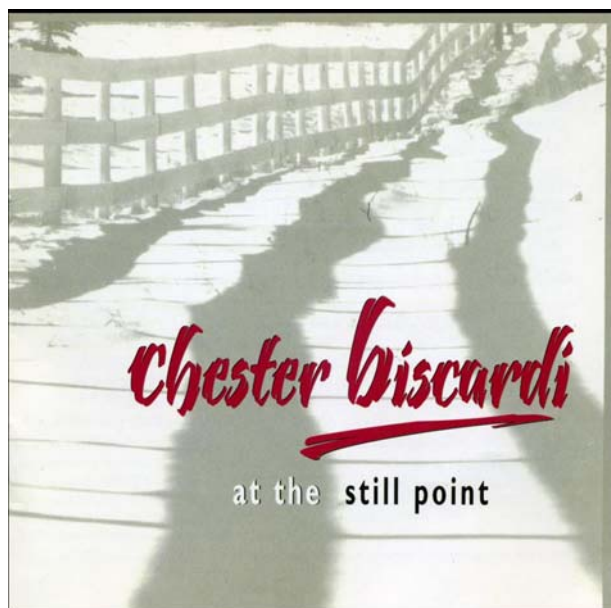


NWCR686

# Chester Biscardi

## At the Still Point



1. *Traverso*, for flute and piano (1987) ..... (7:50)  
Tara Helen O'Connor, flute; Edmund Niemann, piano
2. *The Gift Of Life*, for soprano and piano (1990-93) (9:37)  
Text: Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov, Thornton Wilder; Judith Bettina, soprano; James Goldsworthy, piano
3. *Companion Piece* (for Morton Feldman), for piano (1989/91) ..... (6:44)  
Anthony de Mare, piano
4. *Incitation To Desire* (Tango), for piano (1984) ... (3:18)  
Anthony de Mare, piano
5. *Mestiere*, for piano (1979) ..... (5:38)  
Robert Weirich, piano
6. *Tenzone*, for two flutes and piano (1975) ..... (7:43)  
Robert Dick, flute; Keith Underwood, flute; Robert Weirich, piano
7. *At The Still Point*, for orchestra (1977) ..... (13:10)  
Trio: Jeanne Ingraham, violin; Susan Palma, flute; Gilbert Kalish, piano; American Composers Orchestra; Paul Lustig Dunkel, conductor

Total playing time: 54:00

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## Notes

This recording represents a selection of my music written over an eighteen-year period. One of my concerns in the mid-1970s was to integrate the theoretical and technical elements of music with philosophical ideas. For instance, *At the Still Point* (1977) and *Mestiere* (1979) use the technique of “frozen registration” to illustrate poetic images: the “still point” where past and future meet in T. S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” and the integrity of one’s life and work implied in the title of Cesare Pavese’s *Il Mestiere di Vivere* (The Business of Living). *Tenzone* (1975), the earliest piece on this disc, relies on the interplay between two poets in medieval Italy. These works also reveal an interest in the ways musical ideas and forms are inspired by literature and painting, influences that continue to inspire my most recent compositions.

In the 1980s, I wanted to explore other materials and began to think in different harmonic languages. For example, my Piano Concerto (1983) acknowledges a lifelong passion for the music of George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, and it incorporates their sounds without imitating them. At the same time, I developed new structural bases, as in Piano Sonata (1986, rev. 1987), which adopts the modular arrangements of a triptych lithograph by Jasper Johns. *Incitation to Desire* (Tango) (1984), *Traverso* (1987), and *Companion Piece* (for Morton Feldman) (1989/1991) follow these stylistic directions.

The most recent composition on this recording is a song cycle that grew directly from my work with text and characters in *Tight-Ropes*, an opera I wrote with Henry Butler in 1985. In *The Gift of Life* (1990–93), I chose texts according to their power to generate musical images concerning memory, time, and the cyclical nature of existence, themes that are recurrent

in my music. The notes that follow give a more detailed description of each work.

*Traverso*, for flute and piano (1987), is a duo equally balanced between both instruments. It was commissioned by the National Flute Association to be featured at the 1987 Young Artists International Flute Competition in St. Louis, and it was premiered in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall on May 8, 1988, by the First Prize Winner, Göran Marcusson from Sweden, with pianist Joakim Kallhed, who also recorded it in 1994 for Intim Musik (Sweden).

Although I was not given any particular guidelines as to the nature of the composition, I felt strongly that the work should be musically more challenging than a traditional virtuosic competition piece. The Italian title means “transverse, lying across, breadth” and suggests not only the flute itself, but also a music that extends over diverse feelings and ideas—ideas such as “musical landscapes.” In this work I blend a “Japanese landscape,” in the sense of stillness, with an “open landscape,” in the sense of American harmonies of the 1930s and ‘40s.

*The Gift of Life*, for soprano and piano (1990–93), is a song cycle with texts by Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov, and Thornton Wilder. These songs were written for soprano Judith Bettina, who first performed them with her husband, pianist James Goldsworthy, in Palo Alto, California on June 27, 1993. The poem by Emily Dickinson, “Mama Never Forgets Her Birds,” is set as a lullaby, written to celebrate the birth of their daughter, Ariana Tamar Goldsworthy. The cycle, continuing with “The 90th Year,” by Denise Levertov, and an adaptation of the last lines of Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge*

of *San Luis Rey*, speaks of birth, life, memory, loss, death, and, finally, love.

*Companion Piece* (for Morton Feldman), for piano (1989/91), was inspired by my first meeting with Morton Feldman in Buffalo in 1979. His apartment was neat and sparse: a Steinway, a work table, a Rauschenberg on one wall, the now-famous Brown/Feldman cover from Time Records on another, and many ancient Oriental, Turkish, and Iroquois carpets. His talk about his music and compositional techniques had as lasting an impact on me as did his intense passion for those carpets. He encouraged me to get close to the floor and look at their textures, reliefs, orchestration, what he called “symmetry even through imperfection,” and explained how he was translating these impressions into the musical notes of the string quartet he was then writing.

In this work I am commenting musically on Morton Feldman’s *Extensions 3*, written for piano in 1952. This solo piano version of *Companion Piece*—premiered by Anthony de Mare at Sarah Lawrence College on November 21, 1991—is based on the original duet for contrabass and piano written for Robert Black and Anthony de Mare, who first performed it at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England on November 20, 1989.

*Incitation to Desire* (Tango), for piano (1984), was written for Yvar Mikhashoff, who premiered it at the North American New Music Festival in Buffalo on April 14, 1985, and whose recording of it appears on a New Albion recording released in 1995. It was originally published by Quadrivium Music Press as part of the International Tango Collection that included eighty-eight composers as varied as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Virgil Thomson. (The Skaneateles Festival commissioned a version for clarinet, horn, violin, violoncello, percussion, and piano that was premiered on September 3, 1993, and is dedicated to pianist Robert Weirich and cellist Lindsay Groves.) It is in one short movement starting with a brief, flashy introduction, followed by the tango itself. The tango is to be played “in the style of a tango-canción” (originally a vocal form with instrumental accompaniment and strong sentimental character), and features abstract *habanera* rhythmic patterns in 2/4 meter and a sentimental melody; it is followed by a brief, driving coda. The title comes from H. C. Colles’s “Tango” entry in the fifth volume of the 1944 third edition of Grove’s *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*: “The movements of the dance are less presentable to a polite audience than those of the Habanera, and as now performed in the cafés *chantants* of Madrid and other cities of Spain the Tango has become nothing but an incitation to desire.”

*Mestiere*, for piano (1979), is a celebration of the contrasting sonorities—incisive and lyrical—that are natural to the piano. The Italian title is translated as “craft, business, occupation, whatever is necessary to one’s profession or art.” “*Mestiere*” is what one is and does, what is integral to one’s life and work. Here, the work is used as it is in the title of Cesare Pavese’s collected journals, *Il Mestiere di Vivere* (The Business of Living).

*Mestiere* was commissioned by Tulane University for the 1979 Festival of Piano Music and is dedicated to Robert Weirich, who first performed it on March 4, 1979, in New Orleans and recorded it for CRI in 1981.

*Tenzone* (1975), for two flutes and piano, takes its title from the Italian *tenzone* (“tension”), a lyric interchange in medieval Italy and Provence, usually between two poets, concerning topical poetic devices and ideas. This piece itself is a response to the work of Toru Takemitsu, composer, teacher, and friend,

to whom it is gratefully dedicated. It was first performed by Robert Dick and Keith Underwood, flutes, and Chester Biscardi, piano, at Yale University in 1975 and recorded for CRI with the same flutists and Robert Weirich, piano, in 1978.

Specifically, *Tenzone* is similar in its lyrical and expressive quality to Takemitsu’s *Masque*, for two flutes (1959), which is in two parts, *Continu* and *Incidental*, both traditionally measured and notated. It differs, however, in its overall construction. It is in one continuous movement, intermixing sections traditionally measured and notated with those “as fast as possible” and unmeasured. It differs also in its subtle use of extended, more recently developed flute techniques that, along with the repetition of tones or cells that establish rich, sonorous centers, create the timbral, harmonic, and dramatic motion of the work. A piano was added in order to extend the acoustical range and direct the natural development and flow of the music.

*At the Still Point*, for orchestra (1977), was written for the Orchestra della Radiotelevisione Italiana in Rome and first performed under the direction of Massimo Pradella on December 7, 1977. The American premiere took place on November 15, 1980, with the Houston Symphony, C. William Harwood conducting. This recording for CRI was made following the first New York performance by the American Composers Orchestra, directed by Paul Lustig Dunkel, in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center on February 1, 1982.

*At the Still Point* is scored for an orchestra of 40 players divided into four groups: a high group of two flutes, two clarinets, two trumpets, bongos, congas, tom-toms, glockenspiel, vibraphone, and eight violins; a low group of oboe, English horn, bassoon, contrabassoon, two trombones, tuba, timpani, tom-toms, timbales, four cellos, and two basses; a center group of two horns, four violas, vibraphone, marimba, glockenspiel, and piano that connect the two timbral extremes; and a trio consisting of flute, violin, and piano that functions at different times as a drone and as a group of primary musical importance.

—Chester Biscardi

When Chester Biscardi talks about his music and about his life, sometimes it’s hard to tell where one leaves off and the other emerges. “For me writing music is part of a continuing process of awareness—of self and of trying to make an intellectual and emotional connection to the world,” he says. In his music, one concern is with “space—registral and physical—and how that generates the form of a work.” Another is with timbral bridges, which connect diverse sonorities, and a third is with “frozen registration, when I keep a tone in a certain place until, for motivic or harmonic reasons, I intuitively feel that it must move.” In his teaching at Sarah Lawrence, he urges his own students toward an integrated, intuitive approach to composition.

Literature has given him ideas about form. The titles of his works provide clues to the sources of inspiration. The percussion piece *Trasumanar* (1980) stems from Dante; *Tenzone* (1975), for flute duo and piano, comes from a Provençal poetic form structured by means of dialogue; *Mestiere* (1979), for piano, and *Di Vivere* (1981), for clarinet and piano with flute, violin, and cello make up the title of an Italian journal called *The Business of Living*.

*At the Still Point*

“At the still point” is a line from T. S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” a poem dealing with the interplay of form with time, the “still point” being where past and future meet. It was not until Biscardi was well into the composition of the work that he

realized that its compositional elements—particularly the acoustical and timbral interplay of the four orchestral groups, and the whys and whens of pitch change—reminded him of the poem. Inspired by this association, he made use of a solo violin toward the end of the piece in a direct evocation of one of Eliot’s images. The placement of the four orchestral groups “allows the music to flow in a certain spatial way,” and accounts also for the pulling of the pitches into and out of their “frozen” registration. Biscardi also found that his “technique of dealing with form comes from a constant referral back to material already presented, a reevaluation of musical ideas that are continually related in a new context—a process which attempts to incorporate past as well as future ideas in the present moment.”

—Susan Feder

(from the liner notes to the original  
release of *At the Still Point*)

The music of **Chester Biscardi** (b Kenosha, WI, 19 Oct 1948) has been featured at the Gaudeamus Festival in Rotterdam, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England, Music Today-Japan in Tokyo, the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival, the North American New Music Festival in Buffalo, Piccolo Spoleto, and the 21st Annual Biennial of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Performances have also been sponsored by such organizations as the American Composers

Orchestra, the BBC-London, the Gothia Percussion Ensemble of Sweden, the Houston Symphony, the National Flute Association, the New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, the Orchestra della Radiotelevisione Italiana in Rome, and the UNESCO/International Music Council. His work is published by Merion Music of Theodore Presser, C. F. Peters, and the American Composers Edition. Recordings appear on CRI, Intim Musik (Sweden), and New Albion.

Biscardi is the recipient of the Prix de Rome, the Japan Foundation Fellowship, an Ives Scholarship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as grants from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts, among others.

He holds an M.A. in Italian literature and an M.M. in musical composition from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Doctor of Musical Arts from Yale. He is currently chairman of the music department at Sarah Lawrence College.

Other works by Chester Biscardi on CRI include Piano Sonata (1986, revised 1987) and *Mestiere*, for piano (1979), both recorded by Anthony de Mare, and *Trasumanar*, for twelve percussionists and piano (1980), recorded by the New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, Gary Van Dyke, conductor. (See CR565.)

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## Production Notes

CD mastered by Charles Harbutt, engineer at Sony Classical Productions, New York City.

Recording credits:

*Traverso*, *The Gift of Life*, *Incitation to Desire* (Tango), and *Composition Piece* (for Morton Feldman) produced by Judith Sherman, engineer. Recorded on February 12, 1993, at the SUNY Purchase Recital Hall. *Mestiere*, *Tenzone*, and *At the Still Point* produced by Carter Harmon. *Mestiere* recorded August 1981 at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, by Sam Fishkin, engineer. (From CRI SD 459.) *Tenzone* recorded August 1978 at Sprague Hall, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, by Eugene Kimball, engineer. (From CRI SD 400.) *At the Still Point* recorded February 1982 at the Whitman Auditorium, Brooklyn College, New York, by David Hancock, Engineer. (From CRI SD 474.)

Publishing:

*Traverso*, *Mestiere*, *Tenzone*, and *At the Still Point* (Merion Music, Inc./Theodore Presser Co.). *The Gift of Life*, *Companion Piece* (for Morton Feldman), *Incitation to Desire* (Tango) (C. F. Peters Co.). (BMI)

Special thanks to Peter Stewart.