

# "WE, LIKE SALANGAN SWALLOWS..."

A CHORAL GALLERY OF MORTON FELDMAN AND CONTEMPORARIES

THE ASTRA CHOIR · JOHN MCCAUGHEY, DIRECTOR

80794-2

## 1. Morton Feldman (1926–1987)

**Chorus and Instruments** (1963) 11:14

wordless chorus (SATB), violin, cello, double bass,  
horn, tuba, celeste, piano, antique cymbals, chimes,  
vibraphone, timpani, bass drum

## 2–4. Will Ogdon (1921–2013)

**Three Statements** (1956) 5:39

4- and 6-part choir *a cappella*

I. The Last Invocation (Walt Whitman) 2:10

II. Madrigal (Thomas Campion) 1:21

III. A Clear Midnight (Walt Whitman) 2:00

## 5. Morton Feldman

**Voices and Instruments 2** (1972) 15:40

3 female voices, flute/piccolo, 2 cellos, double bass

## 6. Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016)

**Sound Patterns** (1961) 3:49

wordless choir *a cappella*

## 7. Warren Burt (b. 1949)

**Elgy** (2013) 6:46

wordless 4-part choir *a cappella*

## 8. Morton Feldman

**Voices and Instruments 1** (1972) 12:40

wordless chorus (SATB), 2 flutes, cor anglais, clarinet,  
bassoon, horn, double bass, timpani, piano

## 9–11. Earle Brown (1926–2002)

**Small Pieces for Large Chorus** (1969) 9:08

wordless chorus (SATB)

I. 2:58

II. 2:20

III. 3:44

## 12. Robert Carl (b. 1954)

**The City** (Louis Sullivan) 2:12

from **Sullivan Songs** (1983–93)

6-part choir

## 13. Morton Feldman

**The Swallows of Salangan** (1960) 7:49

wordless chorus (SATB), 4 flutes, alto flute,  
5 trumpets, 2 tubas, 2 vibraphones, 2 pianos, 7 cellos

TT: 76:06

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MORTON FELDMAN  
WILL OGDON  
EARLE BROWN  
PAULINE OLIVEROS  
WARREN BURT  
ROBERT CARL

THE ASTRA CHOIR · JOHN MCCAUGHEY, DIRECTOR

# WE, LIKE SALANGAN SWALLOWS...

## I. MOTIVATIONS

*“...that instinct with the help of which...”*

“**FELDMAN**”: ALMOST A WORD!—A MUSICAL TERM OF THE 20TH-CENTURY LEXICON, synonymous with compositions of quietness and sparseness, vibrance and space. And the immediate association of the name is two-fold—with the New York School of John Cage, and the Abstract Expressionist painters of the same city, mostly artists of an older generation (like Cage), with whom Morton Feldman had close and formative friendships from his mid-twenties.

The primary project of the Cage School, the release of sound in its own right, had the result that almost every score of these diverse composers suggests a new paradigm in the complex relations between notation and action, composition and sonic result, performing and listening.

Both this intense individuality of Feldman’s art and its “painterly” aspect have tended to push his rich output of works into a zone all of their own, surrounded by a moat of stillness. This recording attempts the reverse process—to bring his choral works (those previously unrecorded) into a “gallery” of other choir compositions of his time. Through the interaction with works of other characters and aspirations, mutual illumination might become a new Feldman experience.

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It belongs to the delights and frustrations of the scores of **Morton Feldman** (1926–1987) that the performer is often left wondering what to do, aside from playing softly! Each of his four works on this disc has a different system of notation, without necessarily being four different kinds of piece. Four different proposals, perhaps, for guiding the playing into the kind of sonic art that Feldman had in his ear and mind.

Out of that wondering of the performers come possible solutions which slowly but surely establish their own rightness or otherwise. And if the particular spell of the composer’s harmony and form establishes itself through the performers’ fragile efforts, transferred from the page to the physicality of their voices, the wondering turns into a special wonder, on the part of the audience—a kind of suspended sonic experience where forward flow seems to matter less than the sense of a space, with reverberations forwards and backwards from given sound-objects, abounding in expressive shape, distance, animation, interaction.

These qualities naturally bring Feldman’s composition closer to the domain of his revered New York painters, in all *their* diversity. In distinction to Cage, Feldman’s pieces have beginnings, middles, and ends, beautifully constructed, yet differing from those of a tonal-developmental narrative. Possibly the processes between start and finish are more akin to guiding a listener’s attention and awareness around the framed canvas of particular sound moments.

For the musical domain, however, Morton Feldman’s contribution as a creative artist remains *music*—and this in a newly “absolute” sense, separate from the visual arts. Despite his desire to be considered “between categories,” Feldman seems less a multi-art Apollo than a Hermes—a messenger from the world of painting, showing music how it could change its own shapes in the world after Webern.

Three of these four Feldman works have titles, deliberately bland, containing the words “Chorus” or “Voices” in conjunction with “Instruments.” And they mean exactly that: a particular body of human sound notably important for this composer, heard in its own right among intersecting and overlaid bodies of instrumental sound. These pieces are far from seeking or setting texts, whereby sung sounds become vehicles for imported meanings, or export their own metaphors for a poetry beyond themselves. And yet the title-page of the most adventurous of all Feldman’s choral creations, *The Swallows of Salangan*, embraces a magnificent poetic suggestion of Boris Pasternak, that “we, like Salangan swallows, built the world—an enormous nest, put together from the earth and sky, life and death, and two times, the ready to hand and the defaulting...”

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And so this CD turns its attention as well to the “nest” of a world around Feldman. The metaphor of a gallery also has its sense. Unlike the paintings of, say, Mark Rothko, which can exist in adjacency to each other (or even constitute a whole environment, as in Rothko Chapel), Feldman’s works seem to demand a certain separation from each other. Sonic images can disturb each other; in the way they do in art museums when adjacent exhibits have auditory components. The juxtapositions here with other artists aim at more enlightening forms of encounter, in separating Feldman from Feldman.

In concert, the Astra Choir of Melbourne has, through various programs, placed Feldman among a range of repertoire, from Ockeghem and Monteverdi to Max Reger and Pascal Bentoiu. Here it is composers from a shared American context

who interpolate their presence among his choruses, suggesting their own takes on “earth and sky, life and death.”

Two of the five other works confront Feldman’s textless choral singing with words. These, however, carry their own special musical intent. Three early twelve-tone gems of **Will Ogdon** (1921–2013) move with Walt Whitman “into the wordless... away from books, away from art,” and reluctantly away from human desire, as embodied in the central poem by Thomas Campion. **Robert Carl** (b. 1954), whose teacher Ralph Shapey, like Feldman, was a prominent student of Stefan Wolpe, brings a transcendentalist layered sound to the mystical reflections of the architect Louis Sullivan, contemplating the natural and the built-human in the lake and city of Chicago.

The notion of wordless chorus fans out in varied directions in the other three works. As one of Feldman’s closest associates in the New York School, **Earle Brown** (1926–2002) intrigues us as much for the stark differences from Feldman shown by his abstract choral mobiles. The *Sound Patterns* of **Pauline Oliveros** (1932–2016) are less abstract than their title might imply—moving in and out of singing itself into extended vocality, and towards newly-suggested verbal exclamations of a non-semantic kind. **Warren Burt** (b. 1949), a former student of both Oliveros and Ogdon at the University of California, San Diego, contributes with his *Elegy* the most recent piece, also the closest to Feldman’s simple successions of chorale-like chords. His harmonies, however, acquire their elegiac qualities from chromatic memories and their contradictions, moving along unfamiliar paths.

## II. THE FOUR FELDMAN WORKS

*I prefer to think of my work as: between categories. Between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction and its surface.* (Feldman, 1969)

For Morton Feldman, a special part of the artistic act was the drawing, always in ink, of musical notation on the page—not unrelated to the work that he observed at first hand in the studios of his painter friends. The four pieces here are notated for choir and instruments in four different manners, each of which has equivalents in other, non-choral scores. Their marked individualities as compositions are bound up with their notation and with their highly original choices of instruments, while all share a similar mode of choral writing—successions of soft chords, varying in density from a single pitch up to clusters of eight or more, and notated within the traditional four lines of soprano, alto, tenor, bass.

No traditional grammar supports these chorales. Feldman clearly thinks of the painting-derived idea of “surface” as superseding or disarranging the force of *phrase* and other structuring devices beneath that surface. Yet one word that he did not disavow for his music was “breathing.” A special discovery here may be the four quite different ways in which his works breathe, within an unmistakable, shared Feldman style.

The “liberation” of the listener was an inseparable part of the creative impulses issuing from the New York School, as illustrated in the title of John Cage’s essay “Happy New Ears!” (1964). Cage proposes that listening and composing catch up with what the eye does in the enjoyment of modern painting—whereby attention is mobile, and can shift quickly between the canvas as a whole and points of detail.

The listener to this CD, as with any recorded music, is to some extent his or her own composer, choosing particular items or the whole, determining the listening environment, technical medium and loudness setting. The volume control becomes specially important with Feldman’s music, where softness is a given. It is suggested that the listener set the opening track *Chorus and Instruments* at a level that is quiet, yet clear in details of the choral and instrumental fabric. The remainder of the disc should then follow with little further adjustment as a coherent soundscape—at least, that is the attempt of the sound design.

Each of the four Feldman works can then be heard to create a different dynamic relation to its own softness. *Chorus and Instruments* notates some rare points of swell and fade for the chorus, even dipping below the prevailing *piano* towards the close. These moments cast light on nuances of the material that lies between. *Voices and Instruments 2* sustains its subdued level throughout, yet acquires a dynamic sense through fluctuations between greater bundling of the clustered sounds and their diffusion across a wider pitch-space. *Voices and Instruments 1*, in order to keep its wind scoring in balance, summons forth some moments of intensifying force. And *The Swallows of Salangan* almost transcends notions of louder and softer, in its flickering fullness of sound.

Track 1: *Chorus and Instruments* (1963) closely resembles in its notation the instrumental quintet of the same year titled *De Kooning*. The most visually striking of the four Feldman scores, it also poses special challenges for the realization as performed sound. Feldman’s hand-written pages place the chorus with its procession of chords in the center, amongst a mysterious assemblage of instrumental colors extending far beyond the voices’ range—from tuba, double bass and timpani below,

to violin, celeste and antique cymbals above. The seven instrumentalists articulate mostly single notes, linked by diagonal dotted lines, passing through the terrain of the choir, whose harmony ebbs and flows, from a unison up to clusters of ten notes.

Two types of “field” are created on the page. The first is an open space in which the players’ single note-heads freely trace out their diagonal tracks. Secondly, notated measures are imposed in changing time-signatures and tempi, mostly with just single attacks on their downbeats. These can affect the entire ensemble, or sometimes are inserted as blocks into the surrounding freer field. Choir and instruments both participate in both kinds of “space.” The result is a music, within the domain of the soft and the slow, that is at times crowded with diffuse energies, a gentle commotion of strands and amalgamations—in some passages advancing on its own volition, elsewhere more clearly measured.

Amid the fabric, the listener will also gradually detect the background presence of pedal tones, sometimes two of them at a semitone distance, acting as gravities that draw the diffusion into more solid shapes. A glowing octave on B-flat thus emerges in mid-piece. Towards the finish, the instruments retreat, almost to a bystander role, listening and commenting from above and below the central chorale. A final phrase from the choir is stated three times, progressively truncated, with just two soprano pitches (C and E-flat) oscillating in still-restless harmonic colorations.

Two things bear on the special relationship created in *Chorus and Instruments* towards its own title. Firstly, despite the profusion of timbre, a coherent harmonic spectrum, from low to high, places a wider embrace around the choir in its central position. Second, a particular sense of intimacy is engendered by the single notes of the far-flung instruments as they join and adjoin the collective singing. Far from

the traditional notion of “accompaniment,” this intimate sonic experience would be hard to match in the choral-instrumental repertoire, with the possible exception of Webern’s choral works.

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*The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or a Guston, were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting. For me, stasis, scale, and pattern have put the whole question of symmetry and asymmetry in abeyance.* (Feldman, 1981)

The two works bearing the title “Voices and Instruments,” composed in the same year, take on different characters, again arising from their contrasted modes of notation and their choices of instruments. In common between the two, the music at certain stages arrives at a kind of living-breathing standstill, an amalgam of vocal and instrumental sonority, which both expands the clock-time occupied and suspends its sense of passing. Such transfixed moments are especially prolonged in *Voices and Instruments 2*, where they are part of a deep, questing meditation; the earlier piece enfoldes them in a more darkly dramatic expressionism.

Track 5: *Voices and Instruments 2* (1972) is written in Feldman’s characteristic hand—at once spindly and elegant—with a notation that resembles the later instrumental trio *For Philip Guston*. Conventional time-signatures are in control throughout, unlike the more graphic *Chorus and Instruments*, but with continual shifts of meter from one measure to the next, so that the listener in a live performance, observing the conductor’s gestures, is aware of a ruffled metrical surface.

Acoustically, however, these rhythmic energies are shrouded in the envelopes of voices and instruments moving across the irregular bar-lines.

Although this is not a choral piece as such, its three female vocalists become a quasi-choir, singing at close intervals and eschewing the distinct identities of chamber music with solo voices. As with the shadowed meters, their ensemble engenders a kind of sonic shroud, a quality and atmosphere deepened by the extraordinary instrumentation among which they are set.

It is basic to Feldman that sung notes are rarely doubled by instruments, but the four instruments here interact and interleave closely with them. Two cellos play into the singers' pitch-space, fused as a pair for much of the piece in the unearthly sound of artificial harmonics. Flute and double bass frame the ensemble, although at the outset the flute sounds even below the double bass at the bottom end of the initial sound-object. This object's detailed "painting" is an interesting study in art that conceals art—a feeling of stasis masks a restless movement of notes within the ensemble. Later the flute ventures towards melodic independence in a vantage-point above the singers, extending to piccolo. The double bass also breaks out, in a solo pizzicato line to trigger the piece's ending. Double bass is, indeed, the one instrument in common between Feldman's first three works of this recording—the instrument that he played in high school, and deftly composes as a constant, almost observing presence among other instruments of different character.

Track 8: *Voices and Instruments 1* (1972), unlike its companion-work, is fully choral, and comes closest of the four Feldman pieces to a classical sound in its instrumentation. The notation, likewise, is more regular. A simple 3/4 meter prevails through large stretches (much of the time with a single attack on the downbeat), expanding to larger

meters to create slowings of events. And the score itself is published in conventional engraving, as with much of Feldman's later work. If the personality of the composer's handwriting is thereby removed from the page, the music also conveys a highly personal interaction with certain regularities of the tradition.

The focus of the Cage School on *sound* as the liberated and motivating factor meant for Feldman a freeing from "anxiety" about the past, which he believed beset his prominent European contemporaries. Yet here is a distinct hint of Beethoven in the air! The woodwind formation of two flutes, clarinet, cor anglais, horn and bassoon, joined below by double bass and timpani—and occasionally punctuated by a single, recondite chord from piano—inherently carries such a memory. It becomes more explicit in the orchestrational voicings, including octaves. The initial three-note cluster in female voices, downwardly A-flat/G/D-flat (with double bass on C), opens into a whole environment in which one might be reminded of the C Minor/A-flat Major constellation of the Fifth Symphony, while remaining equally remote from a Neoclassical 20th century.

Even if the Beethoven association seems overstated, it points to an aspect of Feldman more strongly at work in *Voices and Instruments 1* than other pieces. Feldman is quoted by the composer Thomas Adès as saying of Beethoven: "It's not so much how he gets into things that's interesting, it's how he gets out of them." Theatre-based notions of *situation* and *event* arise here, which offer alternatives to visual-arts thinking in relation to Feldman, and specially so to the deep inner reverberations of *Voices and Instruments 1*.

Whereas his other three works of the recording seem to emerge from unique, self-generating sonic moments, *Voices and Instruments 1* at its outset presents some familiar composite gestures. They might once have been called "motives," and they



enter the terrain that grows around that opening A-flat chord, with its prowling double bass and timpani. Moving across the voices and instruments like Webern tone-color melodies, they recall elemental uses of intervals and their shapes. These include: the B-A-C-H succession in transposition (chromatic, sequential); a rising, simultaneously major and minor scale (2nds in steps and half-steps); a wedge figure (widening 3rds); falling arpeggiation (3rds and 4ths and cadential 5ths). The situation of such memories within a Feldman score is utterly other, but the disorientation works in both directions. A charged quality prevails throughout the piece. We might say Feldman “gets out of it” in a manner more like a dramaturgy than a painting, and one that has intimations of a tragic scenario—the lament, which Alex Ross and other writers have noted as a pervasive atmosphere in his music.

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Track 13: *The Swallows of Salangan* (1960), now nearly 60 years old, has taken on a legendary status as a famous rarity—a work of quite unusual scope and effect, frequently referred to by Feldman himself, but barely known as a concert experience. The reason may lie in the striking multiplicity of instruments in which the chorus is embedded—5 flutes, 7 cellos, 5 trumpets, 2 tubas, 2 pianos and 2 vibraphones. Two separate performances in 2014—in Birmingham, UK, (Thallein Ensemble and Via Nova) and Melbourne, Australia (Astra Choir)—along with an earlier one in the Czech Republic may even be the sum of its hearings outside the USA, in marked contrast with Feldman’s later *Rothko Chapel*, which has been widely performed and recorded.

Despite being the earliest of his four works here, *Swallows* has remarkable power to cast revelatory light over all of them, and on Feldman’s art in general. The nota-

tion is again quite different from the other three cases, but has parallels with scores of the time, such as *For Franz Kline*. A procession of 61 chords is written in neat columns of note-heads across the pages, prescribing individual notes for the entire ensemble of four-part choir and 23 players. All are instructed merely to play softly, with minimum of attack and, after the first simultaneous chord, to choose their own durations for each sound before progressing to the next. The ensuing diffusion thus differs in its details in every performance, but is “prevented from crumbling” (in Pasternak’s phrase) by Feldman’s great intuitive sense of what zones of sound come to pass after that first coordinated moment. Focal moments of emphasis are written among the richly-clustered chords—a pair of grand octaves on B-flat and G succeed each other at one point, later a C-minor sonority followed by B in octaves; elsewhere phases of predominantly white-notes color the sound under high pedal-tones of C and A in the topmost voices. While these emphatic moments are not heard as such among all the diverging voices, they provide gravities towards a core in the “nest” of sound, approached and receded from in ways to suggest backward as well as forward movement of time.

One might say that the quiet commotion of the CD’s opening work *Chorus and Instruments* has here grown over, into a tangle of flight-paths. In this concert version in the reverberant space of Melbourne’s Carmelite Church, the audience was surrounded by the distinct sound-bodies, so that each listener had a different perspective on the enveloping sonic haze. A stereo-recording cannot reproduce this, but has its own capacity to wheel above the fray, like an airborne swallow, moving closer to one timbral center or another. The richness with which the piece lives up to Boris Pasternak’s remarkable words about the nest of the world, and the “transparent figurativeness” of its links, can best be assessed in the listener’s own experience of this

track. But other words, about a celebrated painting by Pasternak's compatriot Kasimir Malevich—"Black Square," as described by the American critic Peter Schjeldahl—have suggestive power for understanding the context of Morton Feldman's achievement: "The brushwork is juicy and brusque: filling in the shapes, fussing with the edges. But the forms are weightless, more like thoughts than like images. You don't look at the picture so much as launch yourself into its trackless empyrean."

A strikingly similar insight, directly on Feldman's *Swallows of Salangan*, came from another art critic, when the piece was just four years old. Here was Dore Ashton in 1964, drawing it into the context of Symbolism: "...I heard the piece as an evocation, not of any 'thing' or event, but of a complicated *état d'esprit*. Feldman uses the voices as a transparent veil...fusing the whole in a spherical abstraction. The soft-washed image then recedes before the mind trying to grasp it, leaving only its moving aura behind. The aura is the essence of the piece."

### III. FIVE CHORAL CONTEMPORARIES

*Sound is all our dreams of music. Noise is music's dreams of us.*  
(Feldman, 1958)

Track 2–4: **Will Ogdon's *Three Statements*** (1956, No. 1 revised 1978) witness to his background as a former student of Ernst Krenek in Saint Paul, MN, and René Leibowitz in Paris in the early 1950s. Ogdon subsequently became, in 1966, the founding figure of the celebrated music department at UC San Diego. With his colleague Robert Erickson he created a progressive environment of openness and experiment, drawing in among others Pauline Oliveros, Kenneth Gaburo, Roger

Reynolds and Keith Humble, while continuing his own considerable output of finely-spun 12-tone compositions.

The title "Statements" gives pause for thought. More than just sung poetry for choir, the music makes a kind of composite utterance from a triangle of aspects: *choral writing* and *poetic word* engaging each other through *12-tone organization*. Combining these elements, the composer skillfully achieves a telling of the largest themes in the smallest space, of three two-minute pieces.

In Ogdon's original approach, the pieces each use slightly different 12-tone rows, but are linked in an overriding tonal design. For each piece the two six-note halves of the row give rise to contending harmonies and choral formations. By means of these, the music audibly "states" both the flight of the soul from the corporeal (in the two framing Whitman poems), and the unending separation from the longed-for other (in the central verse by the Jacobean poet Thomas Campion).

**No. 1**—"The Last Invocation": the "wafting" from this world to another is heard in the tonal confrontations of the two halves of the 12-tone row—the first six-note group an E-flat major-minor collection of tones, the second its polar opposite, the A major-minor collection. The opening soprano melody states this whole path across the 12 notes of a single melody ("At the last, tenderly, let me be wafted"), while the remainder of the choir passes beyond intoned utterance itself, into the noise of whisper. In a short space, the whole choir takes up these materials, before the return to solo soprano, in a still undeparted state of E-flat tonality—"be not impatient."

**No. 2**—"Madrigal": the 12-tone row re-assembles in a subtle way to form outright worlds of E-flat major and A-major in its two halves. This diatonic 12-tone arrange-



ment was taken up several decades later by Donald Martino for the richly tonal fabric of his choral *Pious Pieces*. Here Ogdon uses it in an opposite way, towards irreconcilable division—the two halves of the choir SA and TB each trapped in inverted canon in their remote tonalities as the “sigh for him who hears me not.” Consonant horizontal planes and their dissonant vertical connections speak directly to the listener’s ear of a situation that the words can only point to.

**No. 3**—“A Clear Midnight”: a wondrous metamorphosis to another tone-row here. E-flat remains a common point of the first six notes, now as the sixth tone of a G-minor scale collection; the remaining row-half generates a more richly ambiguous harmonic field, for the soul’s ineffable destination. The choir now speaks with one harmonic voice, alternating between the two domains as the poem promises transition “away from art, the day erased, the lesson done.” The soul is sung “fully forth emerging” in the second row-domain, returning to E-flat plainness with “silent, gazing, pondering,” before the final synthesis with “night, sleep, and the stars.”

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Track 6: *Sound Patterns* (1961) of **Pauline Oliveros** was the first work to gain her international recognition, with the Gaudeamus International Composers Award in the Netherlands in 1962. The nod to an American choral piece seems significant at a time when the European avant-garde was in the process of rediscovering the choir as a contemporary medium, on a par with electronics or new extended forms of instrumental writing. Discussion and interpretation of this newly-emerging medium of collective-vocal expression also broached philosophi-

cal and theological fields, for example in the writings of the German composer Dieter Schnebel.

At its heart, the new choral writing was a movement away from the centuries-old coherences of madrigal and chorale. In this environment, the Oliveros choral piece is every bit as individual as were her electronic projects of the time. From their beginnings in breath and noise, the “patterns” of her piece grow out of her own approach to the multiple voices, laid out by her particular notation. Sounds are less unfolded as phrases than “released” into their environment. Constant changes of tempo and meter are not heard as changes of speed, let alone as evolving lines of four-part writing, but more like changing densities of air, within which gasps and whispers, quasi-tape-spliced articulations, and outbreaks of rediscovered singing, have their life of contending energies.

Track 7: **Warren Burt’s *Elegy*** (2013), composed for the Astra Choir, shares with Feldman a straightforward chorale-like approach to the medium, forming a continuum of four-voice chords *a cappella*. It diverges in two significant ways, however: the more traditional tonal nature of the sonorities at play (their familiarity), and the more contemporary manner of their generation and processing (unfamiliarity). Firmly located in the Cowell-Cage tradition of experiment and research, Burt was educated on both coasts of the United States, in Albany, NY, and at UC San Diego, where he encountered the two other composers mentioned above. He also worked with John Cage on the *HPSCHD* project. Since 1975 he has lived mostly in Australia, becoming a seminal figure as composer, teacher and organizer, while maintaining a wide international presence with projects of research and composition, particularly in electro-acoustic and micro-tonal music.

The making of *Elegy* reflects this background, being the product of the “Seventh Chord Generator,” one of a series of modules developed around 2010 by John Dunn, with Burt’s assistance, to generate harmony and pitch collections for the programs MusicWonk and ArtWonk. In traditional tonality, 7th chords are the primary agency for movement, tensions, decorations, transitions to new colors and keys. Their choices and successions thus take on powerful new connotations when directed by new compositional forces. The Dunn/Burt module can generate eight different types of 7th chords on any specified note and in any of the chord’s four inversions. How the composition process extends from there is best described in the composer’s own account. It also explains something of the piece’s progression through differing zones of sound: “For *Elegy*, I used four chaotic equation generating modules that I had designed. Each one produced its results using the ‘tENT aTTRACTOR,’ one of the simplest of chaotic equations. The nice thing about the tENT aTTRACTOR is that although it is wildly unpredictable, it also can swoop into doing repeating or very similar patterns from time to time ... As a result, the piece does indeed hover between traditional tonal sense, and a kind of non-directional non-tonal structure, but one made up of only semi-randomly chosen 7th chords.”

More than one kind of musical experience is at play in this elegy’s passing chorale, between “nature and nurture.” Seventh chords have their own tendency to seek companions. Here they find some unlikely ones, and their successions open up a freedom for conductor and singers, for spontaneous phrasing and voicings in each performance. *Elegy*’s broader envelope might be perceived in three stages: initial chorale, mid-piece harmonic “badlands” (with 7ths and octaves creating uneasy alternations between top and bottom voices), and return to a more serene reverie.

Yet these do not amount to an enclosed rhetorical shape, but something more like a slice of eternity.

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Track 9–11: **Earle Brown’s *Small Pieces for Large Chorus*** (1969) contribute some special interest to this gallery, both as an exception among his better-known instrumental works, and as a contrast with Morton Feldman in the conception of the choir. Brown was the colleague of the New York School directly of Feldman’s own age (the fourth member, Christian Wolff, being eight years younger), and likewise drew compositional method from the visual domain, particularly the sculptural mobiles of Alexander Calder and the action painting of Jackson Pollock. In his elegant graphic scores he developed the notion of “available forms”—techniques of open-form playing and conducting that unleash variable orderings of sonic materials fixed on the page. Spontaneity of choices in performance becomes analogous to the shifting components of a mobile sculpture. Brown indeed took one step beyond Feldman into the visual domain, with his 1966 *Calder Piece*. Four percussionists perform in stations around a specially-made rotating Calder mobile, titled “Chef d’orchestre,” which functions both as conductor and intermittent instrument, with the players stepping forward to play on it in motion.

A New Englander who (like Feldman) first met John Cage in his mid-twenties, in 1951, Brown was educated in mathematics and engineering, as well as steeped in what he called “the 20th-century poetic vocabulary” across the arts. Alongside the visual artists, he acknowledged James Joyce for his “thinking about time and structure and multiplicity,” the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, and the writings of Gertrude Stein. Yet it is no paradox when he states in the score’s Introduction that

“the *Small Pieces for Large Chorus* seem to confirm that I am a ‘sound’ rather than a ‘literary’ composer.” The choral medium itself here becomes his architectural material, shaped into three distinct living designs of collective voices. Vowels, phonetic fragments, and vocal noises comprise the “texts” of the two outer pieces, with pitch notated in graphic terms. Only the central piece stipulates precise notes in chords, presented as physical surfaces rather than agents of harmonic progression.

**Piece I:** a phonetic poem in four voices, written as line-drawings of sliding pitches and changing vowels. First, a monophony of *glissando* lines embraces the choir’s entire range in a succession of contours. The four voice-parts then disperse to a polyphony of gestures—the other archetype of vocal cooperation which succeeded chant in Western music.

**Piece II:** treats the choir as a kind of concrete sonic entity, with two alternating blocks made of two symmetrical 8-note chords. The first of these enters forcefully with an almost garish hue, due to its four distinct vowels from soprano to bass. It persists beyond the comfortable norm, as a static surface for 30 seconds, yet one that recedes from the listener—a “mobile” sculpture indeed. The second chord has six notes in common with its companion, rearranged in their symmetry. Like two viewings, the harmonic blocks interrupt each other’s continuity, break apart into sub-symmetries, finishing up as five shards of sound whose ordering is chosen by the conductor, a kind of detritus of sonic blocks left in the space.

**Piece III:** overtly an open-form mobile for the four SATB-sections, each divided into three to give twelve lines of score. The material is notated graphically in five frames, containing five distinct types of collective expression—from *glissando*

melodies and held sonorities to shouts, unvoiced throats/mouths/lips and whistling wind. These five modules are combined and juxtaposed freely at the conductor’s choice, with twenty possible combinations among the SATB. The piece invites realizations with a variety of spatial perspectives in the disposition of singers. Multiple conductors can even emerge from the choir to signal new entries for their sub-group. The work is dedicated to the conductor and writer Richard Franko Goldman.

Track 12: **Robert Carl, *The City*** (1983) stands here as a brief choral tone-poem in its own right, but originated as a setting for six solo voices within three *Sullivan Songs*, written for William Chin and the 12-voice Oriana Singers in Chicago. The words of Louis Sullivan, the early-century Chicago architect and mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright, have a visionary quality, adapted by the composer for three differing vocal-spatial designs in response to the architect’s reflections on the natural environment and human dwelling. Following a re-write of the third song in 1993 (for Neely Bruce and American Voices), the cycle was taken up and revised as a work for full choir by the Astra Choir in 2015, leading to its first complete performance in Melbourne that year.

Long based in Connecticut, where he chairs the composition program in the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford, Carl embodies a post-Ivesian New England tradition of multi-layer soundscapes in the outer movements of *Sullivan Songs*—No.1, “The Lake” (“... a wonderful body of water, changeable as the days”), and No.3, “The Law” (“It is the Law: be it sweeping eagle or blithe swan... Form follows function”).

The broader context helps to explain the focused, statuesque quality of this second chorale-like piece, *The City*. Here the sonic suggestion is less of a living environment than of a static street scene, a frieze of humans frozen in time—giving ample space for the text’s meditative dimension. These musical qualities grow out of the very sounds of the words, as adapted by the composer. The two syllables of the focal “ci-ty”—already near-assonant in themselves—are echoed in chains of assonances across the six phrases—starting with “is . . . screen,” and culminating in “Big (Ci-ty) dream.”

The melody of this chorale, in a C-minor tonality, eschews the tonal norms of advance and arrival, creating something closer to an “assonance” in musical terms. In the first four segments of text, a veiled urban jazz harmony is suggested below. The remaining two phrases slide apart into overlaid repetitions, the choir in Cubist-like planes rather than counterpoint as such—in Sullivan’s words: “but a screen.”

• • • • •

Robert Carl’s image of a motionless crowd reminds us of something central to the medium of choir itself: its capacity, above those of instruments, to suggest and explore modes of human collective expression and organization. Part of this direct human quality is contained in the very fragility of choral performance, as it engages with the written visual demands of pitches, harmonies, rhythms, ensemble—the majority of the world’s choirs being made of non-professional singers. In an era when choral recordings often seem to elevate above all else homogeneity of sound and fluency of ductus, the variety of discourse in human sound and noise of the composers gathered in this recording might bring music closer to the non-homogeneity

of the real world. As Robert Storr has written of Morton Feldman’s closest artist friend, Philip Guston: “. . . his work breathes—and sometimes gasps or wheezes—lived experience.”

—John McCaughey

• • • • •

Will Ogdon  
*Three Statements* (1956)

1. “The Last Invocation”

At the last, tenderly,  
From the walls of the powerful, fortress’d house,  
From the clasp of the knitted locks—from the keep of the well-closed doors,  
Let me be wafted.

Let me glide noiselessly forth;  
With the key of silence unlock the doors—with a whisper,  
Set ope the doors, O Soul!  
Tenderly! be not impatient!  
(Strong is your hold, O mortal flesh!  
Strong is your hold, O love.)

—Walt Whitman (1870)

2. “Madrigal”

Oft have I sighed for him who hears me not;  
Who absent hath both love and me forgot.  
O yet I languish still through his delay:  
Days seem as years when wished friends break their day.

—Thomas Campion (1610)

3. “A Clear Midnight”

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,  
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,  
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best.  
Night, sleep, and the stars.

—Walt Whitman (1881)

Robert Carl

“The City” from *Sullivan Songs* (1983-93)

The City is but a screen, and behind that screen are the people who suffer it to be.  
It is their image. The Big City Dreams.

—Louis Sullivan, adapted from *Kindergarten Chats* (1918)

Morton Feldman

*The Swallows of Salangan* (1960)

[“I loved the living essence of historical symbolism, or, putting it another way, that instinct with the help of which we, like Salangan swallows, built the world—an enormous nest, put together from the earth and sky, life and death, and two times, the ready to hand and the defaulting. I understood that it was prevented from crumbling by the strength of its links, consisting in the transparent figurativeness of all its parts.”]

—Boris Pasternak, *Safe Conduct* (1931)

By Boris Pasternak, from *Safe Conduct*, copyright ©1949, 1958 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

The Astra Chamber Music Society in Melbourne is a contemporary music organization with the 35-voice **Astra Choir** as its core group. Astra began in 1951, as a string orchestra of women musicians under Asta Flack, a violinist and conductor who had migrated to Australia from Lithuania. Under the directorship of George Logie-Smith (1958–77) the Astra Choir was founded and the playing group extended to a professional chamber orchestra. Over those two decades, the choral-orchestral concerts became a lively influence in Australian music, with repertoire ranging from Bach and Stravinsky to new commissioned works from Australia.

Since John McCaughey succeeded as Musical Director in 1978, the choir has been the main focus of concerts, joined by leading contemporary instrumental performers in a wide range of solo and ensemble music. Each Astra concert is designed as an event that engages the audience with juxtapositions of new and unusual works, drawn from all musical periods. A variety of architectural spaces are drawn into the experience, and the choral-instrumental context is further enriched by other artistic forms, including electro-acoustic music, text-performance, theatre, dance, and film. Astra also publishes scores of Australian composers.

Astra's previous production for New World Records, the double-CD *Johanna Beyer: Sticky Melodies* (2008), demonstrated the group's variety of research and concert activity, assembling a portrait of the forgotten German-American figure through many forms of chamber music alongside her choral compositions. That project was enabled by the collaboration with the American composer-scholar Larry Polansky. Close cooperations and interactions with composers in other countries are a vital aspect of Astra's continuing work. The Astra Choir has performed world premieres of works from Italy, Romania, Germany, the UK, and the USA, in addi-

tion to much new Australian music. In 2012 it gave concerts in Venice, Treviso, Camino/Friuli, and Bucharest.

**John McCaughey** has been Musical Director of Melbourne's Astra concerts since 1978, with some periods when other conductors took over the role. He graduated in German Literature and Music from the University of Melbourne, followed by studies at the multi-art Folkwang School in Essen, Germany—composition with Wolfgang Hufschmidt, organ with Gerd Zacher, and working in the nascent electronic music institute (ICEM), then being created by Dirk Reith.

He became a faculty member in the former Department of Music at La Trobe University, a significant center for contemporary composition and music technology in Australia for the period of the department's life, over the last quarter of the 20th century. He has also taught at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, and the University of Melbourne. Numerous contemporary works from Australia and other countries have been commissioned and premiered under his direction, crossing boundaries between choral performance and other genres and media. His own compositions have appeared on the Move label (Australia) and Cybele (Germany). He is also active as a translator of German and Romanian music texts.



## THE ASTRA CHOIR

### **soprano**

Kelsey Cotton, Irene McGinnigle, Susannah Polya,  
Catrina Seiffert, Michelle Surowiec, Kim Tan, Leonie Thomson

### **mezzo soprano**

Jenny Barnes, Orlanda Bryars, Louisa Billeter,  
Jean Evans, Maree Macmillan, Susannah Provan, Kate Sadler

### **alto 1**

Gloria Gamboz, Anna Gifford, Glenda Lasslett,  
Katie Richardson, Florence Thomson, Dorothy Williams

### **alto 2**

Beverley Bencina, Jane Cousens, Joy Lee, Joan Pollock,  
Shelley McCuaig, Aline Scott-Maxwell

### **tenor**

Matt Brown, Tim Drylie, Stephen Creese, Simon Johnson,  
Matthew Lorenzon, Ben Owen, Phillip Villani, Richard Webb

### **baritone**

Greg Deakin, Peter Dumsday, Lucien Fischer,  
Daniel House, Robert Franzke, Nicholas Tolhurst

### **bass**

Steven Hodgson, Tim Matthews-Staindl, Chris Smith,  
John Terrell, David Watson, Stephen Whately, John Mark Williams

### **accompanist**

Kim Bastin

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### Earle Brown

*Centering: The Music of Earle Brown.* Newport Classic NPT 85631.  
*Folio and Four Systems.* Tzadik TZ 8028.  
*Selected Works 1952–1965.* New World Records 80650-2.  
*Synergy.* hat ART 6177.  
*Tracer.* Mode 179. (CD/DVD)

### Warren Burt

*39 Dissonant Etudes.* Tall Poppies TP 093.  
*The Animation of Lists and the Archytan Transpositions.* XI Records XI 130. (2 CDs)  
*Harmonic Colour Fields.* Pogus P21028-2.  
*Poems of Rewi Alley.* Sonic Gallery SG 0601.

### Robert Carl

*From Japan.* New World Records 80732-2.  
*The Geography of Loss.* New World Records 80780-2.  
*Music for Strings.* New World Records 80645-2.  
*Roundabout.* Innova Records 596.  
*Shake the Tree.* Innova Records 857.

### Morton Feldman

*Coptic Light.* Argo 448513-2.  
*Crippled Symmetry.* Bridge Records 9092 A/B.  
*For Christian Wolff.* Bridge Records 9279 A/C.

*For Philip Guston.* Bridge Records 9078 A/D.  
*For Stefan Wolpe.* New World Records 80550-2.  
*Piano and String Quartet.* Nonesuch 79320-2.  
*Rothko Chapel.* New Albion NA 039.  
String Quartet No. 2. Mode 112. (5 CDs/1DVD)  
*Triadic Memories.* Mode 136. (2 CDs/1 DVD)  
*The Viola in My Life.* New World Records 80657-2.

### Will Ogdon

*The Music of Will Ogdon.* New World Records/CRI NWCR 763.

### Pauline Oliveros

*Alien Bog/Beautiful Soop.* Pogus Productions P21012-2.  
*Bye Bye Butterfly.* Included on *New Music For Electronic And Recorded Media: Women In Electronic Music 1977.* New World Records 80653-2.  
*Electronic Works.* Paradigm Discs PD 04.  
*Reverberations: Tape and Electronic Music 1961–1970.* Important Records IMPREC352 (12 CDs).

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<http://www.cnvill.net/mfashton.htm>  
Feldman, Morton. *Give My Regards to Eighth Street. Collected Writings of Morton Feldman.* Edited and with an introduction by B.H. Friedman. Cambridge MA: Exact Change, 2000.  
Johnson, Steven, ed. *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts.* New York: Routledge, 2002. See especially:

—David Nicholls, “Getting Rid of the Glue. The Music of the New York School.”  
—Jonathan Bernard, “Feldman’s Painters.”

#### RECORDING DATES, PERFORMERS, AND PRODUCTION PERSONNEL

Morton Feldman, *Chorus and Instruments*

April 26, 2017, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne

Aaron Barnden, violin

Alister Barker, cello

Nicholas Synot, double bass

Robert Shirley, horn

Jason Catchpole, tuba

Timothy Phillips, antique cymbals, chimes, vibraphone, timpani, bass drum

Kim Bastin, celeste, piano

The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey

Published by C.F. Peters Corporation.

Will Ogdon, *Three Statements*

September 11, 2016, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne

The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey

Published by APNM.

Morton Feldman, *Voices and Instruments 2*

May 27, 2016, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne

Catrina Seiffert, Jenny Barnes, Louisa Billeter, solo voices

Greg Lee, flute, piccolo

Chien Hsui Ong, Alister Barker, cellos

Nicholas Synot, double bass

John McCaughey, conductor

Published by Universal Edition AG, Vienna.

Pauline Oliveros, *Sound Patterns*

March 6, 2016, Good Shepherd Chapel, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne

The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey

Published by Schott Music.

Warren Burt, *Elegy*

September 11, 2016, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne

The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey

Published by the composer.

Morton Feldman, *Voices and Instruments 1*

May 29, 2016, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne

Greg Lee, Tamara Kohler, flutes

Michael Pisani, cor anglais

Craig Hill, clarinet

Elise Millman, bassoon

Geoff Lierse, horn

Nicholas Synot, double bass

Timothy Phillips, timpani

Kim Bastin, piano

The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey

Published by Universal Edition AG, Vienna.

Earle Brown, *Small Pieces for Large Chorus*  
May 29, 2016 and April 9, 2017, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne  
The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey  
Published by C.F. Peters Corporation.

Robert Carl, *The City* from *Sullivan Songs*  
September 11, 2016, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne  
The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey  
Published by American Composers Alliance (ACA; composers.com).

Morton Feldman, *The Swallows of Salangan*  
Recorded in concert November 29, 2015, Carmelite Church, Middle Park, Melbourne  
Mardi McCullea, Tamara Kohler, Greg Lee, Kim Tan, flutes  
Laila Engle, alto flute  
Tristram Williams, Sarah Henderson, Allison Wright, Nirán Dasika,  
Lauren McAlister, trumpets  
Jason Catchpole, Jonathan Woods, tubas  
Josephine Vains, Zoe Wallace, Alister Barker, Chien Hsui Ong, Paul Ghica,  
Campbell Banks, Paul Zabrowarny, cellos  
Timothy Phillips, Dan Richardson, vibraphones  
Peter Dumsday, Joy Lee, pianos  
The Astra Choir conducted by John McCaughey  
Published by C.F. Peters Corporation.

Producer: John McCaughey  
Engineer & Digital mastering: Michael Hewes  
Technical assistance: Steve Adam  
Administrator: Gabrielle Baker  
Concert manager: Margaret Lloyd  
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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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