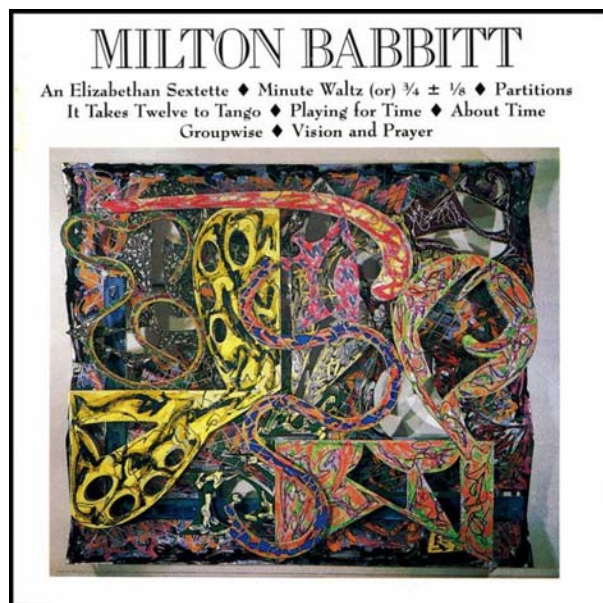


NWCR521

Milton Babbitt

Performed by The Group for Contemporary Music;
Alan Feinberg and Bethany Beardslee



Milton Babbitt

An Elizabethan Sextette (1978–79) (13:25)

1. When I Was Fair And Young..... (3:09)
2. Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind (2:06)
3. Your Face, Your Tongue, Your Wit (2:21)
- 4.

5. Can Doleful Notes To Measured Accents Set (1:17)
6. First Love (3:07)
7. Neapolitan..... (0:46)

Martha Rafferty-Page, Nancy Bergman, Janet Steele, Johanna Arnold, Barbara Martin, Susan Jacquemot; Harvey Sollberger, conductor

Solo Piano works (20:49)

8. *Minute Waltz* (or) $3/4 \pm 1/8$ (1977) (1:01)
 9. *Partitions* (1957)..... (2:14)
 10. *It Takes Twelve To Tango* (1984) (2:28)
 11. *Playing For Time* (1979) (2:27)
 12. *About Time* (1982) (12:20)
- Alan Feinberg, Piano

13. *Groupwise* (1983).....(16:24)
- Benjamin Hudson, violin; Maureen Gallagher, viola; Fred Sherry, violoncello; Aleck Karis, piano; Harvey Sollberger, piccolo, flute, alto flute; Daniel Shulman, conductor

14. *Vision And Prayer* (1961) (14:31)
- Bethany Beardslee, soprano

Total playing time: (65:19)

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Notes

Getting to know **Milton Babbitt's** music is like discovering a new world. For more than forty years Babbitt has been publishing compositions that explore the ramifications of Arnold Schoenberg's epochal insight, and each successive work opens up new vistas or reveals striking new perspectives within the twelve-tone universe. On first encounter, the rigors of twelve-tone composition might seem overwhelmingly restrictive, but Babbitt has used fundamental principles to create a realm in which each work is a fabulous voyage.

Babbitt's compositions are not merely the output of some generational system, the dependable product of some fixed métier. On the contrary, they reflect the constant recombination of a small number of principles, preoccupations, and predilections that may be traced through his entire oeuvre. These "musical genes," which range from technical abstractions to his love affair with the female voice, combine uniquely in each piece, yielding the balance between individuality and communality, local spontaneity and global inevitability, characteristic of each work and his work as a whole.

The present recording spans Babbitt's compositional career, touching on most of the musical veins that run through his work. The variety of his compositions is immediately apparent from their diversity of ensemble and scope; their underlying communality emerges upon greater familiarity. On first hearing,

An Elizabethan Sextette and *Playing for Time* would appear to have little in common; yet they contain identical underlying abstract structures. *About Time* employs a simple variant of the same structure, and *Groupwise* contains structures closely related to those in the aforementioned works. Briefly put, these underlying structures are contrapuntal webs of twelve-tone rows, craftily woven together to yield a maximal variety of ways of combining segments of different rows into collections of the total chromatic. Supple enough to afford a wealth of different interpretations both of detail and mode of presentation, these contrapuntal networks nevertheless preserve certain recognizable large-scale attributes in all their incarnations. The markedly different surfaces of the various compositions using versions of one of these networks attest to their flexibility of interpretation, while their shared qualities allow the listener to hear each work as a new venture over familiar terrain.

One recurring feature of Babbitt's music has been the sensitive handling of texts. The current recording represents this in two works, *An Elizabethan Sextette*, a setting of six Elizabethan love poems for women's voices in six parts, and *Vision and Prayer*, a setting of Dylan Thomas's poem of the same name for soprano and synthesized accompaniment. The latter work is represented here in an historic recording made by its first interpreter, Bethany Beardslee. As Babbitt suggested in his original program notes, the varying line lengths in the poem's two groups of stanzas intimately inform all

aspects of the piece, in all musical dimensions, from its details to its totality. Babbitt's appreciation of the wit and word-play in the texts of the former work is intimated by his sly setting of the line, "All is Heav'n that you behold, and all your thoughts are blessed" at the unique unaccompanied appearance of a row in the composition's contrapuntal web.

The central group of the piano works traces another recurring strand through Babbitt's output. Both the *Minute Waltz* and *It Takes Twelve to Tango* are his contributions to collections of waltzes and tangos by a number of composers, the former instigated by Robert Helps, and the latter by Yvar Mikhashoff. *Partitions*, the earliest composition here, contains the seeds of many of Babbitt's later developments, despite its brevity. *Playing for Time* and *About Time* (the later written for Alan Feinberg), along with a third composition, *Overtime*, alas not ready at the time of this recording, together form the work *Time Series*, but may be played separately. Each work treats the same material in strikingly different ways. As with all of Babbitt's piano music, these pieces are a celebration of virtuosity and plasticity of touch.

Groupwise (dedicated to Harvey Sollberger and The Group for Contemporary Music), a chamber concerto for flute doubling alto flute and piccolo, accompanied by piano and string trio, represents Babbitt's most recent advances in twelve-tone composition; yet readily affords a glimpse of one of his most fundamental precepts, the unique employment of each of all possible combinations of elements of some musical domain. This abstract principle is manifested in a bewildering variety of ways throughout all of Babbitt's music, affecting everything from the smallest details to large-scale form, in all dimensions, including pitch, rhythm, register, and scoring. Its embodiment in Babbitt's large-scale formal patterns frequently provides the readiest entry to his works.

In *Groupwise*, the soloist plays almost continuously, with only two extended breaks. The accompaniment weaves together music from four different ensembles drawn from the remaining instruments. The individual ensembles are the piano, the string trio, and the duos of violin and viola, and viola and cello. The string ensembles further distinguish themselves by their exclusive use of different instrument registers. Thus the cello's duo, heard at the close of the work, employs only the higher notes of the cello along with the lowest notes of the viola, while the other duo uses the viola's middle range to separate the violin's highest and lowest registers. The trio ensemble uses the remaining available registers of the three instruments. The fifteen sections of the composition each use one of the fifteen possible combinations from the one to four different accompanying ensembles. The consistent distinction of registers among the string ensembles allows the listener to readily distinguish between the passage accompanied by the

string trio ensemble alone, and the passages whose string trio music derives from combinations of the duos with each other of the trio ensemble.

Similar patterns underlie a number of Babbitt's compositions, from the early *Composition for Four Instruments* (1947) to the recent massive Piano Concerto (1985) (written for and subsequently recorded by Alan Feinberg). But just as these similarities provide a family resemblance, so each work asserts its own identity through its particular manifestation of the various combinations of ensembles and their embodiment of the underlying contrapuntal networks. In these and similar ways Babbitt has maintained throughout his career a balance between diversity and similarity based on a careful distinction between underlying principles and their particular ramifications, and so, within the abstract universe of twelve-tone relations, has created a music that is fundamentally and rewardingly human.

—Andrew Mead

Andrew Mead, a composer, is currently writing a book about the music of Milton Babbitt.

Other recordings of Milton Babbitt's music on CRI include:

SD-499 *Paraphrases* (1979); SD-461 *Three Compositions for Piano* (1947-8);

SD-446 *Composition for Viola and Piano* (1950).

Alan Feinberg has been called the "Callas of contemporary-music pianists" by *New Yorker* critic Andrew Porter. His numerous performances across the U.S. and Europe have garnered him unanimous acclaim. Feinberg is a noted performer of Babbitt's music and has premiered several of his works including the Grammy-nominated Piano Concerto. Feinberg was the first American pianist to be invited by the Union of Soviet Composers to give premieres by American composers in Leningrad and Moscow.

Bethany Beardslee was born in the mid-west and made the acquaintance of Milton Babbitt in 1950, when she was a student at Juilliard. She began singing his music then and, over the years, has premiered some of his most significant works. She presently teaches and lives in New York City and London.

The Group for Contemporary Music is one of the oldest and most distinguished new music ensembles in the United States. Founded in 1962 by Charles Wuorinen and Harvey Sollberger, who have remained its co-artistic directors, The Group is dedicated to presenting first-rate performances of contemporary repertoire. As part of its continuing mission, the Group performs, commissions, and records important new works and, over the years, has been responsible for developing a new generation of performers of the highest musical caliber.

Production Notes

An Elizabethan Sextette and Groupwise

Produced and edited by Eve Beglarian

Engineer: Alan Tucker, Foothill Productions

Recorded 19 December (*Sextette*) and 23 December 1984 (*Groupwise*) at Vanguard Studios, New York.

Piano Works

Produced, edited and engineered by Judith Sherman

Edited at New York Digital Recordings Inc.

Recorded 1 and 2 (June 1987 at the Recital Hall of the Music Division of SUNY, Purchase (New York).

Piano: Steinway CD 240

Vision and Prayer

Originally recorded at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in New York City, Tape produced entirely on the Mark 11 RCA Synthesizer.

Art Direction and Design: Laura Williams

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