

80816-2 [2 CDs]

JOHN J. BECKER

(1886–1961)

SOUNDPIECES 1-7

DISC 1

[TT: 57:04]

1. *Soundpiece No. 1* (1932) 8:54

FLUX Quartet: Tom Chiu, Conrad Harris,
violins; Max Mandel, viola; Felix Fan, cello;
with Joseph Kubera, piano

2. *Soundpiece No. 2* (1936)

16:35

FLUX Quartet

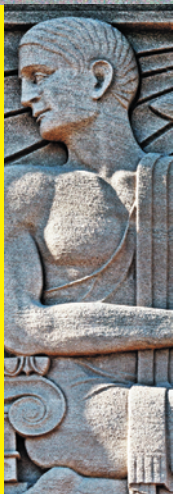
Soundpiece No. 4 (1937) 31:24

3. I. Slowly; Moderato 14:38

4. II. Introduction—Slowly;
Very slow and expressive 7:33

5. III. Scherzo 9:13

FLUX Quartet



DISC 2

[TT: 46:04]

1. *Soundpiece No. 3* (1936) 14:55

Conrad Harris, violin;
Joseph Kubera, piano

2. *Soundpiece No. 5* (1937) 14:21

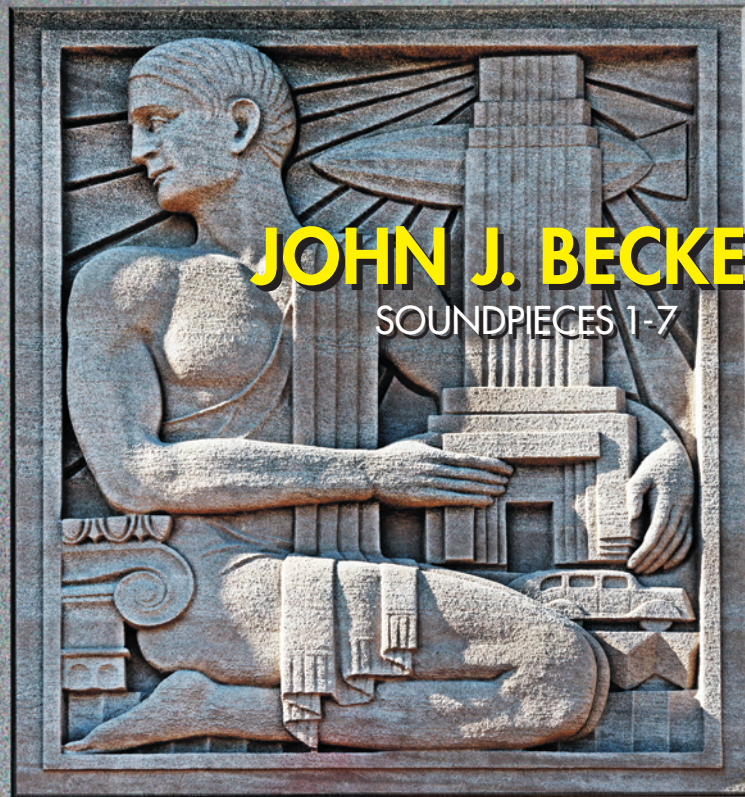
Joseph Kubera, piano

3. *Soundpiece No. 6* (1942) 12:17

Margaret Lancaster, flute;
Vasko Dukovski, clarinet

4. *Soundpiece No. 7* (1949) 4:14

Joseph Kubera, Adam Tendler, pianos



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JOHN BECKER: SOUNDPIECES

In 1982, the New Music America festival honored John Cage as its special guest composer. Cage made one request: that the festival, which was being held in Chicago, include a performance of a piece by **John J. Becker** (1886–1961). The question today is still what it was then: Who was this obscure composer named Becker, that the famous John Cage felt it was important to honor him?

As little known as Becker is today, he had some famous friends. He is the least known of a group of composers who, by reputation, became known as “the American Five,” analogous to the better-known “Russian Five” or “French Six.” Becker’s cohorts consisted of Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, Wallingford Riegger, and Charles Ives. Becker was the only one who lived and worked in the Midwest, thus Cage’s feeling that a tribute in a Chicago festival was appropriate and overdue. Ives, born 1874, was the oldest of the group and Cowell, born 1897, was the youngest, and in the 1920s and ’30s they were known as the most radical and dissonant of American composers. They and several others became known as the “ultramodernists,” at a time when Mahler and Strauss were still described as “modern.” In 1962, a (very good and sadly neglected) composer named John Downey grouped the five together, and the name stuck somewhat, due also to the advocacy of Becker’s biographer Don Gillespie. And during his life, Becker himself commonly referred to these five as “the Ives group,” or, more simply, “our crowd.”¹

Becker could be briefly summarized as a confluence of dissonance and Catholicism. Born in Henderson, Kentucky, he attended the Cincinnati Conservatory and received a doctorate in composition from the Wisconsin Conservatory in 1923, by which time he had already taught piano and theory at the Kidd-Key Conservatory in Sherman, Texas, for several years. His most famous teacher, with whom he remained close, was Wilhelm Middelschulte (1863–1943), an organist/composer who taught many composers in the Chicago area; his contrapuntal expertise was so

celebrated that Ferruccio Busoni wrote a 1912 article about him and his colleague Bernhard Ziehn called “The Gothics of Chicago.”

Becker was a devout Catholic throughout his life. I knew his widow Evelyn Becker in Evanston, Illinois, and she once told me how scandalized she was that Wallingford Riegger, who was a communist, would write Becker letters beginning “Dear Comrade”: “But we were good Catholics!”, she exclaimed. Accordingly, Becker spent his long teaching career mostly at Catholic schools, including the University of Notre Dame (1917–1927), the College of St Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota (1929–33) and Barat College, Lake Forest, Illinois (1943–57). The combination of Catholic musical influences and Middelschulte’s tutelage were responsible for a strong emphasis on counterpoint in Becker’s music. He became known as one of the leading proponents of a style invented by musicologist/composer Charles Seeger (1886–1979), who had been one of Cowell’s mentors, known as *dissonant counterpoint*, an idiom in which the traditional rules of counterpoint were reversed to produce maximum dissonance rather than consonance.

Nevertheless, Becker’s early music was couched in a conservative idiom drawn from German Romanticism and French Impressionism, and in the 1910s he specialized in art songs. Interestingly, Becker seems to have become a staunch, sometimes bellicose advocate for modernism in music even *before* his own conversion to an advanced musical style. While teaching at Notre Dame he continued to study with Middelschulte, who broadened his understanding of counterpoint and also encouraged him to write songs on texts by more modern poets. After Becker had a piano piece called *Chinese Miniatures* published, the *South Bend News-Times* invited him to write a weekly column on musical topics, which he did in 1927–28. In the very first article he went on the attack in the kind of audience-blaming diatribe so familiar in early modernist musical polemics:

To [the] majority the modern composer is anathema. It does not understand him and consequently wishes to devour him. He refuses to accept the tenets which are placed before him by theorists as the unchangeable laws of musical composition,

¹ Nearly all the information here can be found in Don Gillespie’s magnificently exhaustive 1977 dissertation “John Becker: Midwestern Musical Crusader,” the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University Microfilms International. The “Ives group” and “our crowd” quotations are found on page viii.

laws that have changed and will always change, and immediately he is called insane. He refuses to tickle the ears of the musical majority with simple, sickly, and sentimental music, and it says that he is not writing music but noise.²

One could almost forget that at this point Becker himself had written no very controversial music yet (nor did he have any teachers who could be thus defended), and that not many years had passed since he had written simple and sentimental songs himself. The rhetoric preceded the achievement.

One composer Becker praised in his weekly column was Henry Cowell, a decade younger but far more experienced in musical avant-gardeness, having been a child prodigy. In the 1910s Cowell was already performing piano works using tone clusters played with the fist or forearm, and in 1927 he founded a quarterly called *New Music* in order to publish scores by the ultramodern school. On October 16, 1927, Becker published a glowing article about it titled “New Musical Magazine Aids Modern Movement.” The scores Cowell chose received few positive reviews in those days; Cowell noticed, and visited Becker in Columbus, Ohio, in spring of 1928. Cowell encouraged Becker to turn toward a more adventurous path, suggesting that he might be more at home writing instrumental pieces than the art songs he was still turning out. In 1928–29 Becker wrote his first fully modernist work, his *Symphonia Brevis* (Symphony No. 3). It remains today his best-known work, and probably justly so.

In his own writings about Becker, Cowell emphasized his ties to Renaissance church polyphony, calling him “a Sixteenth-Century modern.” For a promotional pamphlet Becker produced, Cowell wrote that Becker “bases his style on the art of the great vocal polyphonists, de Lassus, Palestrina, Victoria, etc. Using their breadth and religious feeling, he has poured his own modern materials into the old polyphonic forms.”³ In the *Symphonia Brevis* this is true primarily of the second of the two movements, which opens with stately half-steps leaping dissonantly in

5/2 meter, and moves to dissonant counterpoint moving at several speeds at once. The briefer first movement, marked “A Scherzo in the spirit of Mockery,” is in Becker’s acerbically satirical vein, with pounding dissonances in square rhythms. A slow middle section bears the indication, “Very slow and with marked cynicism.”

Elsewhere, Becker can fall into a kind of modernist simulacrum of Classical-era style, in conventional four-part textures differentiated by the harshness of dissonant intervals between moving lines. Accordingly, his *Soundpiece No. 2* on this recording is subtitled “Homage to Haydn,” and his Fifth Symphony “Homage to Mozart.” He picked up Cowell’s passion for tone clusters, often pitting black keys on the piano against white (in common with some other early moderns like Stravinsky and Ornstein), and he made a notational fetish of large sharps and flats that were intended to apply to an entire chord. In his music, he said, there *was* no dissonance, because “dissonance replaced consonance as the norm.”⁴

Along with Riegger, Becker’s other intense connection was with the reclusive Ives, initiated in 1931. No fewer than 118 letters survive from Becker to Ives, and another 85 from Ives to Becker (many in his wife Harmony Ives’s hand, due to Ives’s health problems brought on by his diabetes). Ives appreciated Becker’s religiosity and social conservatism, which set the two apart from much of the musical community, and helped him financially.⁵ Their most fruitful collaboration was Becker’s orchestration of what has largely been considered Ives’s greatest song, “General William Booth Enters into Heaven,” based on a Vachel Lindsay poem; the orchestral version has been performed frequently. For his part, the wealthy Ives, former CEO of an insurance agency, funded Cowell’s 1938 publication of Becker’s *Soundpiece No. 5*, and fought hard for publication of Becker’s other works.

The concert that gave birth to the American Five meme was one that Becker arranged and conducted on May 25, 1933, at the Nicollet Hotel, Minneapolis, with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, which he had played a role in founding. The program, the first to bring these five composers together, consisted of:

² John Becker, “Modernistic Musicians Always Misunderstood,” *South Bend News-Times*, May 1, 1927.

³ “Activities of John J. Becker,” p. 19.

⁴ Gillespie, p. 80.

⁵ Stephen Budiansky, *Mad Music: Charles Ives, the Nostalgic Rebel*, pp. 230–231

Cowell: *Polyphonica*

Ives: "In the Night" from the *Set for Theater Orchestra*

Riegger: Scherzo for Orchestra

Ruggles: "Lilacs" from *Men and Mountains*

Becker: Concerto Arabesque

Gillespie notes that Becker's most fruitful years as a composer and "Midwestern musical crusader" were 1929 to 1936. Despite attempts to expand his profile on the New York scene starting in 1932, he was hampered by the truculence of his opinions, as well as by a not entirely inaccurate charge that he often used dissonance for dissonance's sake. Like the other American Fivers, he was allied with the Pan American Association, which stood for radical and homegrown American techniques; the Pan Americans were in some competition with the League of Composers, which was seen as more open to European works and particularly Stravinsky. During the Depression the Pan American Association declined as the League of Composers rose, partly because the Marxist politics of the Left in that era demanded music more accessible to the working class. Becker's artistic sympathies, however Catholic, were not democratic. As he once wrote,

[Although] we may talk about the democracy of Art all we please—from now to the end of time, there will be only the few finer spirits who think, and the herd does not, will not, could not think if it wished to, only the finer spirits who will understand the beauty of Art .⁶

This put him out of fashion. During this period some unyielding composers of thorny modernism (Arthur Berger, Ruth Crawford, Dane Rudhyar) quit composing altogether, if only temporarily. Becker didn't, but he grew embittered as he received fewer and fewer performances.

Thus the last quarter-century of Becker's life is quickly summed up. He became the Minnesota state director of the Works Progress Administration from 1935

⁶ Gillespie, p. 128.

to 1941, a job that siphoned his energies into music for entertainment's sake, and in which context he felt it inappropriate to advocate for his own music. He moved to Illinois in 1943 to teach at Barat College for fourteen years, and the twelve-tone music that became dominant after World War II was an idiom for which he felt no sympathy. He fell into ill health, and died with several operas, symphonies, and large multimedia works unperformed.

Along with the *Symphonia Brevis*, the Concerto Arabesque, and a motoric percussion ensemble piece called *The Abongo* (which the percussion-loving Cage expressed admiration for), Becker's seven chamber works abstractly called *Soundpieces* have proved the most public part of his output. This is the first recording to bring them altogether, and indeed the first commercial recording of several of them. They can be listed, with variants, as follows:

Soundpiece No. 1 for string quartet and piano (1932)

Soundpiece No. 2 for string quartet, "Homage to Haydn" or String Quartet No. 1 (1936)

Soundpiece No. 3 for violin and piano (1936)

Soundpiece No. 4 for string quartet, or String Quartet No. 2 (1937)

Soundpiece No. 5 for piano (1937)

Soundpiece No. 6 for flute and clarinet (1942)

Soundpiece No. 7 for two pianos (1949)

In addition, there is an arrangement of *Soundpiece No. 1* for string orchestra and piano, called *Soundpiece No. 1B*; likewise, a *Soundpiece No. 2B* in string orchestra arrangement; and an unfinished *Soundpiece No. 8* for string quartet. One might imagine that Becker took the non-traditional term "Soundpiece" as a way of disarming listener expectations and giving free rein to his formal imagination. Actually, the pieces mostly follow a segmented form similar to an all-movements-in-one sonata, with clearly defined slow introductions, allegros, scherzos, slow movements, fugues, and so on.

The *Soundpiece No. 1* for string quartet is a cornucopia of dissonant counterpoint, much of it canonic (meaning that a melody in one instrument is

quickly repeated in another at a different pitch level, usually an octave). The first theme, introduced by the violin and then taken up by the cello, is characterized by energetic leaps of major and minor sevenths; the second (at 0:41 in the first violin) is equally atonal, but uses smaller steps. The piano is often used for punctuation and interjection, but a calmer middle section (1:59–2:42) shows off Becker's tendency of repeated chords with one hand on all white keys and the other on all black. At the end about the first third of the piece is repeated, followed by a brief, chordal coda.

Though technically speaking just as dissonant, *Soundpiece No. 2* lives up to its subtitle, "Homage to Haydn," with its transparency of texture and clear echoing of motives from instrument to instrument. The piece is divided as follows: slow introduction; allegro with development; slow movement; fugue; reprise of the second half of the slow movement; repetition of the introduction and opening allegro. The languid slow movement (at 4:00) is one of Becker's most poetic, with the instruments alternating in pairs, while the following fugue opens with a deceptively tonal-sounding subject before wandering into other keys.

Soundpiece No. 3, for violin and piano, starts relentlessly and mechanically, with piano arpeggios dotted by clusters, and with a squareness of rhythm that marks Becker's sardonic mockery vein. Many of the lines climb to an ironic do-re-mi motive. Note the opening piano bass line, which is central to the piece. In a quieter middle section (at 2:23) it is taken, with some variation, into the violin, as the pianist plays triplets with black keys in one hand and white keys in the other. At 9:01 its contour becomes the basis for a delicate three-voice fugue, after which the first half of the score is again repeated.

The Second String Quartet, *Soundpiece No. 4*, is the most ambitious piece here: No wonder it was the one that Cage (and Becker's widow) wanted played in Chicago. A slow, chromatic introduction leads to a marchlike theme accompanied with repeated notes and alternating with a prominent four-note motive F–D–A–A♭. This and related material make up the A sections of an ABA form, the B passage made up of wild sixteenth-note counterpoint in all four instruments, punctuated and interrupted by dramatic quadruple stops. The second, slower movement weaves

expressive atonal lines over a kind of Alberti bass accompaniment, and in the middle (at 2:31) there is a long quotation of a slow passage from the first movement. The third movement introduces a disconcerting rhythmic motive in harsh chords, a 5/8 meter interrupted by sixteenth-note flourishes. Here, too, return two large passages from the first movement, and in the middle of the movement is a fugue based on the first movement's F–D–A–A♭ motive. I don't know of another work in which so much material is repeated verbatim from movement to movement.

Becker called *Soundpiece No. 5* "a short sonata for piano," and indeed it is the easiest to break into its constituent parts. There is a slow, mysterious, quasi-canonic introduction based on the motive F♯–B–G. This leads to a torrent of dissonant sextuplets raining down over a bass line starting with that motive. A quiet, though dissonant, chorale serves as slow movement, followed by a section rather needlessly labeled "like a scherzo": Its twittering alternation of notes are turned into clusters by having one hand on the white keys and one on the black. When this ends a fugue starts up on the F♯–B–G–G♯ motive, leading back to a repeat of the introduction and allegro. This da capo reiteration is, in fact, the work's only departure from sonata form. The piece was premiered by no less than the composer Ernst Krenek, in St. Paul on April 13, 1943.

Soundpiece No. 6, for flute and clarinet, is similar in form. The first section plays the two soloists off each other in what seems to be a quite fluid canon, but the imitation between the two voices is less strict than one first assumes. The second section spins a languorous flute melody over an eight-note ostinato in the clarinet. What stands in for a scherzo is a comic series of two-bar phrases in square rhythms and each repeated, with the two winds dissonantly getting in each other's way. A fugue once again follows, and while the fugue theme sounds tonal enough, the fact that the instruments start a major seventh apart provides some spiky bitonality. Much of the first section is reprised, but with a coda ending on an uncharacteristically consonant third.

Finally, *Soundpiece No. 7*, for two pianos, is not so segmented. It is preponderantly a four-part chorale, often with one of the pianist's hands on black keys and the other one white. Behind that chorale are scalar passages running up

and down the white or black keys respectively, or else treble chords made up of half white keys and half black. It seems clear that Becker thought of the dissonant treble chords as harmonics of the middle-register chorale, for, writing about another of his pieces, he said, “The audience does not have to wait for the overtones: I present them on a silver platter.”⁷ With its more concentrated form and experimental texture, *Soundpiece No. 7* seems a conceptual advance over the earlier works and a marker of Becker’s trajectory. The manuscript of a *Soundpiece No. 8* remained on Becker’s piano when he died.

That John Becker will remain the least-celebrated member of the American Five is probably inevitable. Criticisms brought against his music are sometimes difficult to deny: His relentless dissonance lacks variety, his rhythms can be predictably square, his forms unobtrusive. He wrote many large works that haven’t been performed, and will likely not be. But at his best he achieves considerable eloquence in the then-new idiom of dissonant counterpoint, and a textural momentum and energy that seem all his own. Along with the *Symphonia Brevis*, the *Soundpieces* on this disc probably make the best case for him that can be made, and together they paint a picture of a minor yet unique figure in the American modernist panorama.

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann is a composer and the author of seven books on American music, most recently The Arithmetic of Listening: Tuning Theory and History for the Impractical Musician. His compact discs on the New World label include Custer and Sitting Bull and Nude Rolling Down an Escalator.

The **FLUX Quartet** has performed to critical acclaim in venues worldwide, including Tate Modern with BBC Radio3, Park Avenue Armory, Kennedy Center, Mount Tremper Arts, EMPAC, Walker Art Center, LACMA, Carnegie’s Zankel Hall, and international festivals in Australia, Europe, and Asia. The group’s discography includes recordings on Cantaloupe, Innova, New World, and Tzadik, in addition to the full string quartet catalog of Morton Feldman on Mode. Forthcoming is a

⁷ Gillespie, p. 90.

recording of the full string quartet output of the influential Japanese pioneer, Toshi Ichihyanagi. Strongly influenced by the “anything goes” philosophy of Fluxus, violinist Tom Chiu founded FLUX in the late ’90s. The quartet has since cultivated an uncompromising repertoire that combines late 20th-century iconoclasts such as Cage, Ligeti, Nancarrow, Scelsi, and Xenakis, with today’s visionaries, including Oliver Lake, David First, Michael Hersch, George Lewis, Alvin Lucier, Wadada Leo Smith, Julia Wolfe, and many others. FLUX has premiered over 100 compositions and has been awarded grants from the American Composers Forum, the Aaron Copland Fund, the Koussevitzky Foundation, Meet the Composer, New Music USA, and Chamber Music America.

The spirit to expand stylistic boundaries is a trademark of the FLUX Quartet, and to that end the quartet avidly pursues interdisciplinary projects, resulting in adventurous works with choreographers Pam Tanowitz and Christopher Wheeldon, avant balloonist Judy Dunaway, digital collective The OpenEnded Group, and visual artist Matthew Barney.

Clarinetist **Vasko Dukovski** is a New York-based multidisciplinary performing artist and composer. Trained at The Juilliard School, Dukovski has collaborated with many of today’s leading composers, such as John Adams, Iancu Dumitrescu, Georg Friedrich Hass, Helmut Lachenmann, George Lewis, Gunther Schuller, and Kate Soper, among others. Over the past decade, Dukovski has commissioned or inspired a number of new works and premiered more than three hundred new compositions. An avid performer-composer and advocate of contemporary classical and experimental music, Dukovski regularly performs with some of New York’s most respected ensembles, including the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), S.E.M Ensemble, Bang on A Can All Stars, Talea Ensemble, and Wet Ink, among others. In addition to being a front man of his world-music quartet, Tavche Gravche, he is a member of Either/Or, Lost Dog Ensemble, Echappe Ensemble, Unanimity Sound Collective, and MarKovStein Principle.

www.dukovski.com

Violinist **Conrad Harris** has performed at Ostrava Days, Darmstadt Ferienkürse für Neue Musik, Gulbenkian Encounters of New Music, Radio France, Warsaw Autumn, and the NY Sonic Boom Festival. He is a member of the FLUX Quartet and violin duo String Noise, concertmaster/soloist with the S.E.M. Orchestra, Ostravská Banda, STX Ensemble, Wordless Music Orchestra and Ensemble LPR. He has performed and recorded with Elliott Sharp, Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier, David Behrman, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, Jean-Claude Risset, Rohan de Saram, and Tiny Tim. He has also recorded for Asphodel, Vandenburg, CRI, Northern Spy, and Vinyl Retentive Records.

Pianist **Joseph Kubera** has been a leading interpreter of contemporary music for the past four decades. He has been a soloist at major European and U.S. festivals and has worked closely with such composers as John Cage, Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, and Robert Ashley. Among those he has commissioned are Michael Byron, Alvin Lucier, Roscoe Mitchell, and David First. He has made definitive recordings of major Cage works, and toured extensively with the Cunningham Dance Company at Cage’s invitation. A core member of S.E.M. Ensemble, he has been active with many New York groups, from Steve Reich and Musicians to the Brooklyn Philharmonic. He has recorded for Wergo, Albany, New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, O.O. Discs, Mutable Music, Cold Blue, and Opus One. Mr. Kubera has been awarded grants through the National Endowment for the Arts and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. www.josephkubera.com

Margaret Lancaster (flutist/performance artist/actor/dancer) has built a large repertoire of interactive, cross-disciplinary solo works that employ electronics and mixed media. Performance highlights include Lincoln Center Festival, Spoleto Festival USA, Santa Fe New Music, Edinburgh Festival, Tap City, NIME/Copenhagen and the seven-year global run of OBIE-winning *Mabou Mines Dollhouse* (Helene). A member of Either/Or and Ensemble Ipse, she has made guest appearances with Argento, American Modern Ensemble, and the New York Philharmonic. Ongoing projects

include collaborations with Milica Paranosic, FETA Foundation, Stockhausen’s KLANG cycle, and touring Morton Feldman’s five-hour epic, *For Philip Guston*.

www.margaretlancaster.com

A 2019 recipient of the Lincoln Center Award for Emerging Artists, pianist **Adam Tendler** is a recognized interpreter of living and modern composers. A pioneer of DIY culture in classical music, between 2005 and 2006 Tendler performed in all fifty United States as part of a grassroots recital tour he called America 88x50, which became the subject of his memoir, *88x50*, a Kirkus Indie Book of the Month and Lambda Literary Award nominee. A presence in all new music and classical genres as a concert soloist, recording artist, speaker and educator, Tendler has also performed the complete major piano works of Aaron Copland and collaborates with the John Cage Trust and Edition Peters in presenting Cage’s work internationally. In 2019 he released the album *Robert Palmer: Piano Music* on New World Records, and published his second book, *tidepools*.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The Abongo. New World Records 80285.

At Dieppe, Concerto Arabesque, Soundpieces 1 & 5. Koch International Classics 7207.

Vigilante 1938 (A Dance). New World Records 80711.

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Soundpiece No. 4: New Music Edition

Soundpiece No. 5: C.F. Peters Corp.

Soundpiece No. 6: C.F. Peters Corp.

Soundpiece No. 7: manuscript

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File Under: Classical/
Contemporary/ Becker, John J.

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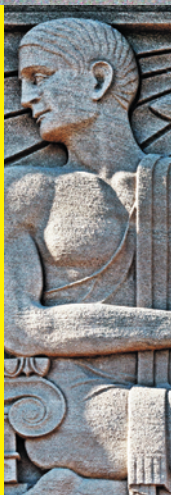
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