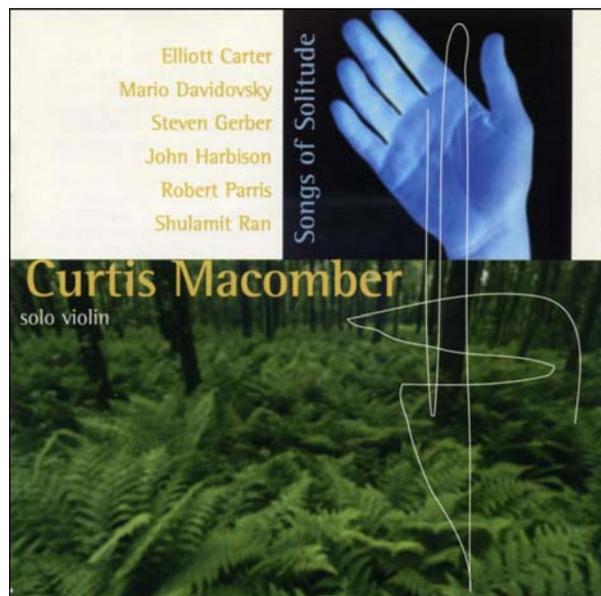


NWCR706

# Curtis Macomber

## Songs of Solitude



Shulamit Ran (b. 1949):

<i>Inscriptions</i> (1991) .....	(11:55)
1. I – Possessed by the Devil .....	(3:14)
2. II – Rondino mostly tongue-in-cheek .....	(3:14)
3. III – Upsurge .....	(4:34)

Mario Davidovsky (b.1934)

<i>Synchronisms</i> No. 9 for violin and electronic sounds (1988) .....	(8:48)
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John Harbison (b.1938):

<i>Four Songs of Solitude</i> (1985) .....	(15:13)
4. I – q = 66 .....	(3:43)
5. II – q. = 52 .....	(3:28)
6. III – e = 80 .....	(4:15)
7. IV – q = 100 .....	(4:26)
Steven R. Gerber .....	(b.1948):
8. <i>Fantasy</i> (1967) .....	(5:40)

Elliott Carter (b.1908)

9. <i>Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi</i> (1985) .....	(4:36)
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Robert Parris (b.1924)

<i>Sonata for Violin Solo</i> (1965) .....	(17:10)
10. I – Fantasia .....	(6:00)
11. II – Capriccio .....	(3:08)
12. III – Rondo .....	(7:52)

Steven R. Gerber (b.1948)

<i>Three Songs Without Words</i> (1986) .....	(4:22)
13. I – Her Dream .....	(1:17)
14. II – After Long Silence .....	(1:30)
15. III – His Confidence .....	(1:42)

Total playing time: 69:36

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## Notes

Music for violin alone may sound like a modern concept but, in fact, violin-with-nothing-on-it is a venerable and popular form of music making, long associated with various things that hardly even seem to go together anymore: dancing, the supernatural, supreme virtuosity, and intense expressivity.

The dance part may seem especially surprising, but not if one thinks about country music and the traditional barn dance or hoe-down. Solo fiddling was the standard accompaniment for social dancing from the medieval *estampie* through baroque court dancing and right on up to the square dance. European dancing masters, like country square dance callers, traveled with fiddle in hand to supply instant musical accompaniment. Their country cousins from Oslo to Ireland to the Ozarks did (do?) the same.

Dancing is actually not that far removed from the music of the great violin virtuosos from Biber to Paganini and the great solo sonatas of Bach are, after all, partly dance suites. Dance rhythms also lurk in the background of that of other great and influential example of the genre, the Bartók solo sonata.

The supernatural aura and the virtuoso pyrotechnics go together and they are almost equally as ancient. The devil plays the violin and so do his disciples. The wizardry of the

great virtuosos was possible only through a pact with the evil one. The legend was actively cultivated by the performers themselves and it shows up in music again and again: Tartini's *Devil's Trill*, the Paganini solo caprices, the Saint-Saëns *Danse Macabre*, Stravinsky's *L' Histoire du Soldat*.

The violin is a magic instrument, especially when it is all by itself. Without any help, the solo player must supply melody, rhythm, harmonic accompaniment and counterpoint. Add a bit of showmanship and a little smoke and you have a seriously virtuosic and genuinely magical medium.

But there is more. The violin is, in the end, a lyric voice and, often, an intensely personal one. In modern times, the string solo has taken on an increasingly serious position as perhaps the purest of all the genres. There are a few choice American examples from the older generation, one of the most notable being the Roger Sessions *Sonata*. Younger composers have taken up the solo violin in fresh ways.

For all the growing seriousness of the medium, suggestions of its origins in song and dance and the virtuoso and expressive challenges remain. Music for solo violin has again become a showcase, not only for the performer, but for the composer and listener as well.

**Shulamit Ran** was born in 1949 in Tel-Aviv, Israel, and graduated in 1967 from the Mannes School of Music. Her teachers included the Israeli composer Paul Ben Haim and Americans Norman Dello Joio and Ralph Shapey. Since 1973, she has been on the faculty of the University of Chicago and she has received awards and commissions from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Illinois Arts Council, the Fromm Foundation, the National Endowment, the Da Capo Chamber Players and many others. In 1991 her Symphony won a Kennedy Center Friedheim award and a Pulitzer Prize.

*Inscriptions* also dates from 1991. It was written for and dedicated to the violinist Samuel Magad, co-concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony, who gave its premiere in Orchestra Hall, Chicago, on June 9 of that same year. It has three movements, all of which carry suggestive titles. "...Possessed by the Devil" refers to the traditional association of the virtuoso and the evil one by, among other things, its consistent use of the tritone or diminished fifth, long regarded as "the devil's harmony" or *diabolus in musica*. The daemonic virtuosity, marked "brilliant," the stops, fits and starts, and the contrast between the unexpectedly diatonic/tonal elements and chromatic/atonal tendencies are all part of the fun. "...Rondino mostly tongue-in-cheek" uses repeated notes and a jaunty pizzicato tune that rises in 4/4 and falls in a hemiola 6/8; the less tongue-in-cheek subsections culminate in an intense passage marked "With abandon, passion" and "molto liberamente, expr" and lead to the return of the main Rondino theme. The finale, "...Upsurge," starts in the stratosphere to which it returns at the end; in between is a lively, figured and even dance-like movement marked "brisk" and "leggiero, with whimsy," another bit of the underworld perhaps before the music vanishes back into the upper regions of thin air.

**Mario Davidovsky**, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1934, has lived and worked in the United States since 1958 when he studied at Tanglewood with Milton Babbitt and 1960 when he began his long association with the Columbia-Princeton (now Columbia) Electronic Music Center, which he led until 1994, when he joined the faculty of Harvard University. He has a long list of performances, commissions, and honors including a Pulitzer Prize, Rockefeller and Guggenheim Fellowships, awards from Brandeis University, the American Academy and Institute, the Pan American Union and the Naumburg, Guggenheim, Koussevitzky, and Fromm foundations.

Davidovsky is best known for his notable series of *Synchronisms* for live instruments and recorded electronic sounds. These include, in order, works for flute, quartet, cello, chorus, percussion ensemble, piano, orchestra, woodwind quintet and solo violin. The *Synchronisms* No. 9 for violin and electronic sounds is dedicated to the violinist Rolf Schulte who gave the first performance of the work in 1988 at Tanglewood and also made its first recording.

Davidovsky was trained as a violinist and he was brought up on the traditions of what he calls "turn-of-the-century violinism." He literally takes the technique of one generation and applies it to the musical sensibility of another; Sarasate or Wieniawski serialized! He also plays with the relationship between the live instrument and the electronic part, one in the traditional Western tuning, the other with the whole gamut of tonal possibility on a continuum. "I was," he says, "trying to embed two musical spaces into one and hopefully come up with something that is more than the sum of its parts. The violin initiates gestures that the tape finishes. The violin modulates the tape and the tape modulates the violin."

Like the other works in the series, this piece follows traditional classical phrasing but neither traditional thematic construction nor strict twelve-tone methods apply. Davidovsky describes his compositional method as a "statistical curve of density"; it is related to European serialism but distinctive. Never mind; like the earlier *Synchronisms*, this is not a theoretical statement but a remarkably coherent piece with clarity and rhythmic integrity in its musical gestures.

**John Harbison** has had a distinguished career as a composer and a conductor. He was born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1938, studied at Harvard with Walter Piston, at the Berlin Hochschule with Boris Blacher, and at Princeton with Roger Sessions and Earl Kim. Since 1969, he has been on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he directs the Cantata Singers and is now Institute Professor, the first person in the arts to gain such an honor. He also has served as composer-in-residence at Reed College, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and at Tanglewood. He has a long list of honors and commissions including awards from the Guggenheim, Kennedy Center-Friedheim, Fromm and Koussevitzky foundations, and the Boston Symphony. He received a commission from the Metropolitan Opera for an operatic adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, slated for performance in 1999 [note: *The Great Gatsby* premiered Metropolitan Opera, December 20, 1999].

Harbison's wife, Rose Mary Pederson, is a violinist, and he has written a number of major works for her including a Sonata, a Sinfonia, and a Concerto for Violin and Orchestra as well as Variations for violin, clarinet and piano. The *Four Songs of Solitude* of 1985, dedicated to her as a personal gift, were originally intended to be performed only privately, a stipulation that has only recently been removed.

Aside from the word "solitude"—which may simply refer to the loneliness of the long distance solo violinist—there are few overt clues about the composer's expressive intentions; even the tempo indications are merely metronome marks. But each of the movements has a marked character: the first with its wistful descending chromaticism setting out from D; the second, a kind of barcarolle, with modal or pentatonic phrases marked *semplice* alternating with wide-stepping figures mostly in sharps; the third, highly figured and tonally uneasy; and the fourth, based on a recurring chorale in double stops alternating with a stop-and-go, sweet-and-sour second subject that keeps trying to push ahead, only to be tamed, calmed down, and absorbed by an extended version of the chorale, closing down and resolving on D.

**Steven R. Gerber** was born in 1948 in Washington, D.C., and studied there, at Haverford College and at Princeton. His teachers included Robert Parris, Milton Babbitt, J.K. Randall, and Earl Kim. He currently resides in New York City.

In the past few years Gerber has become perhaps the most often performed American composer in the former Soviet Union, having toured there numerous times and been given dozens of orchestral performances and many concerts of his solo and chamber works. His most recent compositions are *Dirge* and *Awakening*, premiered by the Russian National Orchestra under Mikhail Pletnev; a violin concerto written for Kurt Nikkanen and played by him at the Kennedy Center to rave reviews; a cello concerto written for Carter Brey; and String Quartet #4 for the Fine Arts Quartet.

His *Fantasy* for solo violin is an early work, composed in 1967, when he was eighteen and showing the influence of his teacher, Robert Parris, as well as that of Béla Bartók, whose solo sonata is one of the major models for the medium. It was

written for Donald Dal Maso and the first performance was by Geoffrey Michaels in Philadelphia in 1969. Gerber's concept of a fantasy employs the traditional big romantic violin sound together with tempo changes and a rubato used almost throughout (where he doesn't want rubato, he is actually constrained to say so!). But the musical material is also highly intense and dissonant in a very twentieth century manner. The main section, in 6/8 most of the way, is dominated by high levels of intensity and dynamic extremes, mostly fortissimo or louder but occasionally pianissimo and dolcissimo. The middle section, mostly soft and played with a bouncing bow, is marked scherzando; unlike the opening, which is steady in meter but very variable in tempo, this is variable in meter but steady and forward-driving in tempo. It builds to its own fortissimo climax and leads to a return of the opening. There is a rather extended, sustained coda marked dolce and molto legato.

**Elliott Carter**, one of the best-known and most influential composers of his generation, was born in New York in 1908 and educated at the Horace Mann School in New York City, at Harvard, at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris and in the studio of Nadia Boulanger; an early association with Charles Ives was also important in his early development. Carter's growth as a composer was gradual but since 1950, the year of his String Quartet No. 1, his reputation and influence have grown enormously. Major works include several large concert and orchestral pieces, five fine string quartets and a variety of chamber ensemble pieces. Carter's trademark is the differentiation of instruments and sections, giving each player or each group a characteristic mode of music speech generating a complex polyphony of rhythm and tempo.

How, one may ask, does a composer of multi-rhythmic, multi-tempo, multi-character polyphony write for one single violin? *Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi*, written for a 1985 Rome concert honoring a distinguished Italian colleague, provides an answer. The work is marked Quasi improvvisando, "almost as if improvised," yet it is written out in meticulous detail, a typical Carter creative contradiction. There are three different areas of musical character which are best described by Carter's own directions: dolce, legatissimo, scorrevole (sweet, smooth, and swift) for the first; giocosamente, furioso, martellato (playfully, furiously, with hammered accents) for the second; and tranquillo, ben legato (calmly, rather smoothly) for the third. The dolce music, moderately soft and off the beat, moves right along in an uneven, loping manner; the martellatos are loud, rhythmic, and strongly accented; tranquillo refers to soft double-stop chords in suspended motion. Just as Bach suggests and implies counterpoints and harmonic structures through his canny writing for a single violin, so Carter uses the same seemingly limited medium to suggest his multi-character universe.

**Robert Parris** was born in Philadelphia in 1924 and studied at the University of Pennsylvania, the Juilliard School, the Berkshire School of Music in Tanglewood and the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris. Since 1963 he has taught at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. where he

has been active in musical life as a composer, teacher, critic, pianist and harpsichordist.

The Sonata for Violin Solo was written in 1965 for a violinist who found it too difficult and was given its premiere only three years later by Joel Berman at the Phillips Collection in Washington. The opening Fantasia, like much of the music on this album, has an improvisational quality that makes free use of rubato, many changes of tempo, and a high level of contrasting material. There is a gradual intensification and a slide—literally a glissando—up to the climax after which the music subsides and returns to its earlier state. Parris calls the showy and tricky Capriccio, a "serious scherzo"; in contrast to the first movement, it keeps to a regular tempo and, except for a more complex mid-section, keeps a driving metrical regularity as well. The final Rondo in no way suggests the classical form but is, again in the composer's words, "slow and contemplative...the affective goal to which the earlier movements have been moving...[ending with] a rhyming confirmation of what was only implied previously." The dark and introspective lyricism of the movement is emphasized by the tuning, which requires the bottom string of the instrument to be lowered by a half step.

The final work on this program, Steven R. Gerber's *Three Songs Without Words*, is an arrangement from 1986 for solo violin of three of the composer's 1985 *Words for Music Perhaps*, settings of poems by William Butler Yeats for soprano and two violins. The first performance was by Anna Rabinova at the Phillips Collection in Washington. With or without words, these settings, simple and expressive, are more clearly tonal than Gerber's earlier work such as the *Fantasy*; his *Confidence* is even notated in four sharps, the key of E major. Although the pieces hold up musically on their own, it is of interest to read the texts for these *Songs without Words* which are included in the CD booklet.

—Eric Salzman

**Curtis Macomber** is a graduate of the Juilliard School where he was a student of Joseph Fuchs and a winner of the Morris Loeb and Walter Naumburg Prizes. He was first violinist of the New World String Quartet from 1982 to 1993 and made fourteen major recordings with the Quartet, was artist-in-residence at Harvard University and appeared numerous times on public radio and television in this country and Britain. A founding member of the Ives Piano Trio and a member of the Speculum Musicae ensemble since 1991, he has appeared in recital and with orchestra in all the major concert halls of New York as well as at the Kennedy Center, and the Festival of Two Worlds, Spoleto, Italy. He has also appeared with many major American chamber and new music ensembles including the Group for Contemporary Music and the New York New Music and in chamber music series across the country and in Europe. He has recorded for Nonesuch, CRI, Vanguard, Pickwick International, and Musical Heritage. Following his *Soliloquy*, an album for Koch International (featuring the Sessions Solo Sonata and works of Bruce Adolphe and Joel Hoffman) this album is the second in what he describes as a "comprehensive look at the great wealth of American music for solo violin."

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## Production Notes

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Editing assistance on Davidovsky: Jonathan Schultz

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