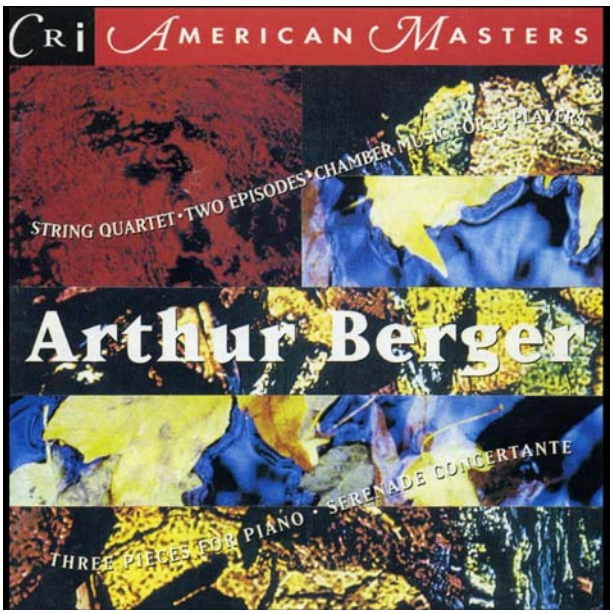
NWCR622

Arthur Berger



Three Pieces for Two Pianos (1961) ..... (7:48)

1. I. ♩ = ca. 80 ..... (2:02)
2. II. ♩ = ca. 56 ..... (3:00)
3. III. ♩ = ca. 80 ..... (2:39)

Paul Jacobs, piano; Gilbert Kalish, piano

4. *Serenade Concertante* (1944, revised 1951) ..... (9:15)

Brandeis Festival Orchestra; Izler Solomon, conductor

String Quartet (1958) ..... (23:14)

5. I. – Toccata ..... (2:45)
6. II. – Cantabile ..... (3:29)
7. III. – Leggiero e sotto voce ..... (3:59)
8. IV. – Tranquillo ..... (5:10)
9. V. – Intermezzo ..... (3:28)
10. VI. – Coda ..... (4:08)

Lenox String Quartet: Peter Marsh, Theodore Mantz, violins; Paul Hersh, viola; Donald McCall, cello

Two Episodes (1933) ..... (3:16)

11. I. – Poco adagio ..... (1:36)
12. II. Allegro molto moderato ..... (1:40)

Robert Helps, piano

Chamber Music for 13 Players (1956) ..... (9:29)

13. I. – Variations ..... (4:59)
14. II. – Allegro moderato, leggiero ..... (4:30)

Columbia Chamber Ensemble; Gunther Schuller, conductor

Total Playing Time: 53:31

Notes

When I began the *Three Pieces for Two Pianos* (1961) I departed from my usual procedure in that I had almost no predetermined plan in mind. I was relying on a certain immediacy in the application of techniques I had been using. I was on a Fulbright scholarship in Rome at the time, and it may simply be that I was conforming to the local practices of the Italian avant-garde. But the reason I found the approach attractive is that it put me in mind of notions I had admired in the 1930s in the seminar of the Harvard aesthetician David Prall. "Ideal aesthetic knowledge," he told us, "absolutely ready response, would bury the whole system of discriminations in our nerves and habits." Automatic writing (chance music) involves the danger of being drawn into well-worn grooves. So one must be vigilant to keep with the good new habits one has formed. In my case I considered those to be, on the one hand, wide spacing of chords of fixed intervals, varied through the device of traditional inversion – their pitch content drawn alternately from the two halves (hexachords) of the total chromatic—and on the other, the fairly constant unrolling of all twelve tones, preserving basic interval cells, but without being strictly serial.

Not even contrast between the pieces was predetermined. (Indeed, it is a long time since I felt under any obligation to obey the traditional directive of making three movements fast-slow-fast.) And yet, without planning it, the second piece, with its silences, gives a sense of retarded motion, while the third starts with the promise of being a lively perpetuum mobile only to lapse into figuration against sustained sonorities, like those in the earlier pieces. Decisions of this nature were made ad hoc, as were also the decisions to return to registral permutations of given chords or to linear elements in retrograde.

The use of prepared piano by someone who is supposedly (according to the press) a member of the academic establishment (in some very good company, so I can't feel too sad about it), may strike one as being odd. My idea was to have percussion without an extra player, and since I had been in close touch with John Cage around 1940, when he was supplying music for the Mills College dancers and I was teaching composition there, prepared-piano, which Cage was developing at the time, was part of my experience—not, as it has been implied, something I dragged in merely to be stylish or whatever.

Serenade Concertante (1951) was originally my *Serenade* (1944), commissioned by Bernard Herrmann for presentation on his CBS series, "Invitation to Music," but first performed in 1945 in Rochester by the Rochester Symphony under Howard Hanson. The change of title was to draw attention to violin and woodwinds and concertino after the model of the concerto grosso.

The work is typical of what has been dubbed my "neoclassical" phase, though labels of this sort tend to oversimplify. In the *Serenade* I believe there are already signs of what Milton Babbitt referred to as "diatonic Webern" in my later neoclassical music. Peggy Glanville-Hicks had this to say in 1953:

"Throughout Berger's music the intensive fragmentation and syncopation which are two results of one procedure bring a

kind of pointillism—almost an impressionism to the surface effect, though this stems from a totally opposite starting point than impressionism. It is this pointillistic surface that recalls Webern, while it is the diatonic planning in back which links that style also to neoclassicism, in particular Stravinsky's neoclassicism..."

The *Serenade* is in one extended movement with some elements of sonata allegro form. There are an introduction and coda, as well as first, second and closing themes, with a kind of slow movement where the development should be. The themes are more easily identifiable as sonata-like in the "recapitulation" where they are not separated by transitional episodes with additional thematic material. But it should be noted that the subsidiary (the lyrical) theme returns before the main theme. All the thematic material, including that in the introduction, is derived from a single basic cell.

The String Quartet (1958) is dedicated to Eugene Lehner, former Boston Symphony violist who at the time of its composition was a member of the Boston Fine Arts Quartet which gave the premiere of the work in Boston, April 14, 1960. Lehner had been a member of the Vienna circle of Schoenberg and Webern, and so it was appropriate that the work should draw upon twelve-tone serialism. But it is not serial in the usual sense. There is a basic set for "melodic" material, another one for a recurring pizzicato line, a trope-like (i.e., unordered) set that dictates the vertical harmony (simultaneities), and figuration freely based on all of these. They are often found superposed one upon the other and stretched over several measures so that the usual unfolding of the total chromatic from one note to the next (lending itself to simple note-counting) is not found.

Commenting on this work, George Perle, in a review of an ISCM performance in Cologne (*Musical Quarterly*, Autumn, 1960), remarked, "Berger presents, above all, an original approach to the most perplexing problem of twelve-tone composition; the absence of any axiomatic harmonic assumptions on the one hand and the rigorous precompositional definition of melodic relations on the other. His serial music today is as far removed from current fashionable trends as his diatonic music was a few years ago." This appreciation from a specialist on the subject naturally gratified me. But I did not pursue the direction, choosing instead to loosen my ties with serialism (see my note for *Three Pieces for Two Pianos*), though it is unlikely my style would be what it is had there been no serialism.

It may be Beethoven's Opus 130 that prompted me to write six movements. But mine are grouped in two parts of three each, indicated by a longer break between the third and fourth. Also, the movements are not discrete. The opening chord and figuration make several attempts to return. But recurrence is a traditional device from which I found myself moving away when I renounced the classical style of my earlier music, and the quartet invites the listener in to experience the actual struggle against this device as each return of the opening ideas is cut off abruptly or, as at the climax in the fourth section, somewhat frantically. In my more whimsical moments I tend to think of the last section (Grave) as a lament of the realization that there can be no return (figuratively, to classicism). Benjamin Boretz (*Nation*, Feb 17, 1962) was keenly aware of this aspect of my quartet:

"The energetic opening chord and figuration become the active principle, the structural pillars of the entire work. Following their exposition and working-out in the first movement, they struggle to return throughout the rest of the quartet, but are always dissolved into an increasingly pervasive quietude. Finally, a kind of immobility emerges from a texture made up of quiet, sustained arrangements of one of the structural chords."

The *Two Episodes* (1933) were submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of bachelor of science in music from New York University. My composition teacher Vincent Jones defended me against the attacks of his colleagues who considered the music outrageously modern. I had been deeply moved by Schoenberg's *Die glückliche Hand*, conducted by Stokowski under League of Composers auspices, and I had been introduced to the music of such composers as Crawford, Ruggles, Ives, Varèse, and Cowell (and sometimes to the composers themselves), so that already as an undergraduate I started to write atonal and what I believed to be twelve-tone music. Jones, however, was incapable of explaining the technique to me, though he tolerated my attempts. Moreover, my peers were already, under the influence of the WPA, turning towards Americanism, and considered it totally out of bounds to do anything that exuded, as they saw it, the stale aroma of gaslit Viennese attics.

To be politically correct one had to write accessible music, music for the masses. This did not appeal to me, and the only compromise I could make with my politically leftist sympathies was to stop composing altogether for a few years. It's hard to believe my mild little pieces should have outraged anyone. Note the two-octave doubling in the second piece—a device that was scarcely idiomatic.

Chamber Music for 13 Players (1956) is dedicated to Jacques Monod, conductor, at the time, of Camera Concerts which commissioned it. Robert Craft conducted the premiere at the Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles in 1960. The work is scored for string quintet, wind quintet (clarinet alternates with bass clarinet), trumpet, harp, and celesta. It belongs to a transitional period which I have characterized as "neoclassic twelve-tone," since I was starting to use serial devices without essentially changing my neoclassical idiom.

In 1964 Eric Salzman observed in the *New York Herald Tribune*: "It actually manages to articulate its chromatic substance through its invented, 'classic' rhythmic, textural and phrase shapes." He went on to say, to my embarrassment, that Stravinsky, who often attended Craft's performances, may have been in the audience and taken a hint from me. That Stravinsky underwent a similar, and slightly later, transition is simply because certain things were in the air. And it was a relief for me when I could finally assure myself that he was very unlikely to have seen Salzman's review. *Chamber Music* is in two movements. The first is a set of variations on a theme with a symmetrical twelve-tone row for its pitch content (the two halves related by retrograde-inversion). The theme is announced quietly by flute accompanied only by the bass, which has a transposition of the row. Each variation addresses itself to a different device: 1. "String Quartet with syncopated motif;" 2. "A la Canzona" [the sixteenth-century form with its characteristic three-note upbeat]; 3. "Antiphonal chords" [between winds and strings]; 4. "Canons in inversion at the seventh and ninth;" 5. "Free interlude with figures in celesta and clarinet" [figures with interval content not determined by the basic row]; 6. "Residual chorale with string figuration" [what remains of a chorale after being fragmented]; 7. "Final cadences and reminiscence."

The second movement is a fantasy that makes extensive use of the free figurations of Variation V. There is also some simple canonic writing based on the basic set.

—Arthur Berger

Arthur Berger was born in New York City in 1912 and died in Boston in 2003. He studied composition and theory with Nadia Boulanger, Milhaud and Piston. In his early career, he espoused the cause of new music, became its spokesman and was among the first to recognize the significance of Charles Ives.

As a composer, chamber and piano music represent a sizable portion of Berger's output. Virgil Thomson called his Quartet in C Major for Woodwinds (1941) "one of the most satisfactory pieces for winds in the whole modern repertory." His String Quartet (1958) received the New York Critics Circle Citation in 1962. Among his larger works are *Serenade Concertante* (1944) written for the CBS Orchestra and *Ideas of Order* (1952), commissioned by Dimitri Mitropoulos for the New York Philharmonic, the success of which led to a full page story in *Time*.

As critic and theorist, Berger has contributed articles, some of a rigorous analytical nature, to numerous periodicals and books. He is author of the first book on Aaron Copland and was founding editor of *Perspectives of New Music*. Berger's labeling of the "octatonic scale" in his essay, "Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky," remains widely in use today.

Over the years Berger has been the recipient of major honors and commissions, starting in 1933 with an award from the prestigious Council of Learned Societies and including grants from the Guggenheim, Fromm, Naumburg and Fulbright foundations, the Louisville Orchestra, National Endowment for the Arts, and the League of Composers. He is a Fellow of both the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Berger received his music education at New York and Harvard universities and started his academic career at Mills College in 1939. In 1943 he became a music critic for the *New York Sun* and later joined the *New York Herald Tribune*. He resumed teaching in 1953 at Brandeis University where he is currently Irving Fine Professor Emeritus of Music while at the same time continuing his teaching activity at New England Conservatory of Music.

Production Notes

From CRI 143:

Serenade Concertante
Published by C.F. Peters/Henmar Press; (ASCAP)

From CRI 161:
String Quartet
Recorded at Judson Hall, NYC on January 31, 1962.
Published by C.F. Peters/Henmar Press; (ASCAP)

From CRI SD 290:
Three Pieces for Two Pianos
Published by Boelke-Bomart (ASCAP)

Chamber Music for 13 Players
Published by C.F. Peters/Henmar Press; (ASCAP)
Released on CRI in 1972 under the auspices of the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation.

From CRI SD 288:
Two Episodes; Published by Lawson-Gould (ASCAP).
Released on CRI in 1971, under the auspices of the Abby Whiteside Foundation and the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.

CRI American Masters

Executive producer: Joseph R. Dalton.

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