

NWCR650

# Jeffrey Mumford

## The Focus of Blue Light



1. *her eastern light amid a cavernous dusk* (1983-84, rev. 1987) ..... (8:19)  
Aspen Wind Quintet: Bärli Nugent, flute; Robert Ingliss, oboe; Todd Levy, clarinet; Susan Heineman, bassoon; Chris Komer, horn
  2. *the focus of blue light* (1987-88) ..... (17:44)  
Kurt Nikkanen, violin; Bruce Anderson, piano;  
The recording of the premiere performance is in the memory of Bruce Anderson.
  3. *amid fleeting pockets of billowing radiance* (1990) ..... (10:46)  
Joshua Gordon, cello
  4. *a diffuse light that knows no particular hour* (1990, rev. 1993) ..... (16:15)  
Da Capo Chamber Players: Patricia Spencer, alto flute; Laura Flax, clarinet; Eric Wyrick, violin; André Emelianoff, cello; Sarah Rothenberg, piano
  5. *linear cycle VII (cambiamenti II)* (1990, rev. 1993) ..... (7:46)  
Kurt Nikkanen, violin
  6. *filaments* (1990) ..... (7:21)  
Peter Brown, flute; Karen Johnson, flute
- Total playing time: 76:38
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## Notes

“My work is inspired by cloud imagery,” **Jeffrey Mumford** has written. “I see the mage of clouds as suspended structures that continually split off and recombine as analogous to the formation of layers of simultaneous musical development. This idea also translates itself into behavioral characteristics which are assigned to specific instruments. As in life, that instrumental voices are constantly vying for prominence, setting up varying kinds of oppositional relationships in much the same way people often do.”

Vivid imagery runs not only through Mumford’s music but also through the names he gives his compositions as well. Consider some of the words he uses in the six titles on the disc—“light,” “dusk,” “focus,” “billowing,” “radiance,” “diffuse,” “filaments.” And yet those who are expecting the sort of wafting, pretty-pretty “space” music that is often associated with such descriptive language will be in for a surprise. For Mumford is a rigorous and painstaking composer: his “clouds” and musical “relationships” do not simply happen—he creates them, controls them, with assurance and exactitude.

Mumford was born in Washington, D.C. in 1955, to parents of African-American descent. He studied at the University of California, both in Irvine and in San Diego; his teachers included Bernard Rands, Peter Odegard, Lawrence Moss, and Elliott Carter. He was received numerous grants, including those from the D.C. Foundation on the Arts and Humanities (funded by the NEA), the Minnesota Composers forum, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc., the American

Music Center, the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, and, on several occasions, Meet The Composer. His works have been performed extensively both in the United States and Europe by such ensembles as the American Composers Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Roanoke Symphony, New Music Consort, and the Group for Contemporary Music. Mumford currently serves on the board of directors of the League of Composers/ISCM. Among his commissions include those from the Fromm Music Foundation, the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation, and cellist Fred Sherry.

This first CD recording devoted entirely to Mumford’s music begins with *her eastern light amid a cavernous dusk* (1983-84, revised 1987), a work commissioned by and written for the Aspen Wind Quintet. The title, according to Mumford, refers to the phenomenon when “during a thunderstorm, the opposite part of the sky from the storm activity will brighten—hence, an evening storm will result in a morning’s light in the east and vice versa.” In keeping with his interest in the frictions and felicities that occur naturally between an individual and a larger group, Mumford allots the most prominent music to the horn—the one instrument in a wind quintet that does not actually belong to the woodwind family—and, indeed, considers *her eastern light* something of a “mini-horn concerto.” The work was presented as a Valentine’s Day gift to the artist Donna Coleman, who was then Mumford’s girlfriend, and who was later to become his wife.

*The focus of blue light* (1987-88) is a brisk, mercurial, and highly virtuosic work for violin and piano, a long, constantly evolving variation movement derived from the opening motive for violin. Mumford says the title—and, one may infer, much of the composition's spirit—comes from the image of a skylight, "which, at dusk, gathers all of blue evening light from outside and spreads it throughout the room." *the focus of blue light* was written for violinist Kurt Nikkanen, a longtime champion of Mumford's music, and the late pianist Bruce Anderson, and was commissioned by the McKim Fund in the Library of Congress.

There are few greater challenges for a composer than creating successful works for solo instruments. It is essentially a matter of sustaining interest; when composing for orchestra it is possible to hide less than top-class material behind the sheer sound of 100 players making widely variegated noises. When writing for a solo instrument, harmony, counterpoint and timbre are circumscribed by the limitations of the instrument and the composer must keep the listener's attention primarily through melodic and rhythmic invention.

This Mumford manages throughout the eleven densely plotted, expertly constructed minutes of *amid fleeting pockets of billowing radiance* (1990) for solo cello. He displays an intimate knowledge of this instrument—the complicated chords and registral leaps flow to a degree that is unusual in such highly chromatic music.

Much the same may be said for *linear cycles VII (cambiamenti II)* (1979, rev. 1993) which is the earliest work on the program, as one might gather from the determinedly literal title. Still, if the name is very much of its time (remember all those pieces with titles like "Notebooks" "Forms," "Isolated Thoughts" and "Structures," from the 1960s and 70s), the piece itself holds up very well—particularly when one considers Mumford was only in his early twenties when it was written. Indeed, this is a tour-de-force for solo violin, music of brains and sinew. Written for William Fitzpatrick, it is here played by Nikkanen, who presented its premiere performance at the Aspen Music Festival in 1979.

*a diffuse light that knows no particular hour* (1990, rev. 1993) is the largest, most "symphonic" and probably the most complicated work on the program. "The work concerns itself with the varying relationships between a continuously unfolding and capricious cello line and the divergent developmental paths taken by other instruments," Mumford writes. "Acting as something of a renegade, the cello is insistent in its changes of mood and personality." *a diffuse light* was commissioned by the Amphion Foundation and written for the Da Capo Players and it is appropriate that this grand and ambitious study in contrasts should be dedicated to Mumford's great mentor, Elliott Carter, and his wife, Helen.

Such contrasts are reconciled in *filaments* for two solo flutes (1990), commissioned by Peter Brown and Karen Johnson—a work that represents Mumford at his most charming. "There is a constant play between extroverted figurative explosions and a more introverted lyricism," the composer observes. In the end, we find what Mumford calls a "coalescence" of the two personalities – both of them attractive and engaging in their own right.

In his masterpiece *Modern Painters*— which should be read by anybody practicing criticism of any sort – John Ruskin defined five chief characteristics of clouds: symmetry, sharpness of edge, multitude, purity of color, and variety. He then added: "There is scarcely a painting of J.M.W. Turner's in which serenity of sky and intensity of light are aimed at

together, in which these clouds are not used, though there are not two cases in which they are used altogether alike...Each has its portion of light, its shadow, its reflex, its peculiar an separating form."

And so, one may add, do the players of Jeffrey Mumford's music.

—Tim Page

The **Da Capo Chamber Players**, since their founding in 1970, have been known for their virtuosity in music new and old and their provocative programming. Their advocacy of new music is perhaps best demonstrated by the more than sixty works they have commissioned from a wide range of composers. In addition to numerous recordings on CRI and New World Records, recent CDs include early and recent works by Elliott Carter and George Perle on the GM label, and, on Bridge Records, Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* with soprano Lucy Shelton. In residence at Bard College, The DaCapo Chamber Players continue to tour extensively throughout North America. The Da Capo Chamber Players are flutist Patricia Spencer, recipient of a NEA Consortium Commissioning Award for flute works; clarinetist Laura Flax, assistant principal clarinetist with the New York City Opera Orchestra; cellist André Emelianoff, winner of the NEA Solo Recitalist Award and solo cellist of the New York Chamber Symphony; pianist Sarah Rothenberg, chair of the music department at Bard College; and the newest member, violinist Erick Wyrick, concertmaster of the Bard Music Festival.

The **Aspen Wind Quintet** are the winners of the Artist International Distinguished Artist award in 1983 and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1984. The Quintet has been responsible for over thirty premieres, collaborating with some of today's most interesting composers including Frank Zappa, Allen Shawn, Jeffrey Mumford, and Pulitzer-Prize winner Robert Ward. They have been in residence at Queensborough Community College and Wave Hill, and served a faculty appointment at the Hartt College of Music. In addition, they have appeared on "All Things Considered" and "St. Paul Sunday Morning." The Quintet has performed at music festivals and just returned from their tour of the former Soviet Union where they presented sold-out concerts and master classes in major cities and the Baltic republics.

**Kurt Nikkanen**, violin, has been called by the Washington Post "a complete artist, poised, knowledgeable, and technically as well equipped as any violinist alive." Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1965, he made his Carnegie Hall debut at the age of twelve and by age fourteen had performed with the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Pops. In the few years since his emergence, he has performed with distinguished international orchestras including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Radio Orchestra, the Helsinki Philharmonic, the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Holland; and in the United States with the Syracuse, Colorado, Baltimore, San Antonio, Cleveland, Honolulu and Cincinnati Symphony orchestras. He also has made frequent recital appearances at such venues as the Kennedy Center, Library of Congress, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1982 he gave the world-premiere of Jeffrey Mumford's *violin concerto no. 1* with the American Composers Orchestra. His debut recording of Tchaikovsky and Glazunov with the London Philharmonic was released on the Collins Classics label in 1991. Based in New York City, he is a graduate of the Juilliard School and is managed by Shaw Concerts.

The late **Bruce Anderson**, piano, performed at the Franz Schubert Institute in Baden-bei-Wien, Austria, the Aspen

Music Festival, and the Library of Congress among other venues. Performances in New York included those with the Haydn-Mozart Chamber Orchestra, Group for Contemporary Music, Washington Square Contemporary Music Series, and the American New Music Consortium. He presented George Crumb's *Apparition* at the 1982 Bowdoin Summer Music Festival in collaboration with the composer. A faculty member at New York University, his dissertation, *The Solo Piano Music of Elliott Carter: A Performance Guide*, written with the assistance of the composer, was the winner of the 1988 Roger Phelps Award. A native of St. Louis, he attended Oberlin Conservatory, Brooklyn College Conservatory, and received his doctorate from New York University. His teachers included Herbert Stessin, Aube Tzerko, and the late Paul Jacobs. In 1989, he premiered along with violinist, Kurt Nikkanen, Jeffrey Mumford's *the focus of blue light*, which was commissioned by the McKim Fund in the Library of Congress, and written for Mr. Anderson and Mr. Nikkanen.

**Joshua Gordon**, cellist, has performed in major concert halls in New York City, Washington, D.C., and throughout the United States, Canada, and Germany. He has performed on the American Composers series at the Kennedy Center, the Summer Garden series at the Museum of Modern Art, the Tanglewood and Waterloo festivals, the Composer's Conference at Wellesley College, and June in Buffalo new music festival, and with the New York Chamber soloists, Orpheus, Continuum, and Speculum Musicae. As soloist, he has appeared with the Colonial Symphony and the New Jersey Symphony, and gave his Weill Hall debut in 1990, playing music by Bach, Beethoven, Hindemith, and Carter. With The Group for Contemporary Music he has recorded a compact disc of string quartets by Charles Wuorinen, Jonathan Harvey, and Wayne Peterson, and a second disc of solo and chamber music by Roger Sessions, both recently released by Koch International Classics. Mr. Gordon received his B.M. and M.M. degrees from the Juilliard School, where

he studied with Harvey Shapiro and Joel Krosnick. Based in New York City, he is principal cellist of the Colonial Symphony in Madison, NJ, and assistant principal cellist of the Colorado Music Festival Orchestra.

**Peter Brown**, flutist, has been principal flutist of the Washington Bach Consort since 1986, and is a member of the faculty of the Levine School of Music. Trained in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and at the Tanglewood Music Festival, Mr. Brown has studied with Bernard Goldberg, Peter Lloyd, Geoffrey Gilbert, and Jeffrey Khaner. As a recitalist and in performances, he has traveled extensively throughout the U.S., Japan, Korea, and China. He has recently commissioned a Flute Sonata from Jeffrey Mumford.

**Karen Johnson**, flutist, has performed extensively both in solo recital and orchestral settings. Her playing has been described by the Washington Post as both "exquisite" and "mesmerizing." She currently serves as flute soloist with the Chamber Artists of Washington, a position she has held since 1984, and also performs regularly with the Washington Bach Consort and other chamber orchestras. In the Washington area, she has performed at the Kennedy Center, the National Gallery of Art, the French and German embassies, the Washington National Cathedral, and at Strathmore Hall. She is the recipient of several performance awards, including Second Prize in the National Flute Association's 1983 Young Artists International Competition. Her other awards include first prize in the 1984 Sigma Alpha Iota National Competition, finalist in the New York Concert Artist Guild Competition, and first prize in the Homer Ulrich Competition. Ms. Johnson studied flute performance with William Montgomery at the University of Maryland. She also has studied with James Galway, Peter Lloyd, Trevor Wye, and William Bennett. She is presently chairperson of the wind department at the Washington Conservatory of Music.

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## Production Notes

Produced by Jeffrey Mumford.

Co-produced by David Merrill.

Recording and editing engineer: David Merrill, Mastersound Studios; except for *the focus of blue light*: recording engineers Michael Turpin and Beverly Palau, Library of Congress. Mastered by David Merrill, Mastersound Studios.

*blue light* was recorded live on March 17, 1989 at the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. *her eastern light* recorded February 24, 1993; *linear cycles*, *amid fleeting pockets*, and *filaments* recorded May 19, 1993; *a diffuse light* recorded May 20, 1993 at Mastersound Studios, Astoria, Queens, New York.

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