secretary, rehearsal contractor, and scheduler—in short, a gofer and handler of every imaginable administrative detail, freeing Ralph to concentrate on the creative work of programming and conducting. But the job was much more than that. I felt that in combination with composition instruction, the work with the ensemble constituted a sort of old-fashioned apprenticeship, one where a student observed a master artist at work in a range of contexts, and where comprehensive musicianship was imparted via instruction, imitation, and, ultimately, osmosis.)

So if these notes at times take on a personal cast, I hope it will be forgiven. It's impossible for me to be totally objective in terms of Shapey, but if I feel a sense of gratitude and duty to him which may make me sometimes more an advocate than a musicologist or critic, I also hope the deep background of my extended encounter with him can help to give some additional insights that many others cannot provide.)

This collection provides a glimpse into a critical point in Shapey's artistic development. It covers the period from 1963 to 1979, when he moved from an astringent, visionary modernism to a version of the same that was tempered by a more "classical" character. At this point, before looking at the works in detail, it's worth taking a moment to consider some of the more important characteristics of technique and aesthetic that these works share, which make Shapey's music so distinctive.

First, Shapey is a thoroughly *modernist* composer, but not in the way the word nowadays is bandied about pejoratively. He spent his final four decades in the university, but he was never what one might call "academic" (in fact, he was the rare instance of a tenured full professor who had only a high school degree, who achieved his position by bootstrapping professional credit). His music embraces dissonance and intense gestures derived from expressionism (the extremities of register and dynamics; huge leaping, disjunct lines; obsessive reiteration), but it is never serial, nor does it strive to create any compositional system solely for its analytic consistency. Shapey did create a highly personal toolbox of techniques, but it was always the result of a hard-fought struggle to realize what he was hearing and wanted to express. The structure never predated the deep intuitive inspiration. And while he revered Schoenberg, it was more for that artist's uncompromising pursuit of personal vision and deep professionalism, rather than for the actual system he discovered. If I think of composers who share a closer kinship with Shapey, I immediately reference Carl Ruggles and Edgard Varèse, two artists of similarly uncompromising work, who developed highly idiosyncratic takes on the modernist paradigm.

Second, if anything gives Shapey's music its characteristic sound, it is his unerring sense for strong and memorable *motives*. No matter how complex the contrapuntal textures, each of the lines is defined by clearly audible shapes that return, and whose fundamental underlying shape is perceptible upon variation and permutation. Shapey repeatedly told a story (and he was always telling stories, every one relating to himself in some way) of how he had undertaken a year's study of the classical monuments—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms—to understand what made them work. For him, the answer ultimately came down to the “essentiality” of their motives. In a biblical turn of phrase, he said they were “graven images,” written in stone. And not only were these motives unforgettable, they were rich in possibility, fertile seeds from which could blossom an extraordinary range of alternatives.

Third, this emphasis on motive led to the predominance of *line* in his music. Shapey's world is one above all of counterpoint. Harmony does exist in his world, but to my ear at least, it tends to play second fiddle to the demands of unfolding, multilevel linearity. In this sense, his music shares some kinship with the great contrapuntal writing of the Renaissance, when harmony tended to be the result of modality interacting with a set of intervallic constraints. Of course, an endlessly flowing contrapuntal stream can be utterly undistinguished; it's no guarantee of musical quality. What gives Shapey's music a dynamic thrust, one that keeps one engaged with those lines, is his mastery of permutation. Wherever one's ear comes to rest, one can follow the evolution of an idea. Shapey taught a course to all entering students at Chicago that revealed these core techniques (now published by Theodore Presser as a wonderful little book, *A Basic Course in Music Composition*). They drew a lot from serialism, except for the fact that there was no pitch counting, and tone repetition was welcome. Ideas could be inverted, retrograded, elided, seeded within one another. In a sense, every line in his music was a challenge: how to squeeze the most blood from the stone that was the core motive. In this sense, one hears his constant exhilaration at how much he can extract from so little.

Fourth, Shapey also creates this independence and integrity of line through his highly personal and sophisticated sense of *rhythm*. When one examines the scores, one will find triplets within triplets (most often groups of three within three), fearsome in their apparent complexity. But in fact these seemingly irrational representations are in fact the solution Shapey found to a basic compositional challenge, that is, how to represent multiple musics moving simultaneously in different tempi. If one line moves within a simpler rhythmic framework, a line at a different metric or tempo ratio will need to be adapted to that original grid and that was what Shapey solved with his notation. In this sense there is a great appropriateness that when Shapey was awarded a MacArthur “genius” fellowship in 1982, the first year of the program, his only fellow composer in the group was Conlon Nancarrow.

Fifth, unlike many composers in the modernist mold, Shapey embraced *repetition*. Not only do whole sections of pieces return in a way similar to classical forms, like the sonata (and of course variations, as two of the works on this program attest), but also ideas evolve, permute, and return from moment to moment. And furthermore, there are sections of extreme obsessive, literal repetition. Listen to the very first variation of the *21 Variations for Piano*—here one is smacked by the grinding rotation of a clanging ostinato sound-block. While the music shares none of the modality or desire for trance one associates with Minimalism, Shapey's willingness to let an idea follow its course, even if it meant such reiteration, violated one of the prime directives of late modernism just as much as did the cycles of Reich and Glass.

Sixth, it should now be apparent that one of the guiding principles for Shapey's larger scale forms is *contrast*. The music is made of up of large, clear blocks of material, whose juxtaposition one after another creates a dynamic tension, and a sort of “macro-rhythm” that drives the music from one landmark to another.

But contrast exists on a more metaphysical level as well in Shapey's work. One becomes accustomed to thinking of him as storming mountains, an apostle of the shrilly intense. And so it may come as a surprise to encounter in every one of these works moments of extraordinary calm, of lyricism, of tenderness. Yes, the lines may leap more, but there are moments in the *31 Variations* (Nos. 16 and 26, for instance) when one feels the composer channeling the spirit of Brahms from the *Intermezzi*. Or listen for that very open, cold, aching night sky that returns again and again in the Sixth Quartet. Or the viola solo that opens the second movement of *Three for Six*—this is music so quiet it could almost be Morton Feldman. And there is also music of humor and dance here. For the former, listen to the satiric chugging of the scherzo for the Seventh Quartet, with a Trio that leaps and twirls like a malign elf. For the latter, listen how at the end of the first movements of both *Three for Six* and the Seventh Quartet all the preceding musics of each respective movement combine into a texture with a surprising lilt. In short, in this music there is consistency of practice and vision, yes; homogeneity of sound and character, no.

Finally, what gives Shapey's music its essential character is above all the composer's conception and manipulation of music *space*. By this I mean that Shapey's vision seems to encompass a vast openness within which many different musical objects can coexist, cycling about like a vast mobile. We may move close and contemplate just one; at another moment we can step back and see that in fact many are moving about in the same space, each with enough elbowroom to not entangle with another.

This in fact seems to be the key as well to Shapey's harmonic practice. I remember him teaching in his course how a single collection of five pitches could be constantly revoiced so as to create an almost infinite number of chords with radically different characters and implicit meanings. So in this "space," a collection of notes (what he called an "aggregate") can be repeatedly recycled: spiraling, rotating, and recombining from moment to moment to create progression and diversity. It's worth noting that, as dissonant as these chords sound, they usually involve note repetition well before the twelve chromatic pitches are used, they have vestiges of traditional bass line progressions, and they sound deeply heard. So in terms of harmony, counterpoint, and large sectional form, Shapey's practice is recombinant—a constant assemblage, dissolution, and reassemblage of materials that ultimately move to a point of maximum density and impact. Out of this developmental strategy comes the music's growth, drama, and rhetoric.

Treating the works in their order of composition, we begin with the *String Quartet No. 6*, written in 1963 (commissioned by Copley and Stern Family Awards, and dedicated to Harold Rosenberg and May Tabak). This work is a prime example of the radical experiments of form and technique that characterize Shapey's "middle period." It begins with music where each line is straining to proclaim its individuality, weaving a dense counterpoint in which each instrument, though part of an obvious whole, refuses to join with the others in any sort of concord. With time and repetition, this material will begin to seem "normal," but quickly it is set in relief by the extraordinary stillness of the music that emerges at the 3' mark. Here the cello and viola hold a single chord while the two violins revolve in spare, still gestures. The vast space, the silences, the drone—it suggests a sudden entry into a nocturnal realm of deep contemplation. The whole piece in fact consists of the alternation of these two primal elements, and their diptych-like juxtaposition is precisely the point. Nothing is "resolved" in any traditional sense; in this art, it doesn't need to be.

But by the *String Quartet No. 7*, Shapey had obviously moved to a new paradigm. The work (commissioned by the Fromm Foundation and dedicated to Emanuel Zetlin) was written between 1968-72, and obviously took an enormous effort. It also coincides with one of Shapey's most notorious acts, his withdrawal of all his music from public performance from 1969-76, due to his feeling that lack of its comprehension by all audiences (lay and professional) rendered its presentation useless, and in fact injurious to the work. But of course lack of visibility did not mean that the composer wasn't writing; in fact, the case was exactly the opposite. Shapey had always held a grand argument with those he regarded as the Masters, and this piece is the response that propelled him into a realm that he felt at the very least allowed him entrance into the ring with them.

It is astonishing to think that this piece was written at almost exactly the same moment as the Carter and Rochberg Third Quartets, as it shares certain surface similarities with both of them—like the former, Shapey's is also a pair of duos, parsing the quartet as violin/viola and violin/cello. Like the latter, it begins with a first movement that is a sequence of fantasies and interludes (though with none of the stylistic tropes that made Rochberg's work so shocking at the time).

But it is enormously different, and of course the dates of composition show that there was no knowledge of the other works; rather, there simply seems to have been "something in the air" aesthetically that moved three such different composers to respond with common strategies. Shapey's first movement is an extraordinary architectural monument. Once again, we have a recurrent static motif that sets off the violently contrapuntal sections—two chords for all four players, high then low, gently rocking back and forth. Between it there are fantasias that explore every combination of the four instruments. (And lest one think it's all heaven-storming, wait for the surprise of the duo for violin and pizzicato cello at 9', which suggests a delicate, almost floating waltz. And it in turn becomes the bass-line foundation for the wildly inventive conclusion of the movement, starting at 12').

The first movement takes up almost half of the piece. In fact, the whole work has an admirable symmetry, in that the middle two movements, each compact, naturally associate with their outer partners. The aforementioned second movement is a satiric romp, a deliberate dose of comic relief, Shapey at his true nose-thumbing best. The third is a brief meditation (with harmonies that to my ear are perhaps the most Ivesian of any the composer ever wrote) that is in fact an invocation that introduces the massive final movement, the architectural counterpart to the first.

And in this fourth movement, Shapey definitively stakes his claim with tradition. Not only is this a passacaglia, one of the oldest and most venerable forms (so deeply integrated from micro- to macro-level that it is in fact a technique and a form simultaneously), but near the end we begin to hear a gesture that will permeate the composer's music for the rest of his career, the "turn," a gesture from the Baroque, but even more from late Beethoven, that suggests a sense of graciousness that is also almost Divine Grace. And the sound of this conclusion is remarkable, because over the course of the piece the cello has lowered its C-string until here it is tuned to a low G, a dark, almost gaspingly flaccid sound. (Only a composer as naturally familiar with strings as Shapey could pull this off.) Now resolution is possible: The sense is of multiple, angular elements finally fitting together, all coalescing in the serenity of this conclusion.

The 1973 *31 Variations for Piano* (dedicated to Paul Fromm, whom Shapey always called "The" patron of contemporary music), shows the composer exultant in the power of his newfound language. And indeed, this piece pushes the envelope further than almost any other work of the composer's (except perhaps the *Concerto Fantastique*, his immense orchestral monument that was recommended for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize by its music panel, only to be rejected by the general committee, a scandal that still resonates). The most radical aspect of the piece is the theme itself, a homophonic chorale twelve measures long, stripped to what for Shapey is utter simplicity. Then, for every single variation, some portion of the theme is used as a cadence—now and then almost in its entirety, at others just the final two chords. It seems Shapey wants to remind us always of the source, the "Word" behind the surface of the music, no matter how far-flung the variations seem to become from their source. As a strategy, it is bracing, and it also pushes one's patience to the limit over its nearly hour's course. I think one has to hear this piece as a series of remarkable moments, each a gemlike nugget, and give up a sense of chronological time. While immense in its dimensions, it is also concentrated in a sort of intense "present". One must yield to Shapey's imagination and energy and just go along for the ride.

By 1978, however, he returned to the form with the *21 Variations for Piano* (commissioned by and dedicated to Abraham Stokman, the longtime pianist of the CCP and a renowned Chicago soloist). And by this point Shapey confronted long-range formal issues, finding in this work an ingenious and totally successful solution to how one makes variation form compelling over a long span. The theme (far more wide-ranging than that of the *31 Variations*, almost a piano reduction of the sort of writing that characterizes the string quartets) is not only a source for all the music to come, but also serves as a *ritornello*, a marker that outlines a sequence of embedded movements that is positively classical. It appears symmetrically just after the first variation and before the final one, but it also occurs three other times: The first five variations constitute an expository first "movement"; 6–10 are a sort of scherzo, some of the fastest, most athletic and lightfooted music Shapey ever wrote; 11–16 explore a realm of extreme softness, sparseness, and gentleness; and 17–21 synthesize all that has happened before, leading to a conclusion of genuine nobility (the "turn" returns to emphasize the sense of relaxed gravity).

The following year Shapey wrote *Three for Six* (composed that summer during his term as composer-in-residence at Tanglewood, commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Baltimore, and dedicated to Robert Black and the New York New Music Ensemble). The "Three" are the movements, the "Six" are the players. And while one could hardly call this piece a divertimento, it does project a sense of relative ease that suggests Shapey had reached a point in his wrestling with musical matters that he could relax and enjoy the pure pleasure and confidence that his hard-won technique had brought him. For example, the fanfare quality of the first movement's opening feels a little more open, cheerful, and spirited than the more portentous tone of many of Shapey's introductory motives. It is written for the now-classic post-*Pierrot* sextet of flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), violin (changing to viola for the second movement and returning to violin only near the end of the third, the one really unusual aspect of the instrumentation), cello, piano, and percussion. Many aforementioned techniques and strategies are again on display: the assemblage of smaller sections and ensembles over time of a climax of greatest density in the first movement; the exceptional stillness of the second; and the exuberant repetition of the third, at first in overlapping layers, and finally in exultant exclamations of the same sound-block.

I find this recording to be a grand first step in reacquainting the world with the strong, visionary world of Shapey's music. There is so much more to explore from all periods, and as a listener, student, and friend of the composer, I can only hope there is more to come. Shapey is truly an original, though not because he denied everything that preceded him. Indeed, his course may be one of the most difficult an artist can take: to refuse to ignore the past, but without being cowed by it. Shapey loved one description of him above all, by his friend the great music theorist Leonard Meyer: "radical traditionalist." I agree and couldn't say it better; let that be the last word for now.

—Robert Carl

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, NYC

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

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

This reissue was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

21 Variations for Piano was originally issued on CRI SD 496. Recorded by David Hancock in New York City in 1983. Produced by Carter Harman and Eve Beglarian.

Fromm Variations (31 Variations for Piano) was originally issued on CRI SD 428. Recorded by David Hancock in New York City in February 1980. Produced by Carter Harman.

String Quartet No. 6 was originally issued on CRI SD 275. Recorded by Bruce Swedien. Produced by Carter Harman.

String Quartet No. 7 was originally issued on CRI SD 391. Recorded by Richard Mintel in Chicago in April 1977. Produced by Carter Harman.

Three for Six was originally issued on CRI SD 509. Recorded by David Hancock. Produced by Robert Black.

Thanks to Frank Abbinanti and Barry Wiener for their help in compiling the bibliography.

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The Lexington Quartet of the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago: Elliott Golub, violin; Roger Moulton, violin; Everett Zlatoff-Mirsky, viola; John Hill, cello

String Quartet No. 7 (1972) 35:09

3. I. Brillante 14:06

4. II. Scherzando, leggiero 2:53

5. III. Largo 4:00

6. IV. Passacaglia 14:10

Quartet of the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago: Elliott Golub, violin; Lee Lane, violin; Everett Zlatoff-Mirsky, viola; Barbara Haffner, cello

DISC 2 [TT 69:03]

Fromm Variations (31 Variations for Piano) (1966; 1972-73) 52:09

1-32. Chorale and Variations I-XXXI

Robert Black, piano

Three for Six (1979) 16:43

33. Movement I 8:43

34. Movement II 5:10

35. Movement III 2:50

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