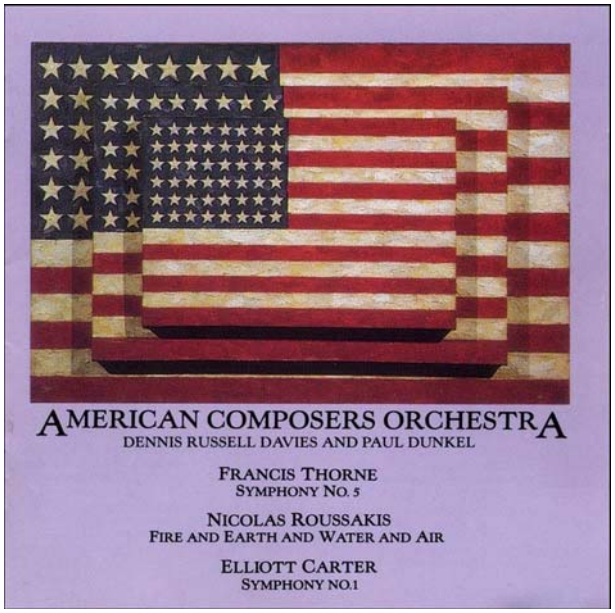
NWCR552

American Composers Orchestra

Thorne, Roussakis, Carter



Francis Thorne
Symphony No. 5 (1984) ..... (22:38)
1. Maestoso ..... (6:58)
2. Scherzo, Presto con brio ..... (2:00)
3. Adagietto cantabile ..... (8:31)
4. Andante, Allegro con gioia ..... (4:48)

Dennis Russell Davies, conductor

Nicolas Roussakis
5. *Fire and Earth and Water and Air* (1983) ..... (22:21)

Paul Dunkel, conductor

Elliott Carter
Symphony No. 1 (1942)* ..... (25:13)
6. Moderately, Wistfully ..... (7:08)
7. Slowly, Gravely ..... (10:18)
8. Vivaciously ..... (6:38)

Paul Dunkel, conductor;
*Previously released on CRI 475

Total playing time: 88:10

Notes

Francis Thorne was born in Bay Shore, New York on June 23, 1922 and now lives in New York City. He composed his Symphony No. 5 in July and August of 1984 on commission from the Albany Symphony (it premiered October 11, 1985).

From the beginning music came naturally to Francis Thorne, but the road to becoming a professional musician was hardly direct. Thorne's maternal grandfather was Gustav Kobbé, author of Kobbé's *Complete Opera Book*. His father was an amateur ragtime pianist, and Thorne taught himself to play the piano by imitating his father. By the age of nine he was entertaining family and friends with his jazz performances. Studies in composition at Yale were aborted when Thorne's teacher, Paul Hindemith, told him that he would never be a composer. Devastated, Thorne took a job on Wall Street, where he worked for the next ten years.

A chance encounter with Duke Ellington led to Thorne's first professional job in music, as a pianist at Hickory House in New York. Private composition studies with David Diamond followed from 1959 to 1961. In 1964 Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra gave the premiere of Thorne's *Elegy*, and since then his works, which now number over 90, have been performed by orchestras and chamber ensembles throughout the United States.

"Any concert work of mine shows a strong influence of jazz," notes Thorne, and the Symphony No. 5 is no exception. "The other element that is always present is my lifelong fascination with the chromatic harmonies of Wagner, put these two basic elements together, and my music is understood; the fast sections more given to the jazz, the slow sections to the chromatic sequences. Every measure I write has a tonal center. If this be the third stream, I plead guilty. One has to listen to one's inner ear, and my music is nothing if not intuitive."

The structure of Roger Sessions' Symphony No. 2 with its short scherzo preceding an elegiac slow movement was very much on Thorne's mind when he composed his Fifth Symphony. The opening movement begins deliberately: three slow statements followed by pauses before yielding to jazz elements. A dreamlike sequence using the introductory music comes midway through the movement. Following the chattering scherzo, the heart of the symphony arrives. This slow movement has a theme that blossoms incrementally, as the interval of a second is followed by a third, and then a fourth. This sequence, first employed in the scherzo, is hinted at by the shape of the opening of the first movement; Thorne also uses the same theme for the slow introduction to the finale, thereby linking movements thematically as well as structurally. Again fast music takes over and when taken up-to-tempo (120 beats per minute), time truly flies.

Nicolas Roussakis was born in Athens, Greece on June 10, 1934 and died in New York City in 1994. He wrote *Fire and Earth and Water and Air* (*πύρ καί γή καί ϋδωρ καί αήρ*) on commission from the National Endowment for the Arts for a consortium of four orchestras: the Tri-City Symphony (which premiered the work on March 2, 1984), the American Composers Orchestra, the Oakland Symphony and the Milwaukee Symphony.

Roussakis describes the major focus of his current artistic endeavors as an exploration of his Greek heritage. It was not always so. Although born in Athens, Roussakis lived in Estonia, Italy, and Switzerland before coming to the United States at age 15. At Columbia University he studied with Otto Luening, and in 1961 received a Fulbright Grant. Over the next two years he completed his "central European training" by attending the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg (studying with

Philipp Jarnach) and the Ferienkurse für Musik in Darmstadt (working with Boulez, Stockhausen, Ligeti, and Berio).

It was in the mid-1970s that Roussakis began to explore his Greek roots which resulted in works including *Syrtos* (1975) for band; *Ode to Cataclysm* (1975) for orchestra; *Ephemeris* (1979) for string quartet; *Trigono* (1986) for trombone, vibraphone, and drums; and the cantata *The God Abandons Antony* (1987).

All of the musical ideas in *Fire and Earth and Water and Air* are drawn from Plato's *Timaeus* that follows in the translation by the Rev. R.G. Bury, Litt. D.:

I. For God desired that, so for as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil; wherefore, when He took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder, deeming that order is in all ways better. (30)

II. Hence, in the beginning, to construct the body of the All, God was making it out of fire and earth. But it was not possible that two things alone should be conjoined without a third…Thus it was that in the midst between fire and earth God set water and air. For these reasons and out of these materials, such in kind and four in number, the body of the Cosmos was harmonized by proportion and brought into existence. (31, 32)

III. It is hard to say which particular element we ought really term water rather than fire, and which we ought to term any one element rather than each and all of them…(for) we see the elements passing onto one another, as it would seem, in an unbroken cycle of transformations. (49)

IV. (The Creator) fashioned (the Cosmos) to be One single Whole, compounded of all wholes, perfect and ageless and un-ailing. Wherefore He wrought it into a round, in the shape of a sphere, equidistant in all directions from the center to the extremities, which of all shapes is the most self-similar. (33)

Chaos rules at the opening of the work. Each member of the orchestra plays casually, until the conductor starts beating time and gradually brings "order out of disorder." According to Roussakis, "the sounds which emerge are those of the overtone series on E-flat to the 22nd partial (each one adjusted to the closest available pitch in the equally tempered chromatic scale). This chord, which appears many times in various transpositions during the course of the composition, is both consonant and dissonant; its lower tones offer the luxuriant richness of the major triad, while its upper tones form a densely dissonant cluster."

Roussakis next introduces the four elements: "first, fire–a filament of fast flowing notes; then earth–a barrage of bombastic brass chords; followed by water—undulations on the woodwinds and wave-like tremolos in the strings; and air-sharp staccatos in the xylophone, piano, and winds." These musically distinct motives are then subjected to a series of gradually more intense developments in which they act upon one another.

"The high point of the composition is a very rapid section in which the flamboyant rhythm of fire has achieved maximum interpenetration with the rest and culminates in some measures of incandescent intensity. After that, in the final portion of the piece, the music is both standing still and moving with great energy at the same time. It is a musical description of the sphere, the most perfect of all shapes in which the Creator made the world. The work ends quietly with the overtone series on E-flat. Even thought there are many aleatoric sections marked *senza misura*, every note of the composition has been written down."

Elliott Carter was born in New York City on December 11, 1908 and now divides his time between Manhattan and Waccabuc, New York. He completed his Symphony No. 1 on December 19, 1942 in Santa Fe (revising it in 1954), and the work was first performed by the Eastman-Rochester Symphony under the direction of Howard Hanson at the 14th Annual Festival of American Music on April 27th, 1944.

Our image of Elliott Carter is so ingrained, it takes at least a moment to think of him as a young man. Today's image has many parts–the shock of white hair, the steady gaze—at once gentle and severe, the formidable intellect, the still-growing corpus of compositions, the vast quantity of honors, and above all, the principled attitude toward composition that "the next step had to be taken and this is what I have tried to do."

It has been nearly forty years since Carter wrote his String Quartet No. 1 in which he "decided for once to…say to hell with the public and with the performers too. I wanted to write a work that carried out completely the various ideas I had at that time about the form of music, about texture and harmony, about everything." That new attitude led to compositions of singular originality–the orchestral works Variations for Orchestra, Double Concerto, Piano Concerto, Concerto for Orchestra, and *A Symphony of Three Orchestras*, as well as the smaller-scaled works he has written in the last ten years. In these Carter has devised new ensemble configurations, masterfully juggled levels of activity, and made meter and tempo as much a structural component of his music as melody and harmony.

Carter himself has confounded part of our image of him as a young man. We do know about his early interest in modern music, contact with Charles Ives, rebelling against his family's business interests (although a European trip with his father in1925 enabled him to buy "all the scores of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern I could find"), studies of English, philosophy, mathematics and classics at Harvard (chosen "because of it proximity to the Boston Symphony") and his lessons with Nadia Boulanger from 1932 to 1935. But of the young man's music we know little. Carter withdrew and destroyed an opera, two string quartets and a symphony.

The United States was still in the throes of the Great Depression when the young Carter returned from Paris in the mid-1930s. He found "the musical world here had taken a new turn, toward a kind of populism which became the dominating tone of the entire musical life." His ballet *Pocahontas* (1938-39) was meant to be a "parable of cooperation," and Carter's next orchestral work, the Symphony No. 1 was written "in a deliberately restricted idiom—that is, an effort to produce [a work] that meant something to me as music and yet might, I hoped, be understood to the general music public I was trying to reach…"

"Carter can write a tune, but he can also surround it with a kind of esoteric tonal haze," noted Bernard Rogers in his 1946 review of this Symphony in *Modern Music*. The populism of the first movement recalls Copland and Harris, but the organization of phrases into irregularly patterned three, four, and five-bar groupings, the disorientation of the lilting waltz figure with off-the-beat accents, the acceleration and deceleration of tempo, and the agile manipulation of the meter from triple into duple, are surely Carter's own tricks. In his book, *The Music of Elliot Carter*, David Schiff points out that the basic rhythmic pulses of the movement, a dotted half and a half note (which are the ratio 3:2), also support the overall form of the movement. A solo trumpet carries the hymn-like second movement for much of its expansive way. One realizes here, as in the clarinet writing of the first movement, what Carter means by "orchestrally thought textures." The rambunctious theme of the third movement originated in *Pocahontas*; there Carter had

discarded it as too diatonic. Rapidly shifting dynamics reveal precisely conceived levels of activity, especially in passages of deceptively simple texture. And again the sounds of individual instruments remain at the end, as the high E-flat clarinet and piccolo bring the Symphony to its giddy close.

Like many a brilliant idea, the one to create the **American Composers Orchestra** (ACO) originated over a good meal. In October of 1975 composer Francis Thorne, and the newly appointed Executive Director of the American Composers Alliance (ACA), and conductor Dennis Russell Davies were at a SoHo restaurant discussing plans for the fortieth anniversary of the ACA. As Davies recalls, "We started talking about the fact that American orchestras don't play very much American music as part of their regular programming, and that led to the idea of an orchestra that would fill that gap, so that audiences would at least have the opportunity to hear what was there."

Soon thereafter, Thorne enlisted the support of ACA President Nicolas Roussakis. Davies agreed to serve as music advisor, and Paul Dunkel signed on as assistant conductor, principal flutist and orchestra contractor. Musicians with a strong commitment to contemporary music were hired to play in the orchestra. Funding was obtained from Broadcast Music, Inc. and from two foundations and the inaugural concert was held on February 7, 1977. The program consisted of a world premiere, Charles Dodge's *Palimode* (commissioned for the occasion), two New York premieres, Yehudi Wyner's *Intermedio* and Lou Harrison's *The Marriage at the Eiffel Tower,* and a thirty-year-old work, Wallingford Riegger's Symphony No. 3. With Thorne as president and Roussakis as manager, a three-concert series was set up at Alice Tully Hall for the 1977–78 season. In 1985–86 the ACO's performances moved to Carnegie Hall.

ACO programming is admittedly and proudly eclectic, with geographic, stylistic and temporal diversity contributing factors. While its aim is to present the symphonic music of all periods of American history, its orientation is focused on the latter part of the twentieth century. As of May 1987, the orchestra had scheduled sixty-six world premieres, forty-five of them ACO commissions. Two of these, Joseph Schwantner's *Aftertones of Infinity* and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Symphony No. 1, have gone on to win Pulitzer Prizes, while John Harbison's Piano Concerto [CRISD440] won the Friedheim Award. Significant revivals of American music have included compositions by Roger Sessions, William Schuman, Henry Cowell, Colin McPhee, and Victor Herbert. The ACO's repertory also extends to works by Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, John Philip Sousa, Laurie Anderson, and Philip Glass. By the end of its 1989 season the ACO will have presented the works of 168 different American composers.

While Davies has remained as principal conductor and music advisor, the ACO has a growing roster of distinguished guest conductors, among them Leonard Bernstein, Leonard Slatkin, Michael Tilson Thomas, John Nelson, Lukas Foss, Gunther Schuller, Charles Wuorinen, and Catherine Comet. Soloists have included pianists Keith Jarrett and Garrick Ohlsson; cellists Lynn Harrell and Fred Sherry; singers Phyllis Bryn-Julson, Bethany Beardslee, Lucy Shelton, and Paul Sperry; clarinetist Stanley Drucker, and trombonist Stuart Depster.

Among the various honors the ACO has received are a special award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a Letter of Distinction from the American Music Center. The ACO became a regular winner of ASCAP's annual prize for adventuresome programming, and in 1983 was singled out by ASCAP as being the orchestra that has done the most for American music in the United States.

Music director of the New Orchestra of Westchester and associate conductor of the American Composers Orchestra, **Paul Dunkel** has been affiliated with ACO since its initial concert. He has served as principal flutist of the American Symphony Orchestra, the Brooklyn Philharmonic and with Speculum Musicae.

—Susan Feder

Production Notes

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Thorne: Symphony No. 5 G. Schirmer-AMP (BMI)
Recorded at Manhattan Center January 12, 1987
Produced and recorded by Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz, Elite Recordings, Inc.

Roussakis: *Fire and Earth and Water and Air* ACA (BMI)
Recorded at Manhattan Center December 4, 1984
Produced and recorded by Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz, Elite Recordings, Inc.

Carter: Symphony No. 1 G. Schirmer AMP (BMI)
Recorded by David Hancock at Walt Whitman Auditorium, Brooklyn College, February, 1982
Produced by Carter Harman, Carolyn Sachs, Associate Producer