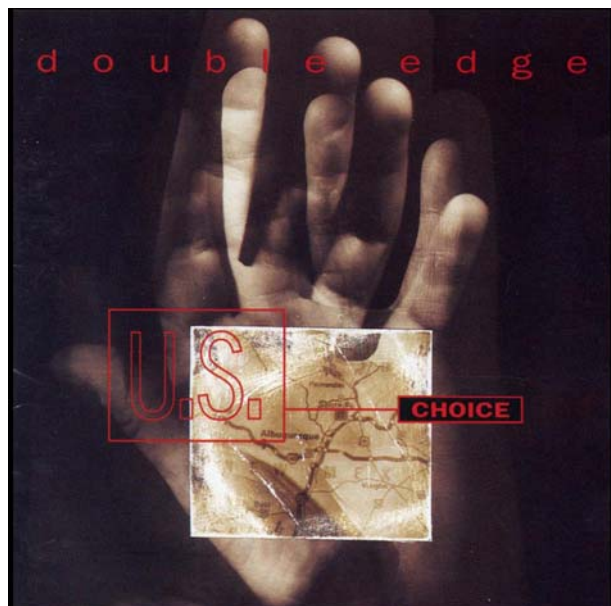


U.S. Choice



Meredith Monk

1. *Phantom Waltz* (1989) (6:53)

Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn

2. *Tonk* (1940) (3:39)

Mel Powell

3. *A Setting for Two Pianos* (1987) (5:46)

David Borden

4. *Double Portrait* (1986/87) (14:38)

Paul Bowles

5. *Night Waltz* (1949) (4:22)

Morton Feldman

6. *Two Pianos* (1957) (8:48)

James Tenney

7. *Chromatic Canon* (1980/83) (10:10)

"Blue" Gene Tyranny

8. *The De-Certified Highway of Dreams* (1991) (9:56)

Meredith Monk

9. *Ellis Island* (1981) (3:06)

Double Edge: Edmund Niemann & Nurit Tilles,
duo-pianists

Total playing time: 69:55

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Notes

Double Edge:

The name connotes a two-sided razor-sharp knife, poised at the brink of the unknown, slicing through the mediocre and the derivative, seeking the best of the new.

When pianists Edmund Niemann and Nurit Tilles first met in 1978, they certainly had that aggressively modernist definition in mind. Both were members of Steve Reich and Musicians; both were fascinated with minimalism; both were drawn to the cutting edge of New York's downtown new-music scene.

Their first concerts, arranged with Reich's help, were mostly of minimalist music. By 1987, when they gave their debut as Double Edge at Town Hall, the duo-pianists were expanding their repertoire, moving back through the twentieth century and embracing new music of a broader stylistic range. Today their programs, performed in concert halls around the world, even include Mozart and Brahms. "We treat new music with the same respect that we were taught to treat the standard repertoire," says Tilles. "We find out as much as possible about the composer and the cultural/musical context of the time, and we bring to that our own voice. Through rehearsal and many performances, we grow with a new piece the way we grow with a Brahms sonata over a lifetime."

The bulk of Double Edge's programming remains American twentieth century music, and it is from those works that *U.S. Choice* is drawn. "The two-piano medium really began to flower in the twentieth century," says Niemann. "Major composers such as Stravinsky, Messiaen, Poulenc, and Wolpe

have been intrigued by the possibilities of the ensemble, and that's a boon for us."

One explanation for the ascendance of two-piano music in this century is the existence of enlightened duo-pianists like Gold & Fizdale, who gave their debut in Town Hall in 1946. Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale felt a responsibility to commission new works from the composers of their day. Yet instead of ghettoizing contemporary music, Gold & Fizdale delighted in mingling standard and unknown pieces, the new and the old, the heavy with the light.

That superb duo has been the model for Double Edge. *U.S. Choice* includes several works (by David Borden, Meredith Monk, James Tenney, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny) that were commissioned or premiered by Double Edge. Niemann and Tilles both consider the continued expansion of the repertoire to be a priority, with new works written for them by John Cage, David Lang, and Kevin Volans. But they also bring together the present and the past. "Our aim is a synthesis," says Niemann, "providing a view of the music that is being composed today by major composers and emerging composers and combining that with established masterworks, whether from 30 or 150 years ago." Tilles adds: "It's not so much stylistic criteria that guide us, as what I would call the health of the menu."

Certainly the menu of *U.S. Choice* is a varied one. Considering Double Edge's origin, it is not surprising that much of this disc is devoted to minimalism. But what is surprising is the diversity of these works, which embrace several approaches and even several generations.

First, there is what might be called the proto-minimalism of **Morton Feldman** (b New York, 1926; d New York, 1987). His *Two Pianos* (1957) consists of a single score for the two players, headed with these instructions: "Durations are free. Slow. Soft as possible." Although the pitches and their sequence are fixed, the durations are not, so the pianists may play together or separately, creating a work of indeterminate length. The result is a hazy, irregularly shifting sonic tapestry, clouded by the low dynamic level and the resonance of the pianos. And it is music that in its own unsystematic but reductive way seems to foreshadow minimalism. "Because it's so very soft, because there are so few events and the palette is so radically limited, the word 'minimalist' applies almost by accident," says Tilles.

Rigorously systematic minimalism is represented by **James Tenney's** (b 1934) *Chromatic Canon* (1980/83), an homage to Steve Reich that equals the austerity of Reich's own early process music. Unlike Reich's modal *Piano Phase* (1967), Tenney's work concerns itself with constructing a twelve-note canon. Built up gradually from a two-note start to a twelve-note midpoint, and then deconstructed just as gradually, the out-of-phase canon progresses from modality to atonality and back.

A more expressive post-minimalism is found in **David Borden's** (b 1938) *Double Portrait* (1986/87), a work whose directionalized power recalls John Adams's early *Phrygian Gates* (1978). Borden's central concern is counterpoint, and *Double Portrait* consists of a tightly unified development of brief melodic patterns, each varied by contrapuntal devices such as augmentation and diminution, inversion and retrograde. After an introspective, modal opening, the piece rapidly becomes more chromatic, denser in texture, and filled with spiky cross-rhythms that poke up from the perpetual-motion surface. Finally, the entire range of the keyboards is thickly covered, and the work explodes in a C-Minor climax of Beethovenian proportions.

Meredith Monk's (b 1942) piano music has affinities with that of Erik Satie, in economy of means, apparent simplicity, and a mixture of elegant reserve and heartfelt expression. The ostinato patterns of *Ellis Island* (1981) and *Phantom Waltz* (1989) owe something to minimalism, while the bittersweet melodies Monk layers over these accompaniment figures seem to stem naturally from her vocal work. In the *Waltz*, her modal language, centering on the alternation of two open fifths, is tinged with dissonance and bitonality. The principal melody circles overhead like a mournful seagull, growing in length and density before receding from consciousness. Within the melodic repetition, Monk uses asymmetry, rhythmic displacement, and subtle variation to create a disturbing, mysterious aura.

Several of the pieces on *U.S. Choice* are indebted to American vernacular traditions, to ragtime, blues, and jazz. Clearly, **Duke Ellington** (1899-1974) and **Billy Strayhorn's** (1915-1967) *Tonk* (1940) is closest to those sources, but even it has

roots in other musical styles. Ellington and Strayhorn created *Tonk* as a virtuosic two-piano vehicle, and they recorded it twice, in 1945 and 1950. (The present transcription, a composite of the two versions, was made for Double Edge by Jed Distler in 1991.) Although the chromatically inflected circle-of-fifths, the scampering whole-tone scales, and the metric displacements are Ellington trademarks, the motoric ostinatos and octave doublings lend a peculiarly French boulevard stride to the proceedings.

A similar amalgam of French sensibility and American popular culture is found in **Paul Bowles's** *Night Waltz*, composed in Tangier in 1949 (the same year his novel *The Sheltering Sky* was published). Dedicated to Gold & Fildale, the languid *Night Waltz* mingles bluesy chords and jazzy syncopations with nostalgic Parisian-café harmonies and dissonant polytonal clusters. Like an impatient hummingbird, Bowles leaps from one idea to another, delighting in the juxtapositions. "There is a lot of filmic editing, jump-cutting, in the piece," says Tilles, "it's actually an extremely modern sensibility. In a sense Bowles was the John Zorn of his time."

Jazz and blues also find their way into "**Blue**" **Gene Tyranny's** (b 1945) *The De-Certified Highway of Dreams* (1991). Tyranny evokes the now legendary Route 66, which once stretched from Chicago to the Pacific. *Highway of Dreams* is genuine traveling music, wandering from place to place, ruminating wistfully about a lost America of tailfins, diners, and two-lane highways. The modal melody, imbued with the rhythmic twists and florid embellishments of bebop, is usually in the lower register, and is constantly transformed by new contrapuntal and harmonic garb. By the end, it becomes clear that *Highway of Dreams*, instead of being a purposeless road trip, is actually a closely structured exploration of a handful of rhythmic cells.

Although **Mel Powell** (1923-1998) was once a jazz pianist, not much evidence of that remains in *A Setting for Two Pianos* (1987), this recording's only example of formal serialism. *A Setting* is serial music of such vividness as to create an illusion of spontaneity. Fleeting arabesques, as lacy and delicate as filigree, burst into bloom and then dissipate; the pointillistic discourse is fragmented even further by the constant pauses. "It reminds me of haiku," says Niemann. "There are these brief explosions and cascades of sound, and then a *fermata* afterwards, during which the sound is just supposed to drift into the air. In a strange way, there is a connection with Feldman's music, in terms of the space between the sounds."

In fact, the delight of *U.S. Choice* is that it allows the listener to draw these unexpected parallels, whether between Feldman and Powell, Ellington and Bowles, or Monk and Borden. How many recital discs can boast of such provocative, even revelatory juxtapositions?

—K. Robert Schwarz

Production Notes

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton.

Producer: Judith Sherman

Recorded in the Recital Hall of the Music Division at SUNY Purchase on April 1-3, 1992.

Piano technician: Ed Court.

Recorded on Steinway pianos.

Mastered by Ellen Fitton at Sony Classical Productions, Inc., NYC.

Monk: *Phantom Waltz*, Meredith Monk Music (ASCAP)

Powell: *A Setting for Two Pianos*, G. Schirmer (ASCAP)

Borden: *Double Portrait*, Lameduck Music (BMI)

Ellington/Strayhorn: *Tonk*, Transcription by Jed Distler,

Composite version from 1945 and 1950 recordings, EMI Music Publishing (ASCAP)

Bowles: *Night Waltz*, Theodore Presser (ASCAP)

Feldman: *Two Pianos*, C.F. Peters Corp. (BMI)

Tenney: *Chromatic Canon*, Sonic Art Editions (BMI)

Tyranny: *The De-Certified Highway of Dreams*, "Blue" Gene Tyranny (BMI)

Monk: *Ellis Island*, Meredith Monk Music (ASCAP)

Special thanks from Double Edge to Jody Dalton, Judy Sherman, Gayle Morgan, and Catherine Blackburn of Steinway Pianos.