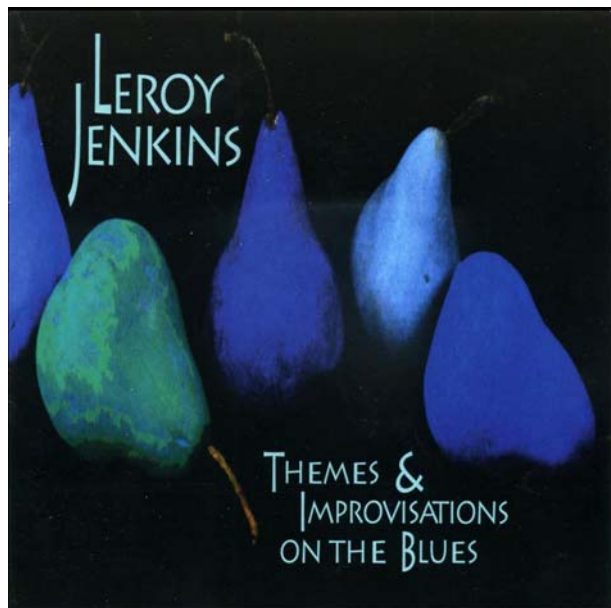


NWCR663

Leroy Jenkins

Themes & Improvisations on the Blues



1. *Themes & Improvisations on the Blues* (1986) ... (18:31)
The Soldier String Quartet: Laura Seaton, violin; David Soldier, violin/ Ron Lawrence, viola; Mary Wooton, cello
2. *Panorama I* (1983) (13:31)
Leroy Jenkins, violin; Henry Threadgill, flute; Don Byron, clarinet; Marty Ehrlich, bass clarinet; Vincent Chancey, French horn
3. *Off Duty Dryad* (1990) (13:04)
The Soldier String Quartet: Laura Seaton, violin; David Soldier, violin/ Ron Lawrence, viola; Mary Wooton, cello; Lindsey Horner, bass
4. *Monkey on the Dragon* (1989) (15:31)
Leroy Jenkins, solo violin; Henry Threadgill, flute; Don Byron, clarinet; Marty Ehrlich, bass clarinet; Janet Grice, bassoon; Vincent Chancey, French horn; Frank Gordon, trumpet; Jeff Hoyer, violin; Jane Henry, violin; Ron Lawrence, viola; Mary Wooton, cello; Lindsey Horner, bass; Thurman Barker, traps; and Myra Melford, piano. Tania León, conductor

Total playing time: 60:40

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Notes

Interpretations—Leroy Jenkins

It's been a long time coming, but composer/violinist Leroy Jenkins's so-called "concert" music is beginning to achieve a measure of visibility commensurate with its unique value. Long recognized as an improviser of the first order in the jazz world, Jenkins is also one of America's most original and visionary composers. This compact disc recording is from a retrospective concert of Jenkins's music that was given on April 9, 1992, at Merkin Concert Hall at the Abraham Goodman House in New York City.

Jenkins described the circumstances leading up to the concert: "For the past ten years or more, I have really been more of a composer than a violinist. Fortunately, numerous important commissions had been coming my way in a wide range of formats. The only problem was—the resulting pieces were being performed once, never to be heard again! Merkin Hall, a small auditorium on West 67 Street in NYC, has recently become a hotbed of contemporary American music, largely attributable to Tom Buckner's Interpretation Series. I approached Tom in 1991 about an ambitious project involving eighteen musicians performing four of my compositions, which were written between 1983 and 1990. Thanks to him, we made it happen. Cynthia Herbst came up with the name, "Retrospective and Beyond." Indeed, the evening was a boundary-defying, genre-straddling, style-melding potpourri of musical excitement and innovation. And the good news is, it was all recorded!

The string quartet opener, *Themes and Improvisations on the*

Blues, was written in 1986 and received its premiere performance at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall by the Kronos Quartet. The Soldier Quartet here offers the most idiomatic and insightful performance to date, achieving a seamless blend of improvisation (estimated by the composer to comprise approximately thirty percent of the piece) and composition. The Soldier Quartet's virtuosity allows the shifting, episodic themes to be executed with great precision, but it's their feel for the organic elements of the piece that gives it life—they seem to relish the blues-based thematic material and integrate it with ease into the more formal structural densities of the work.

While *Panorama I* (1983) is more typical in terms of Jenkins's improvisational approach to small-ensemble composition, it was "designed to provide maximum opportunity for players interested in improvisation, with the written parts being used as 'fuel stops' for the improvised sections," says Jenkins. It doesn't hurt that here this "mixed quintet" sports some of the finest improvising musicians in the business. Players the caliber of Henry Threadgill, Don Byron, Marty Ehrlich, Vincent Chancey, and Jenkins himself guarantee that sparks will fly, and they do! This piece offers the intellectual stimulation of meticulously crafted chamber music with the urgent, passionate thrill of great improvisation. It's a rare and beautiful combination.

Off-Duty Dryad was composed in 1990 for string quintet and dancer. Felicia Norton's graceful dancing added a visually arresting element to this performance, but the music offers special thrills of its own. Jenkins describes the program of the

work as follows: “A dryad is a wood-nymph, protectress of the forest. The piece has allusions to Nijinsky’s ballet set to Debussy’s *Afternoon of a Faun*.” It is important to note that Jenkins’s remarks are primarily applicable to the dance element, as his music bears little resemblance to Debussy’s. The darkly dramatic, rhythmically sophisticated writing suggests an intensity that is almost foreboding, and can be heard as an extension of Jenkins’s great (and greatly under-exposed) dance/opera, *The Mother of Three Sons*. Jenkins’s own background as a violinist is evident in the mastery of the string writing. The slashing bass lines both punctuate and provide a harmonic underpinning, making the five-piece ensemble sound much larger than it is.

Monkey on the Dragon was commissioned originally as a dance score by the 14th Street Dance Center for Felicia Norton with choreography by Mark Dendy. The version heard here, for improvised violin and chamber orchestra, was completed in 1990 on a commission from the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble which premiered it. *Monkey on the Dragon*, exemplifies the best of Jenkins’ music—dramatic, lyrical, richly varied, and rhythmically exciting. In Jenkins’s words, “the soloist is the monkey and the orchestra is the dragon.” The retrograde theme that ends the piece inverts the opening melody and provides a formal structural coherence. As in all of Jenkins’s music, *Monkey on the Dragon* combines improvisation with a seamless blend of notation and extemporaneous expression. Much of Jenkins’s warm personality and good-natured sense of humor can be heard in this performance, too. The always enthusiastic and intellectually inquisitive Jenkins can almost be seen peeking around corners in the surprising and distinctive music.

As displayed in all of the works on this disc, Jenkins’s ability to integrate improvisation into a larger compositional structure depends to a large extent on the abilities of the players at hand. In its most successful realizations the boundaries between the composer’s score and the performers’ excursions are unapparent to the listener. Jenkins uses several methods to achieve this in his scores. In *Themes and Improvisations on the Blues*, one member of the string quartet frequently is given a set number of bars in which to improvise, while the rest of the ensemble plays fully-noted material. In *Off-Duty Dryad*, there are sections marked “free time” for each part, with no given rhythms or bar lines. In other sections of *Dryad*, Jenkins gives the ensemble bars of unison rhythms, but no pitches. *Panorama* allows the performers the broadest freedom to improvise, with the composer’s directions being primarily verbal (at the Merkin concert performance, Jenkins told his colleagues to “make it kinky”). In *Monkey on the Dragon* improvisation is primarily the work of the soloist (the monkey) who “finds holes” in

which to be noticed, even to “take stabs” at the orchestra.

Considering the vagaries of the music business in general, the release of one CD does not mean that the floodgates have opened for Leroy Jenkins. But it is encouraging that his notated music is enjoying more opportunities to be heard these days. His creative voice is entirely original and uniquely personal. It’s a voice that American concert audiences need and deserve to hear. It also represents an approach to blending composition and improvisation that will likely be heard more frequently from future composers. Consider this music, then, a preview of the future. But don’t wait for the future, to celebrate it. Leroy Jenkins’s time is now.

—Carl Baugher, April 1994

Leroy Jenkins was born in Chicago, Illinois on March 11, 1932. A student of Walter Dyett at Dusable High School in Chicago and of Oscar Frederick, Jenkins’s talent was demonstrated on violin and reeds at an early age. Oscar Frederic, church musician and champion of contemporary African-American music, instilled Jenkins with the music of Will Marion Cook, Grant Still, Coleridge Taylor, and particularly Clarence Cameron White’s *Bandana Sketches*. Earning his music degree from Florida A&M University, Jenkins studied the baroque and classical masters, but nevertheless developed an increasing interest in improvised music. Under the spell of jazz greats Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane, Jenkins returned to Chicago after college, where he became a charter member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the legendary collective of which he is still an active member. He made his first recordings with Anthony Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. In 1970, Jenkins moved to New York where he founded the influential improvising trio, the Revolutionary Ensemble which toured North America and Europe and recorded five albums.

Since the early 1970s, Jenkins has worked in virtually every field of American music, including continued work in jazz, as well as writing commissioned scores for chamber ensembles, orchestras, dance and theater, and giving solo violin recitals. He has been an artist-in-residence at the Atlanta Arts Center and been featured in the American Composers Series at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In 1990, Jenkins completed the dance opera *The Mother of Three Sons* in collaboration with the choreographer Bill T. Jones on a commission from Hans Werner Henze and the Munich Biennale Festival. The work was seen at the New York City Opera in 1991 and has been broadcast on German television. His newest work for the stage, *Fresh Faust*, which utilizes hip-hop rappers along with jazz improvisers, was commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Boston.

Production Notes

Recorded live at Merkin Concert Hall, New York City, on April 9, 1992

Mastered by Leroy Jenkins and Ellen Fitton, engineer at Sony Classical Productions, Inc. New York City

Don Byron appears courtesy of Electra Entertainment, a division of Warner Communications, Inc.

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