

The Timeless Textures of Burr Van Nostrand

“We had never heard anyone like him before, and we haven’t since.”

—Malcolm Peyton, composition faculty, New England Conservatory of Music

This long-awaited recording includes three extraordinary works by one of America’s most original and forward-thinking composers—all of the works included here were composed between 1966–72. Burr Van Nostrand’s music, although both born from and deeply rooted in the anti-war counterculture avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s, remains as strikingly fresh and timeless today as when it was first performed. Van Nostrand’s music is marked by an acute sensitivity to instrumental color and texture, extreme sonic contrasts, gestural freedom, and a signature ensemble fluidity achieved through the use of very precise and detailed conventional notation combined with extraordinarily beautiful graphic notation, resulting in music that places very high technical demands on the performer and at the same time allows for the flexibility and freedom of improvisation. Each work on this disc presents a catalogue of extended techniques that would widen the eyes of even the most dedicated Lachenmann enthusiast, but is also infused with a pluralistic (and even—sometimes—reactionary) view that vividly reflects the time and place of composition—Boston and New Haven at the height of the Vietnam anti-war movement. Van Nostrand’s music moves seamlessly between metrically precise passages, those that are designated as “senza misura,” and those that are purely graphic. Spellbinding textures abound in this music—the textures draw you in, take you to a faraway place, then return you to your current time and location, utterly transformed. Each of the meticulously hand-drawn scores in Van Nostrand’s catalogue is visually stunning. This disc includes three works that represent the extremes of his output, from the most graphically notated and improvisational, *Voyage in a White Building I*, to the most structured and fully notated, *Fantasy Manual for Urban Survival*, with *Phaedra Antinomaes* located somewhere in the middle of these two extremes.

Van Nostrand is a native Californian, a San Diego surfer, a thumb-your-nose-at-convention 1960s counter-culturalist; wonderfully radical, but with the rigor, seriousness of purpose, and thorough knowledge of the classical music canon that would garner the respect of the most uptight serialist composers. It is not surprising that Van Nostrand would ultimately study composition at the New England Conservatory of Music with Robert Cogan, the pioneering composer/theorist known for his groundbreaking work in tone color analysis and his multicultural analytical and compositional view. Over time, Van Nostrand developed his own very idiosyncratic compositional approach and notational conventions and created a catalog of works that are prophetic precursors of much that was to happen in new music in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Due to the extreme technical demands of his works, these pieces have not been heard publicly since the late 1980s; Van Nostrand’s music has had few performances and has not received the full attention it deserves until now. His last completed work, *Nightlines* (1989), was commissioned by Chamber Music America for the California EAR Unit, after which he retired from composing (he remained active as a professional cellist until 2000). Because of the extraordinary efforts of Malcolm Peyton (former Chair of Composition at NEC), Jason Belcher (composer/performer), Gina Genova (Executive Director of the American Composers Alliance), and others, this music is now being re-introduced for a new generation of listeners.

Fantasy Manual for Urban Survival, scored for alto flute, cello, and prepared piano, was completed in New Haven in 1972 and premiered at the New England Conservatory of Music's Jordan Hall by Robert Stallman (alto flute), Jay Humeston (cello), and Herman Weiss (piano) on October 17 of the same year. It is this performance that is included on this disc. Dedicated to the memory of Jay Humeston, *Fantasy Manual* is part of a series of “manuals” that Van Nostrand wrote between 1972–77, all of which exhaustively explore the sonic and textural possibilities of instruments and voices. They include *Ventilation Manual* (for flute and harp), *Earth Manual* (for soprano and chamber ensemble), *Emergency Plumbers Manual* (for brass quintet and piano), and *Lunar Possession Manual* (for soprano and chamber ensemble).

In contrast to *Voyage* and other works of his that rely heavily on graphic notation, in *Fantasy Manual* Van Nostrand decided to put his musical gestures into fully notated form. It is an extremely difficult piece to perform, and is in his words a “stress test for performers [that] captures a whole world of sound” in which he strove to write a cello part beyond his own capabilities.¹ He also worked very closely with flutist Robert Stallman during this time— they were classmates since 1964—and recalls that he “never wrote a note of flute music without imagining Robert Stallman playing it.”²

Fantasy Manual for Urban Survival is a deeply personal response to the extreme violence that was taking place in New Haven at the time in reaction to the Vietnam War. Van Nostrand recalls large tear-gas plumes in the skies over Yale and National Guard tanks rolling by his window. Writing this piece provided a refuge, a way to psychically and physically survive the violence taking place daily in the streets.³

Van Nostrand began the project by compiling lists of extreme ensemble sonorities, gradually organizing them into a piece that is his most structured and complex. The composer describes the process of composing *Fantasy Manual* as follows:

“I purposefully had no formal system of composing except for an arsenal of sounds. So I began with the *form*, ordering sonic events arrived at through exploration of extreme instrumental possibilities. I then began composing using a stream of consciousness process where the three instruments often combine to form a melodic line, only to split apart in a kaleidoscope of textures.”⁴

Van Nostrand drew inspiration from the Friedrich Hölderlin poem “Hälfte des Lebens” (“Half of life”), unusually presented in movement four in the form of *sprechstimme*, alternately spoken by the three performers. The three short and lyrical “Schwangesang” (“Swan Songs”) movements, located at the beginning, middle, and end of the piece, sonically encapsulate the exquisitely tranquil, stark, cold, and clattering images of the Hölderlin poem, and also act as key structural pillars.

The violent second movement starts ominously and slowly with sustained low-register sonorities, before gaining rhythmic momentum toward its end, culminating with a fantastic surprise texture involving bow distortion on the D and A strings played behind the cello bridge coupled with violent strumming with a guitar pick on the middle strings of the piano. The single-note epilogue to this movement, marked “Slow, suspended, very sad,” focuses on the second octave C harmonic

¹ Burr Van Nostrand, Master Class Lecture, New England Conservatory of Music, October 15, 2012.

² Burr Van Nostrand, phone interview with author, January 31, 2013.

³ Burr Van Nostrand, Master Class Lecture, New England Conservatory of Music, October 15, 2012.

⁴ Burr Van Nostrand, Concert Program Notes, New England Conservatory of Music, October 16, 2012.

on the cello, a note that is returned to often in the piece, this time embellished by the minor third A below it in the alto flute, and setting up the peaceful tone of the next movement, titled “9 Miracles.”

“9 Miracles” is structured in a similar way to the “Fragments” section in *Phaedra Antinomaes*; each of the “Miracles” has a unique and vivid sonic profile with silences inserted between them—the ordering of these beautiful sonic snapshots is freely chosen by the performers. The “Miracles” have evocative titles: “A Miracle of Visions,” “A Miracle of Mirage,” and “A Miracle of Wood.” The most extended of these snapshots, “A Miracle of Prisms,” is reserved for last and is divided into four phrases separated by silence. The movement trails off at the end with a light ostinato texture that is both rhythmic and gently fluttering.

Movement four introduces the Hölderlin poem, the first stanza of which is a meditation by a lake—a serene image of a swan dipping its head in the water creating ripples in the reflected reality. The movement begins in much the same way as movement two ended, focusing on the cello’s second octave C harmonic, with the alto flute interjecting shakuhachi-like gestures into the texture. The heightened instrumental activity is also reminiscent of movement two, the music moving linearly toward several arrivals including the words “Das Land in den See” (“The land in the lake”) coinciding with a dark sonority reminiscent of the start of movement two. The next arrival, or new beginning, is realized through the first appearance of a rhythmic unison in the piece presented as stacked tritones, which serves to introduce the last two lines of the stanza, “Tunkt ihr das Haupt, Ins heilignüchterne Wasser” (“You dip your heads, In sacred-sober water”). The first stanza ends with an extraordinary extended texture that includes both the cello and flute trilling in their upper extreme registers. Then comes a transition into soft upper flute partials, behind-the-bridge cello pizzicatos, and inside-the-piano glissandos, followed by a return of the lyrical “Schwangesang” music—the second structural pillar, which also marks the dividing line between the two stanzas.

Fantasy Manual often returns to specific fixed pitches (the second octave C cello harmonic and A flat below in the alto flute, for example) colored in different ways. These profiled pitches split apart and gradually expand into larger textures, and according to Van Nostrand “represent a metaphor for reality as seen and reflected in the water; the whole fourth movement exists in that reality and fantastical place.”⁵ Fluid aquatic gestures—rippling, extended fluttering—are found throughout the piece, and in other pieces (including *Voyage*) as well (Burr was a San Diego surfer, after all!).

The second stanza of the Hölderlin poem presents images of cold: piercing ice, wind, and weathervanes clattering. The music begins slow and sober, with silences, before reaching a big climax after “Schatten der Erde” (“shadows of the earth”), the music once again highlighting the image of the earth reflected. However, this time the reflections are absent in the poem’s final image—a gray frigid German landscape in which all autumnal beauty is gone. The cold and stark images that close the poem are underscored by a stunning sequence of sonic effects: bowing the back of the cello, fingernail glissandos on the low piano strings, rattling the stick of the bow between the cello tuning pegs, and, finally, the slow loosening of the cello’s lowest C string to its sub-register depths which, according to Van Nostrand, “no one should ask any cellist to do!”⁶

⁵ Burr Van Nostrand, Master Class Lecture, New England Conservatory of Music, October 15, 2012.

⁶ Burr Van Nostrand, conversation with author, October 16, 2012.

Movement five, “Receding Attenuations,” introduces completely new material. Pulsing, repetitive, freely overlaid and overlapping, lush and minimal in conception, it is an extended moment of aquatic rippling occasionally interrupted by short interjections of material from earlier movements, only to re-form again in pulsing ecstasy. This material sets up the final “Schwangesang,” now presented in retrograde fashion with the cello reaching into its far upper stratosphere, the piece closing with a final clattering of wood and flute keys before the final release, punctuated by an airy and exhausted sigh spoken into the flute mouthpiece. There is nothing left to be said—the musicians are emotionally and technically spent.

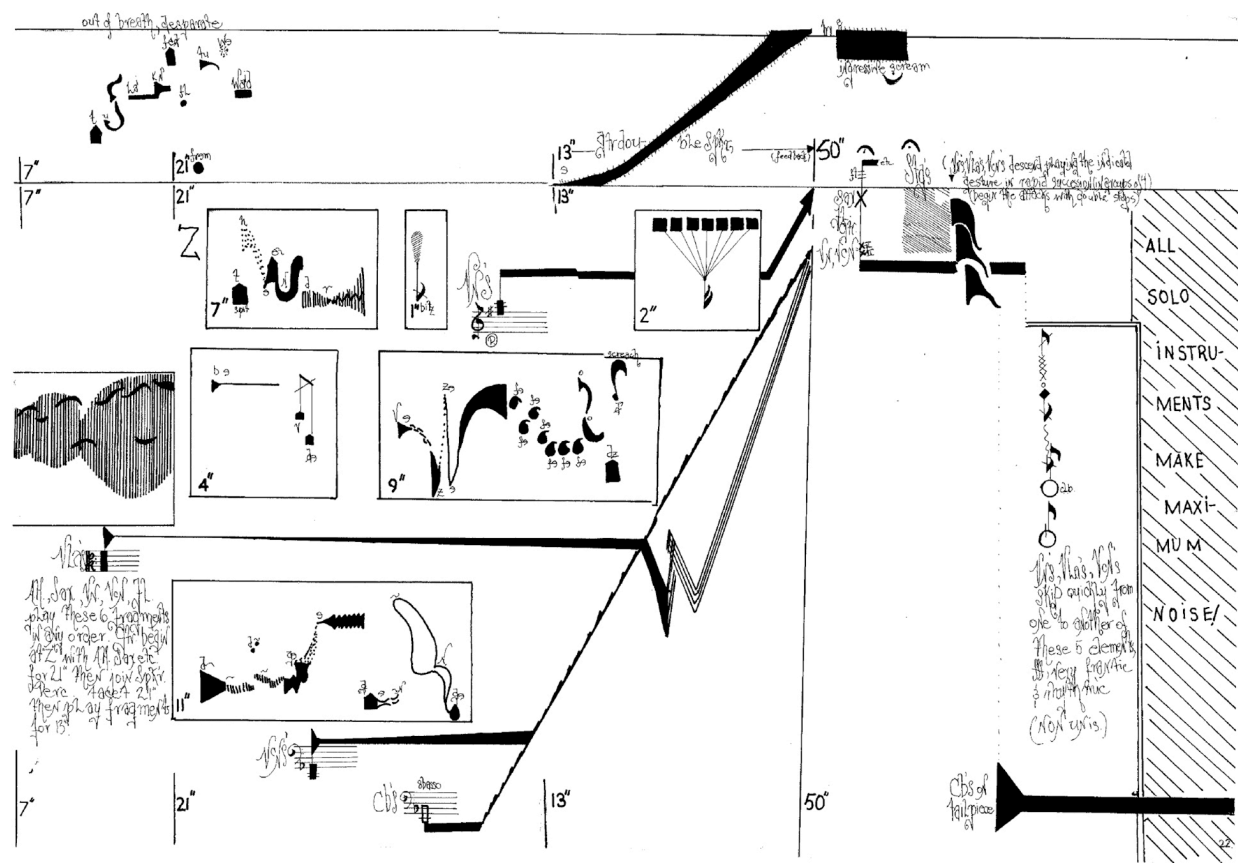


Phaedra Antinomaes was composed during the same time as *Voyage in a White Building I* (1967–68). It was written for Burr’s longtime friend and close collaborator, Paul Severtson (their association goes back to high school), and was first performed by him at Yale, and then again on December 9, 1969 in Jordan Hall. It is this performance that we hear on this recording.

The piece is composed in three large sections—the middle section is comprised of short fragments of varying length and the outer sections are continuous. The ordering of the three sections as well as that of the fifteen fragments that form the middle section, is left to the discretion of the performer; however, the three sections are intended to flow without pause one into the next. In the middle section, titled “Fragments,” the composer indicates specific pauses between each fragment, thereby interjecting a considerable amount of silence into the piece.

Silence plays a role in the first section as well, which is also quite slow and spacious. The first section is mostly slow, section three is fast and violent at first, then slow, and each of the fragments in the middle section vary in terms of character, color, and shape.

In this introspective and virtuosic performance, Severtson chose to play the “Fragments” movement first, followed by section one and then section three. An interesting choice, in that it first provides a set of crystallized gestures and sounds put into relief through silence, followed by a somewhat more linear and continuous unfolding provided by sections one and three. Don’t get me wrong: this is not linear music, but rather, a meditation on sound and gesture without arrivals or goals or recurring motives; a kaleidoscopic presentation of extremes, each gesture and sound like a uniquely cut diamond. Long-range registral connections and multiple delineated voices can also be discerned, as in a Bach Partita, but in a non-linear way—fractured, deconstructed, and variable. The use of silence and the incorporation of choice and variability in performance reflects a Cagean influence here, but the signature gestures are very much Van Nostrand’s



Voyage in a White Building 1, A Grand Concerto is scored for speaker, violin, cello, auto harp, flute and alto flute, sitar, alto sax, electric guitar, percussion, piano, and string orchestra. The work is based on Hart Crane’s poem *Voyages 1* and was premiered at Yale in the spring of 1969. A revised version of the work was performed on April 8, 1970 in Jordan Hall and then not again until the NEC Chamber Ensemble performance on April 22, 2012 in Brown Hall at the New England Conservatory of Music, conducted by Anthony Coleman.

Voyage was written specifically for a core group of composers and performers that were part of Van Nostrand's very close circle of colleagues in New Haven. The group included Humphrey Evans as speaker, Stephen "Lucky" Mosko on drums, Jeff Fuller on guitar, Robert Dick on flute, Paul Severtson on violin, and Burr Van Nostrand on cello. The remainder of the ensemble consisted of musicians including Lucky's brother Marty Mosko on sitar, and Van Nostrand's roommate Bruce Hanson on auto harp. The sax player remains anonymous to this day. Van Nostrand's challenge was to create a notation system that worked for both reading and non-reading musicians, eventually devising a solution that was visual, highly graphic, and relied on the improvisational skills and sensibilities of the performers involved, all of whom he knew quite well. This allowed him to write very "person-specific" musical ideas into the piece.⁷

Voyage is a "no holds barred" extravaganza that showcases Van Nostrand's compositional brilliance at its most radical and uninhibited. The score is visually stunning, a work of art in its own right, combining small traces of traditional notation within a larger graphic representation. To emphasize the importance of register and ensemble texture, rather than placing each instrument on a single staff from beginning to end each instrumental gesture is placed vertically on the page according to its registral participation in the given texture—all the performers must therefore read from the score.

The Speaker slowly moves through the Crane text in a linear fashion, microscopically dissecting it into its phonemic components. He is asked to "act his part rather than sing it" and to "constantly shift the context of thought in which he is involved—for a split second he could be a Jewish housewife shrieking at her children, a T.V. announcer whose voice has cracked, then a sergeant who stutters. . ." The voice notation ranges from a highly detailed graphic hyper-expressive shaping of sound and instructions that ask for extreme changes in character and emotion, to more general indications such as the start of the third stanza when the speaker is asked to "Perform 'Oh' with every possible inflection." Most of the speaker's part is represented in highly detailed graphic notation resulting in an extraordinary array of screeches, sinister laughs, coughs, pops, grunts, crazy infant sounds, and orgasmic breathing, placing extreme demands on the performer and exceptionally realized by Lautaro Mantilla on this recording.

The work is in three sections that delineate the three stanzas of the Hart Crane poem. Stanza one paints a calm and playful scene of children on the beach, the last line of which describes them "gaily digging and scattering." This triggers a trio cadenza for percussion, guitar, and sax in which the performers are asked to interpret retrograde excerpts from the speaker's part, thereby mirroring events that happened earlier but which are now displaced and transformed.

In Stanza two we hear the children's "treble interjections" and begin to feel the veiled force of nature—"The sun beats lightening on the waves," "The waves fold thunder on the sand"—all along the music closely following the text in a sort of hyper-hallucinogenic word painting. All of this is in preparation for the poet's stern warning to come.

Stanza two joins smoothly with the third stanza beginning with the text "O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog" backed by another playful extended instrumental improvisational passage rendered from previous and future excerpts from the speaker's part (the flute and sax start off, with others joining in).

⁷ Burr Van Nostrand, phone interview with author, January 12, 2013.

The first extended silence sets up the brutal turning point in the poem “but there is a line you *must not cross*” shouts the speaker violently in rhythmic unison with the ensemble, “nor ever trust beyond it.” The speaker surprisingly responds by leading some of his playmates in a chorus of menacing kazoos!

A bass drum heartbeat is heard, sounding much like troops called in to silence the crowd, followed by a laughing-sobbing-screaming passage where the speaker finally loses whatever traces of composure he may have had. This leads into a glorious chorus of violins simultaneously quoting fragments from *Phaedra Antinomaes*. The instrumental soloists soon follow suit with *their* loudest and most chaotic outburst so far that, in turn, introduces the straightforward and rhythmic payoff line “the bottom of the sea is *cruel*,” with the speaker, in a creaking and extended vocal fry, stretching the word “cruel” out to its extreme limit above a quiet and mournful texture and fading sitar drone.

Only recently, with the emergence of a new age of extremely adept composer/performer/improvisers, is a piece like *Voyage* able to be fully realized as it was initially intended. This NEC Chamber Ensemble (a confluence of musicians from NEC’s Jazz, Classical and Contemporary Improvisation Departments) represents the best of these young twenty-first-century performers, who are equally skilled at interpreting graphic or conventional music notation, and who are also highly creative improvisers, versed in many improvisational idioms.

Although primarily focused on the complexities of love, Crane’s poem’s underlying message of hidden danger and innocence lost is a timeless one—there were certainly very harsh lessons being learned in the streets of Boston and outside of Van Nostrand’s studio window in New Haven in 1969. And, with their expression of this danger and of the fragility of life, both the poem and Van Nostrand’s composition are as relevant today as they were then.

“There is a line you must not cross” warns the speaker in *Voyage*, but Van Nostrand eagerly crosses that line over and over again in this and the other pieces on this recording and in his catalog—at the same time pointing the way for others who might dare to follow.

—Mathew Rosenblum

Mathew Rosenblum is a composer and Chair of the Department of Music at the University of Pittsburgh. Rosenblum has two recordings available on New World/CRI and New World Records, Ancient Eyes and Circadian Rhythms.

Burr Van Nostrand, the author of a body of work unlike any other in American music, was born in Los Angeles on December 30, 1945. He grew up in San Diego, where he studied painting, piano, and music theory. He took up the cello and studied composition with John Glasier and Howard Brubeck. In California, he was acquainted with Harry Partch and his instruments and his music. Before he entered the New England Conservatory (NEC) in 1964, his works had been performed by the San Diego Symphony and the La Jolla Chamber Orchestra and his string trio, performing his *Trio Verbrougghe*, had won the Coleman Chamber Music Competition.

Van Nostrand studied composition at NEC with Robert Cogan and graduated with a Master's degree in 1971. During this time he also studied cello at Yale with Aldo Parisot. In New Haven, as part of a composers' ensemble called Not Morton Baby, he participated in avant-garde music performances and multi-media events, premiering two of his major works, which were subsequently performed at Jordan Hall at NEC. He spent his summers in San Diego studying chamber music and cello in Edgar Lustgarten's master classes.

His music has been performed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Jordan Hall, the Longy School of Music, Yale University, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, Cal Arts, and the National Landmark Concert Series in New York, and broadcast on KOGO and WQXR. His works were chosen to be performed at the Gaudeamus International Music Festival four years in a row, winning two prizes, and he was the first composer selected by the Nathan-Maas Foundation. Van Nostrand has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and from Chamber Music America, and was commissioned by the California EAR Unit in 1988, for which he composed *Lovesongs of the Vampires* (later retitled *Nightlines*)—the world premiere of which was conducted by Rand Steiger at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Anthony Coleman, composer–pianist, was born in New York City and studied at the High School of Music and Art, the New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, and the Yale School of Music. He has been on the faculty of New England Conservatory for the past seven years. Coleman's recordings include *The End of Summer* (Tzadik), which features his NEC Ensemble, Survivors Breakfast; *Pushy Blueness* (Tzadik) and *Lapidation* (New World), both recordings of his chamber music; *Shmutsige Magnaten*, featuring interpretations of the songs of Mordechai Gebirtig; *Freakish: Anthony Coleman Plays Jelly Roll Morton* (both Tzadik); and *Damaged by Sunlight* (DVD, La Huit). Recent activity has included a commission for the Parisian Ensemble Erik Satie, tours of Japan and Europe with guitarist Marc Ribot's band Los Cubanos Postizos, an artist's residency in Venice, and a commission from the String Orchestra of Brooklyn.

Jay Humeston (1944–2001) was principal cellist of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and a founding member of Boston Musica Viva. He graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music and the New England Conservatory, and studied with Leonard Rose, Mischa Schneider, and Rudolf Kolisch. He regularly toured Europe and Israel with Music from Marlboro, and performed for two years in the Carnegie Hall Evenings for New Music series in New York. He recorded Joseph Schwantner's *in Aeternam*, which was written for him, and Mario Davidovsky's *Synchronisms No. 3*, among many others.

Violinist **Paul Severtson** has performed in symphony, opera, ballet, and chamber orchestras; popular, rock 'n' roll, and jazz groups; contemporary music ensembles; and as a folk musician with special interest in the Norwegian hardanger fiddle. He is co-concertmaster of the San Luis Obispo Symphony Orchestra, principal 2nd violin in San Luis Obispo's Festival Mozaic orchestra, violin and viola instructor at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and a frequent participant in chamber music performances as a violinist and violist. He is familiar to many in the area as Development Director at Public Radio KCBX FM-90. Severtson met Burr Van Nostrand in high school where they formed a string trio that was a prize-winner at the Coleman Chamber Music Auditions in Pasadena. They also played together in Daniel Lewis's Repertoire Study Orchestra and in master classes with cellist Edgar Lustgarten in La Jolla.

Flutist **Robert Stallman** was a top prize-winning graduate of New England Conservatory and a Fulbright scholar at the Paris Conservatoire. Throughout an acclaimed international career as soloist, chamber musician and recording artist, Stallman has collaborated with many outstanding composers. His extensive discography includes three virtuosic concertos written especially for him. Listed in several Who's Who directories, Stallman is also admired as a gifted arranger who continually expands the repertoire through numerous publications from distinguished houses here and abroad. More information at aboutrobertstallman.com.

Herman Weiss is a composer, conductor, and pianist, and founder of two chamber music societies. He served as chair of the composition department at the Longy School of Music for twelve years. Formerly president and founding member of Composers in Red Sneakers, he is currently the musical director for the Congregational Church of West Medford, and part of the Dreamsong Duo.

NEC Chamber Ensemble:

Lautaro Mantilla, speaker
Diamanda La Berge Dramm, amplified violin
Valerie Thompson, amplified cello
Fausto Sierakowski, alto saxophone
Amir Milstein, alto flute/flute
Sonny Lalchandani, sitar
Jason Belcher, autoharp
Andrew Clinkman, guitar
Andy Fordyce, drums and percussion
Evan Allen, piano
Tara Mueller, violin
Tanya Kalmanovich, violin, viola
Eden MacAdam-Somer, violin, viola
Abby Swidler, violin
Alexandra Simpson, viola
Clare Twohy, viola
Benjamin Wu, viola
Dara Blumenthal-Bloom, cello
Daniel Hawkins, cello
Daniel Parker, cello
Christine Lamprea, cello
Dorsey Bass, double bass
Nash Tomey, double bass
Moe Winograd, double bass
Anthony Coleman, conductor

Producers: Ted Reichman and Anthony Coleman (*Voyage in a White Building I*)

Engineer: Corey Schreppel (*Voyage in a White Building I*)

Fantasy Manual for Urban Survival was recorded live on October 17, 1972. *Phaedra Antimonaes* was recorded live on December 9, 1969. *Voyage in a White Building I* was recorded on October 8, 2012.

All three works were recorded at New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, Boston, MA.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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BURR VAN NOSTRAND (b. 1945)

VOYAGE IN A WHITE BUILDING I

80742-2

Fantasy Manual for Urban Survival (1972) 33:47

1. Schwangesang #1 1:21
2. Vredens Dag 6:34
3. 9 Miracles 6:17
4. Hälfte des Lebens: stanza 1—Interlude: Schwangesang #2—stanza 2 12:21
5. Receding Attenuations 5:36
6. Schwangesang #3 1:39

Robert Stallman, flute; Jay Humeston, cello; Herman Weiss, prepared piano

Phaedra Antinomaes (1968) 12:26

7. 2—Fragments 3:20
8. 1—Very slow, suspended 6:00
9. 3—Violent, fast—very slow 3:06

Paul Severtson, violin

Voyage in a White Building I (1969) 23:51

10. Whisper exquisitely, Cadenza 7:07
11. Light and edgy, Placid 3:35
12. Oh! Oh? Oh. . . Violent, Sad, Fragments 13:10

NEC Chamber Ensemble, Anthony Coleman, conductor

TT: 70:19