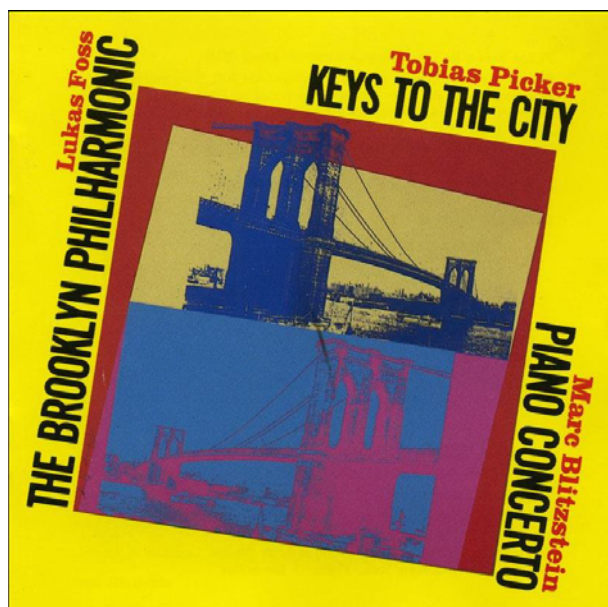


Picker / Blitzstein



Tobias Picker (b 1954)

1. Keys To The City (1983) (19:04)
Tobias Picker, Pianist

Marc Blitzstein (1905-1964)

- Piano Concerto (1931)..... (28:18)
2. Largo assai (9:35)
3. Moderato molto (10:47)
4. Adagio ma non troppo (7:49)

Michael Barrett, Pianist;
The Brooklyn Philharmonic,
Lukas Foss, Music Director and Conductor

Total playing time: 47:15

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Notes

This record brings together two examples of American musical populism at its most sophisticated—or, if you prefer, American Modernism at its most accessible.

There are many similarities between **Tobias Picker's** *Keys to the City* (1983) and **Marc Blitzstein's** Piano Concerto (1931). Both are works by young men: Picker was twenty-eight years old when *Keys to the City* received its spectacular premiere and Blitzstein was only twenty-five when he finished his concerto. Both pieces are ambitious, virtuosic compositions for piano and orchestra that are, in their own ways, “New York pieces”—musical reflections of the city that gave them birth. *Keys to the City* was commissioned for the 100th anniversary of the Brooklyn Bridge and first performed directly in the shadow of its stone towers, while Blitzstein wrote most of his concerto in Greenwich Village. Both works combine academic expertise, formal development, careful counterpoint, and appropriate orchestration with a brash, fierce, even rebellious spontaneity.

But it will not do to belabor the point, for each concerto has its own distinct character. Peter G. Davis has written that the Blitzstein is “terse, biting, witty, melodically fresh, and with a disturbing undercurrent of melancholy.” And so it is. There are plenty of undercurrents in *Keys to the City* too, but none of them are melancholy.

Picker determined to capture the Brooklyn Bridge—and the city it serves—in music; the work was first performed during a gala celebration of the bridge’s centennial as a prelude to one of the most spectacular fireworks displays New York has ever seen. It is an exuberant, brassy, celebratory evocation, nineteen minutes of irrepressible energy and cosmopolitan eclecticism. One can discern snatches of street cries, popular songs, the whistles of ferry boats gone by carried along by the throb of the great river underneath this most poetic of bridges. Hart Crane would have approved.

The Brooklyn Bridge Centennial Commission is only one of the many honors that have been awarded Picker. He currently is composer-in-residence for the Houston Symphony, which recently presented the premiere of his Second Symphony. He also served in this capacity during the 1987 season of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. His works have been performed by the San Francisco Symphony, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and other leading ensembles. A chamber version of *Keys to the City* received its premiere in 1987 under the auspices of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. In January 1988 his Third Piano Concerto was premiered by the Honolulu Symphony. His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

“I became obsessed by the bridge,” Picker told a reporter before the premiere. “I visited it again and again, at all hours, day and night. I hoped that through some spiritual process of osmosis, the qualities of the bridge would come through to me. For the Brooklyn Bridge *is* the key to this city. Not only is it a monument to the vitality and glamour of New York City, but it is in its own right a work of art.”

Picker makes colorful use of the orchestra by contrasting stark dissonances with cool, aquatic ripples of sound. At one point, the pianist—here Picker himself—breaks into a frenzied, hyperactive boogie-woogie that would draw cheers in many jazz clubs.

[Other works of Tobias Picker on CRI include; *Rhapsody, When Soft Voices Die*, Sextet No. 3, *Romance* (SD427) and Concerto for Violin (SD474).]

It is ironic that Blitzstein’s piece, half a century old, should have received its premiere more than two years after *Keys to the City*. But until the Brooklyn Philharmonic’s performances in January 1986, under the direction of Lukas Foss with Michael Barrett at the piano, the concerto had been heard only twice, in

the late 1930s, both times in a reduction for two pianos. The composer David Diamond turned pages for one of the performances, and the work impressed him so much that he wrote to Blitzstein in 1959, requesting a score for perusal and possible performance.

"All my thanks about the Piano Concerto," Blitzstein replied, "which I don't think I want done now." By this point, the composer was well-known for his stage pieces, particularly his adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, but also for his own music theater works such as *The Cradle Will Rock* [available on CRI SD 266], *No for an Answer*, and *Regina*. The reasons for Blitzstein's firm, polite dissuasion of Diamond's interest remain unclear; it would seem that he considered the concerto juvenilia.

"Perhaps if he had lived long enough to become a grand old man of American music, mellowing into a more expansive, self-forgiving artist, and responding to the curiosity of a younger public, Blitzstein might have looked more kindly on attempts to resuscitate his non-theater pieces," the musicologist Eric Gordon has written. "But in 1959, famous for a spotty record of success with his operatic and music theater creations, he still felt doggedly devoted to his commitment to theater as the very nearly exclusive domain for his life's work."

A pity, for this is a strong, quirky, original work by a composer of great skill, and I suspect that many contemporary listeners will find it more satisfying than Blitzstein's theater pieces. There is a smug, self-righteousness in works such as *The Cradle Will Rock*, a tendency to reduce people to stereotypes, complex issues to sloganeering, that now seems shrill and naïve. The Piano Concerto is not hampered by extra-musical sentiments and may be judged entirely by the merits of the score, which are considerable.

By 1931, Blitzstein already had studied with Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg, composed a short "dada" opera called *Triple Sec*, and produced an unusual string quartet, its three movements marked "Largo-Largo-Largo." The Piano Concerto also begins slowly. In a letter, Blitzstein speaks of a "slow quiet beginning for the solo instrument, which is monstrous it is so beautiful." Later, in his program notes for the first performance, the composer observed that the concerto "follows the nineteenth century model, except that it begins with an extended prelude for the solo instrument. The last moment is a double passacaglia in which two themes are deployed alternately and simultaneously, affording considerable opportunity for many types of contrapuntal devices and treatment."

It is more than geographical location that makes Lukas Foss and the Brooklyn Philharmonic ideal interpreters for these two works. Foss has been an indefatigable champion of new music and the American composer's best friend. The concert premiere of *Keys to the City* took place on a program that also included music by George W. Chadwick and Victor Herbert, while Blitzstein's concerto shared space with new works by Hsueh-Yung Sheh, David A. Jaffe, David Felder, and Daniel Asia. Quite a panoply, and one that offers a refreshing contrast to the succession of works by nineteenth-century Europeans that makes up the programming of most twentieth-century American orchestras.

—Tim Page

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Tim Page is the chief music critic for *Newsday*, and the host of a program entitled *New, Old and Unexpected* on New York's WNYC-FM. Twice the recipient of the ASCAP Deems Taylor

Award for Distinguished Music Criticism, he was recently the recipient of the ASCAP Deems Taylor Broadcast Award. He is the editor of *The Glenn Gould Reader* and—with his wife Vanessa Weeks Page—*Selected Letters of Virgil Thompson*.

Acclaimed for incorporating contemporary music into the mainstream of symphonic repertoire, the **Brooklyn Philharmonic** has received four ASCAP awards for "Adventuresome Programming of Contemporary Music," and three for "Creative Orchestral Programming." Composers who have had works premiered by the Brooklyn Philharmonic include John Cage, Elliott Carter, John Corigliano, Morton Gould, Krzysztof Penderecki, among many others. In 1984 the Brooklyn Philharmonic presented the American premiere of Steve Reich's *The Desert Music* as part of the Brooklyn Academy's Next Wave Festival and subsequently recorded this work under the baton of Michael Tilson Thomas. As part of the 1986 Next Wave Festival the Philharmonic undertook the massive staging of William Bolcom's three-hour cantata setting of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Lukas Foss (b 1922) is a conductor, composer, pianist, and educator and has been a moving force in the world of music for over thirty years. At the age of eighteen, Foss was widely known as a musical prodigy and had already graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music where he studied conducting with Fritz Reiner. He continued his training under the tutelage of Serge Koussevitzky at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, and with Paul Hindemith at the Yale School of Music.

As a composer, Foss has amassed a catalogue of more than one hundred works, including such celebrated works as *The Prairie*, *Time Cycle*, and *Baroque Variations*. As a pianist, Foss is best known for his performances of Bach concertos, Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety*, and Hindemith's *The Four Temperaments*, which he premiered.

Mr. Foss is currently music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, a position he has held since 1971. In 1980 he became music director of the Milwaukee Symphony, where he is now Conductor Laureate. As music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic from 1963–70, Foss was widely acclaimed for his innovative programming, particularly involving twentieth-century works. He was music adviser and conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony for four years and has guest conducted leading orchestras in the United States and abroad.

American born and trained, **Michael Barrett** enjoys a dual career as conductor and pianist. He has made numerous appearances with many of the world's finest performing organizations, including the New York Philharmonic, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Opera New England, and the Nederlands Dans Theater.

Michael Barrett made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1985, when he was called on short notice to substitute as conductor of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Requiem*. Mr. Barrett has worked as assistant conductor to Leonard Bernstein at the Vienna Staatsoper, for the 1986 summer tour of the New York Philharmonic, for the National Symphony Orchestra, and for the 1987 world tour of the Vienna Philharmonic.

For television, Mr. Barrett has conducted Barber's Violin Concerto, Blitzstein's *Freedom Morning*, and Bernstein's *Halil* at the Salzburg Festival. He also was music director of John Houseman's 1983 production of *The Cradle Will Rock*, which, in its televised version, was nominated for an Emmy Award. Most recently he conducted members of the Bolshoi Ballet for the Kennedy Center Honors, seen nationally on PBS in December 1987.

Production Notes

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Score and parts for this recording of the Marc Blitzstein Piano Concerto were provided by the Edwin A. Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Recorded January 7, 1985 (Picker) and January 26, 1986 (Blitzstein) at Manhattan Center.

Produced and recorded by Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz, Elite Recordings, Inc.