

NWCR627

Conrad Cummings

Photo-Op

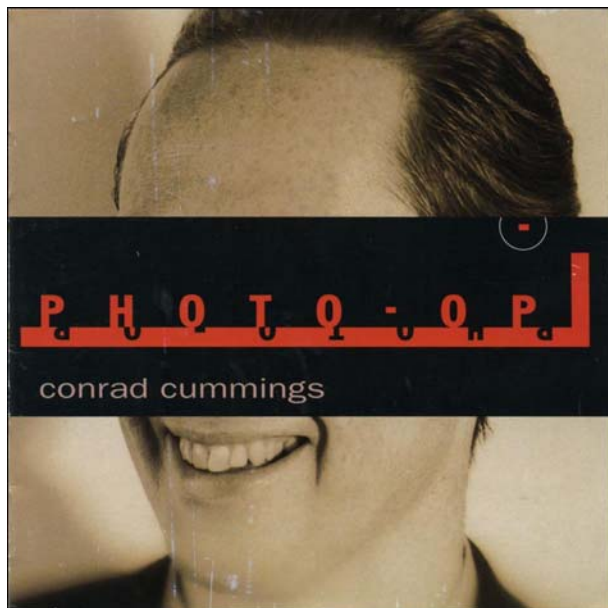


Photo-Op: Life In The Political Fast Lane (19:01)

1. A New Direction (2:45)
2. I Believe in Something (6:57)

3. By Keeping Things Exactly
the Way That They Are (5:03)
4. Will You Die for Me? (4:04)

Insertions: About Love, War, And Death (15:09)

5. In the Department of Love (3:59)
6. Soon (5:09)
7. Midgetman (5:47)

The American Way: From a New Opera

- About Vietnam [*Tonkin*] (21:54)
8. I'm Johnny Appleseed (5:48)
9. A Fast Plane Out (7:23)
10. The Green Berets (8:35)

Lyrics: 1,2,3,4,5,7: James Siena; 6: Vikram
Seth; 8, 9,10: Robert T. Jones, Thomas Bird,
Conrad Cummings

Cummings Ensemble: Larry Adams, baritone (1-7, 10);
Gregory Fulkerson, violin; Daryl Goldberg, cello; David
Lawton, conductor (8, 9, 10); James Longacre, tenor (8, 9,
10); Dora Ohrenstein, soprano (1-7, 9, 10); Andrew Sterman,
woodwinds; Conrad Cummings, keyboard.

Total playing time: 56:14

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Notes

There is a social and political consciousness to art in America during the 1990s. It is a result of the challenges and charges confronting the arts community: As artists suffer on-going attacks from religious and political conservatives, public support of the arts is being curtailed and freedom of expression is jeopardized. As the AIDS epidemic continues unabated into a second decade, the ranks of artists are being depleted of the young and talented. At the same time, debate in the political arena is blind to other pressing social issues affecting broader constituencies. Artists working in a variety of disciplines are addressing these concerns and others in a style that is both personal and public.

In writing new works for his ensemble, composer **Conrad Cummings** sought out collaborators to offer him lyrics "rich in intellectual and emotional connections to an audience." His subsequent musical settings are tonal and direct, relying on a self-imposed economy of means. Though comparisons to the music of Philip Glass, John Adams, and Virgil Thomson are obvious, Cummings's true predecessors are Kurt Weill and Marc Blitzstein, socially conscious composers who wrote theatre works in an individual and accessible idiom.

As a composer, Cummings straddles the worlds of academia—he currently is on the faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory—and performance, leading his ensemble on regional tours and in appearances at New York venues including La Mama E.T.C., P.S. 122 and The Knitting Factory. He considers his ensemble of winds, strings, synthesizers, and voices to be "a laboratory for exploring different aspects of music and theatre" as the three works on this disc display. Cummings's style was far less diatonic until

he composed his first work for the theatre, a large-scale opera *Eros and Psyche* (1983). In that work, Cummings sought the extremely disciplined formal structure of Baroque opera and the emotional power that it can convey. To the composer's initial surprise, a limpid, harmonious music was the result and has since then become the hallmark of this mature style.

Photo-Op lies somewhere between song cycle and opera. It is a setting of original texts by performance artist and painter James Siena that explore the problems of current political discourse in America. Inspired by the less-than-inspirational Presidential campaign of 1988, the work seeks to reveal the implicit and the unspoken thought behind the public positions of two imaginary political figures. In the course of the piece, their inner, skewed passions are gradually and unintentionally revealed.

Though in its entirety *Photo-Op* is some fifty minutes long, Siena's lyrics are a one-page poem. Cummings's settings highlight the mutability of the political and patriotic statements; through musical repetition the sound-bites take on new, and at times chilling connections. Reflecting on the "giddy pride and mindless confidence" of the 1988 general election, Siena remarks: "there are many who believe what they are saying and that's the most frightening to me."

Photo-Op is to receive its first full staging by Ridge Theater directed by Bob McGrath in New York in the spring of 1992 only weeks before that city hosts the Democratic National Convention. For that performance, which is to be staged like a political convention, Siena and Cummings plan to add new

lyrics based on the issues of the current debate...or lack thereof.

Insertions, a 1988 collaboration of Cummings and Siena, is a song cycle dealing with the subjects of love and war using the language of one to describe the other. "In the Department of Love" uses bureaucratic language about love and "Midgetman" passionate language about war. Such juxtapositions recall artist Barbara Kruger's "Your Body is a Battleground," a simple work combining word and image in support of abortion rights.

Siena, whose father led a civilian career in the Pentagon, traces his ideas about the connection between love and war to sex roles in society. "Traditionally men have trouble with close relationships. They don't touch each other or share parts of their lives the way women do." Siena explains. "But throughout history they have had great excitement about killing each other in battle. It approaches the level of passion in sex."

In the same manner that a performance artist might prepare a script, Siena here draws on popular phrases and selected quotations. In "Midgetman," the phallic image of a nuclear warhead is brought to life through a quote from the popular sex adviser Dr. Ruth Westheimer: "Well, I don't know—maybe your penis is too large." The concluding lyric, "The bomb of the people is the bomb for peace" comes from Chinese revolutionary propaganda but also recalls the political rhetoric of a "peace-keeping missile." The directness and even violence in these texts is put in sharp relief by Cummings's lyrical, harmonious style.

"Soon," also part of *Insertions*, is a setting of a poem about AIDS by Vikram Seth, best known for his novel-in-verse *The Golden Gate*. Its simple language about love and death serves as a kind of fulcrum between the Siena texts and is accentuated by Cummings's Handel-like setting. Yet surrounding the AIDS crisis with topics of political ineptitude, bureaucratic inaction and the war like struggle of

young men against a killing force, is an appropriate, if activist, view of the pandemic.

The American Way groups together three scenes from a new opera about Vietnam [*Tonkin*], under development by Opera Delaware with a production anticipated for 1993. The opera spans the interaction of the two nations from 1945 to the present, interweaving history with enactments of traditional fables from the two cultures. Cummings's collaborators here are Robert T. Jones (librettist) who has worked as a music critic, editor and translator of numerous operas, and Thomas Bird (co-librettist, concept), an off-Broadway producer, Vietnam veteran and founder of the Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theater Company of New York.

In the first scene, "I'm Johnny Appleseed," the American paratrooper John Paul Scott embodies the stuff of American legend. The anthem-like music, at least initially, displays his benevolent intentions as sowing apple seeds in Vietnamese rice paddies becomes "planting the seeds of Democracy in fertile soil." In "A Fast Plane Out," Scott passes word of an impending coup to Trung, a Vietnamese woman, and each imagines a different outcome, he still full of hope, she already disillusioned. In the third scene, as Trung sits alone in her bedroom, packing to leave for the United States, in her imagination Ho Chi Minh chastises her. Action shifts to a briefing room where Scott announces the arrival of the first American ground troops; then in slow motion the Green Berets begin to parachute in.

By providing in the opera sympathetic characters both Vietnamese and American, the collaborators hope to allow audiences to find new insights on the still-debated topic of the Vietnam War. In this and other works, Cummings aims for his music both "to confront and inflame and to embrace and reconcile." Such a balance might be viewed as the basis of a new aesthetic.

—Joseph R. Dalton.

Production Notes

Produced by Michael Riesman.

Executive producer: Joseph R. Dalton.

Recorded at the Living Room, New York City, May 22-25 and September 12-15, 1990.

Engineer: Michael McGrath

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