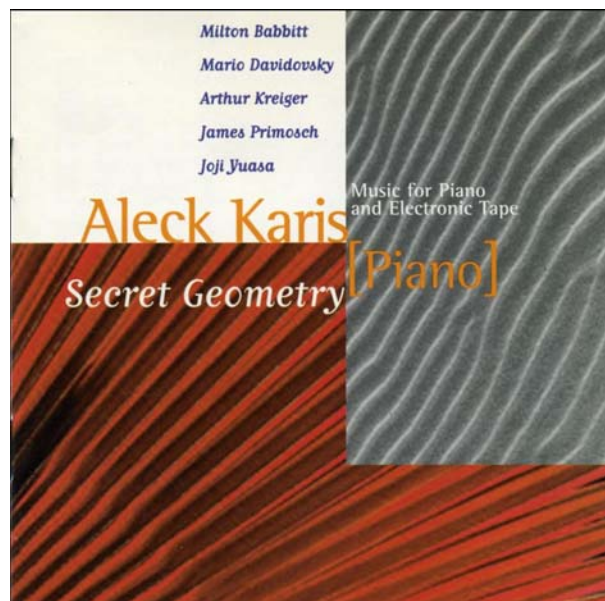


NWCR707

# Aleck Karis

## Secret Geometry



Mario Davidovsky

1. *Synchronisms* No. 6 (1970) ..... (6:59)

Arthur Kreiger

2. *Fantasy* (1979) ..... (7:11)

James Primosch

- Secret Geometry* (1992) ..... (12:10)
3. I. Variations ..... (5:01)
4. II. Nocturne ..... (3:32)
5. III. Toccata ..... (3:33)

Milton Babbitt

6. *Reflections* (1975) ..... (10:12)

Joji Yuasa

7. *Towards "The Midnight Sun"* (1984) ..... (19:05)

Total playing time: 56:20

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## Notes

All of the composers on this recording except Joji Yuasa have been associated with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center at Columbia University, and share those aesthetic values that developed primarily in academic institutions on the American east coast after World War II. Milton Babbitt (born 1916) was a significant driving force in the genesis of synthesized music in the early days of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Studio, composing the first extended work for synthesizer in 1961.

Mario Davidovsky (born 1934), whose *Synchronisms* series for performer(s) and electronics have become the *non plus ultra* of works in the medium, began his association with the studio in 1960, ultimately serving as its director until 1994. Arthur Kreiger (born 1945) has been connected with the studio as a student, technician, and teacher for twenty-three years, during which time he has produced a body of twenty-five works remarkable for their aesthetic and technical accomplishment. James Primosch (born 1956) studied with Mario Davidovsky at Columbia and received his doctorate in composition from the institution in 1988. He is now director of the Presser Electronic Music Studio at the University of Pennsylvania.

These four composers have treated the electronic apparatus as a means through which to create a new, timbrally versatile instrument that can function on its own, or, as is especially the case with Davidovsky, Kreiger and Primosch, can be used to alter and extend the sounds and capabilities of the conventional instruments or voices with which it interacts. These composers use electronics to create detailed, finely shaped, multi-timbred and motivically-oriented music.

Joji Yuasa (born 1929), an autodidact in composition, studied medicine at Keio University in his native Japan. He embraces aesthetic values different from those of his colleagues on this

recording, manifested in his overall treatment of electronics, in the relationship between electronics and piano, in the materials that he favors, and in the pacing of musical events.

**Mario Davidovsky** began his work at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Studio in 1960, at a time when there were few precedents in electronic composition. At that time, according to Davidovsky, composers “were trying to...create a musical logic and continuity between sounds that were totally unfamiliar to us.” Expertise gained in the studio, especially in the area of timbre (“I would listen to a single sound for hours,” he told this writer), led to the production of the eleven *Synchronisms* for conventional instrument (or voice) and electronics, works that set new standards for mixed-media pieces and inspired the next generation of composers. In 1971 Davidovsky was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Synchronisms* No. 6 for Piano and Electronic Sounds (1970), a seven-minute composition that is an encyclopedia of timbral invention for electronics and conventional instrument.

*Synchronisms* No. 6 was composed for pianist Robert Miller, who premiered it at the Tanglewood Contemporary Music Festival in 1970. It shares with the other *Synchronisms* an attempt, in the composer’s words, “to preserve the typical characteristics of the conventional instrument and of the electronic medium respectively—yet to achieve integration of both into a coherent musical texture.”

The work is a kaleidoscope of changing timbres and gestures, anchored by a handful of important returning pitches and the often reiterated harmonic interval of the major seventh. The electronic music functions in richly diverse ways. It often interacts with the piano to expand and enhance its timbral and dynamic capabilities, as in the beginning of the piece, where it makes the opening piano note appear to get louder. Throughout the work, the electronic sounds join with the

piano to create a complex sound world of integrated if disparate musical gestures. In addition to melding with the piano to create a single, enhanced instrument, the electronic music at other times dramatically opposes the piano's material with its own contrasting contrapuntal music. Occasionally, the electronics fade into the background, creating an unobtrusive canvas supporting the more intense foreground activity of the piano.

The seductive quality of Davidovsky's music stems from the composer's visceral delight in sound and gesture, his meticulous craftsmanship and sonic sensitivity, and a sophisticated feel for pacing that relegates even the most rigid pitch generating systems to the demands of a larger dramatic conception.

In *Fantasy for Piano and Electronic Tape* (1979), **Arthur Kreiger** conceives the electronics and piano as mutually supportive media. Electronics, intricately interwoven with the piano sounds, significantly enhance the instrument's sonic capabilities, creating a "superpiano." The consanguinity of the electronics and piano interaction informs the dramatic character of the piece; the two media never contend in concerto-like opposition, but cooperate in perfect synchronicity throughout. From the lingering, dark-hued chords (marked "lontano"—far away) that open the work (reminiscent of a chorale in presentation and voice leading), the listener knows that the sensual properties of sound itself will be as essential to *Fantasy* as are the constructive aspects of the composition. These chords, and others that later accompany the return of the opening melody, recur throughout the piece, and serve as the pillars of the form. Considerable drama is created by the clash between these slow-moving chords and the finely sculpted flurries of musical activity that weave the electronic music and piano virtuosically together.

*Fantasy for Piano and Electronic Tape* is dedicated to pianist Matthias Kriesberg.

Of the first four pieces on this recording, *Secret Geometry* (1992) by **James Primosch** owes the greatest debt to traditional musical values. This may be attributable to recent changes in the aesthetic climate that perhaps have influenced the youngest composer represented on this recording. During the last two decades, composers have been increasingly less convinced by what in 1951 Boulez called the necessity of "forsaking all memory to forge a perception without precedent," less concerned with "renouncing the legacies of the past," and more interested in creating a resonant and more inclusive musical language that does not reject constructive and aesthetic values of the past. In *Secret Geometry*, Primosch embraces the traditional piano sonata shape of three movements, ordered fast-slow-fast. The movements, formal structures, and characters also are inspired by the rich legacy of the piano repertoire. The first movement is a set of variations, the second a nocturne, and the third a whimsical toccata. Traditional also is the clear presentation and development of highly profiled and easily identifiable motives (for example, the opening jazzy, attention-getting riff that defines the shape of the variation movement and returns in the toccata), a carefully restricted intervallic language that stresses minor thirds and major sevenths, the repetition of important notes to create pitch centrality (producing a coherency that rejects more abstract and egalitarian serial pitch usage), the repetition of certain melodic contours (like the descending minor third gesture heard prominently in all three movements), and a more tolerant attitude toward the establishment of pulse.

A distinctive motivic complex-syncopated flurry, held note, and descending minor third—opens the Variations and serves to delineate its sections. The composer ingeniously combines the electronics and piano in increasingly minute and interactive ways. The second movement, *Nocturne*, contains the most evocative music of the first four pieces of this recording. The continually resurfacing twitterings of the movement's motive punctuates the electronic music's reflective stillness. The final movement, *Toccata*, alternates a motoric, scalar melody (derived with slight modification from a slow descending scale found at the structural center of the nocturne) with episodes of material that recall the other two movements. The stunning chords found in the last pages are explicit harmonizations of important melodies and contours heard in the first movement, one of many inventive techniques through which the composer unifies this work.

*Secret Geometry* was composed for Aleck Karis with the assistance of a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

As composer, theorist and educator, **Milton Babbitt** has been one of the most important and influential figures of the twentieth century. After meeting Schoenberg and becoming familiar with his music in the 1930s (music that was hardly ever performed at that time), Babbitt became, in his own words, an "unreconstructed ...twelve-tone composer." Babbitt's fascination with Schoenberg's discoveries and its implications, his mathematical expertise coupled with a deep affection for music, the ability to imagine, realize, and perceive complex relationships among a variety of musical parameters, and a truly adventurous spirit all prompted him to become the first composer to extend Schoenberg's serial technique from the domain of pitch to those of dynamics, register, rhythm, and articulation. A consultant in the construction of RCA's Mark II synthesizer at Princeton (which was installed in the Columbia-Princeton Music Studio), Babbitt composed the first extended composition for synthesized sound (1961), and has been a pioneer in the development of music for performers and electronic media.

*Reflections*, for piano and synthesized tape (1975), may be distinguished from the previous three works on this recording by a fundamental difference in the relationship between piano and electronics. In the first three pieces, electronics are frequently interlaced with the piano sounds to alter and extend the piano's sonic capabilities. As Babbitt is concerned with the most far-reaching and rigorous contrapuntalism, the electronic medium in *Reflections* tends to function as an independent "instrument" rather than as a partner in the expansion of the piano. Piano and electronics each contribute several lines to the dense contrapuntal fabric of the music. The ten-minute work is relentless in its activity, especially in the seemingly mercurial (but minutely planned) juxtaposition of contrasting dynamics, registers, timbres and gestures. The series of dynamics that constitutes only one aspect of the work's organization suffices to demonstrate that Babbitt is intrigued by the greatest juxtaposition of disparate elements: in the opening half second, the electronics trace a movement from *mf* to *ffff* to *pppp* to *ff*. This modus operandi-favoring maximum contrast-characterizes the composer's approach to rhythm, registration, and timbre as well.

Despite the intense foreground activity, the disparate parts gel to create a unified whole. The paradox of Babbitt's music is that discrete moments of extreme contrast compound to create larger gestures of unique lyricism, just as the differently shaped, colored, and textured bits of a mosaic may, in the hands of an artist with vision, create a unified "picture" when viewed from an appropriate distance.

**Joji Yuasa** was a founding member of the “Experimental Workshop” in Japan in 1951, collaborated with Roger Reynolds and Kuniharu Akiyama to create “Cross Talk” in Tokyo and Osaka, and has taught at the University of California at San Diego from 1981 until 1995. His music expresses different sensibilities than those of his colleagues on this recording. Although highly distinctive and original, the American composers hold certain interests and values in common. They generally favor a fast-paced unfolding of frequently dense musical material, and rarely use electronics as a means through which to create sound “environments.” The electronic medium either produces complex multi-timbred motives arrayed in counterpoint with the piano’s motives, or interacts with and extends the piano’s capabilities. Yuasa’s poetic and musical intentions in *Towards “The Midnight Sun”* (1984) appear to be different. The work is evocative, an homage to Ze-Ami, the fifteenth-century founder of Noh theater. Whereas the American composers generally use electronic and computer-generated sounds as their basic source materials, Yuasa favors concrete sources—stones struck with mallets, a stick of bamboo, sleigh bells, clay bells and a brandy snifter—that are manipulated by the computer, along with white noise. In Yuasa’s hands, the electronic medium rarely serves as a contrapuntal instrument, but more frequently creates moody atmospheres, emulating nature sounds.

*Towards “The Midnight Sun”* unfolds at a slower pace than any of the other pieces on this recording, concentrating, for example, on a single note (the opening D in the piano’s lowest register is heard sixty times before another pitch is sounded) or reflectively occupying itself with the thorough exploration of simple motives expressed with a variety of nuances. The title *Towards “The Midnight Sun”* is inspired by a Zen Ko-an quoted in Ze-Ami’s *Nine Grades* that reads, “In Shinra, the sun appears clearly at midnight.” Imposing electronic “atmospheres” and the elemental treatment of musical motives combine to represent the spiritually transcendent state that is the ultimate aim of Noh practice, and for which the image of the sun shining at midnight serves as a metaphor.

—Perry Goldstein

**Aleck Karis** is at home with both contemporary and classical works, and has recently appeared with New York’s Y Chamber Symphony, St. Luke’s Chamber Orchestra, the Richmond Symphony and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. He has been featured at leading international festivals including Bath, Geneva, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Miami, New York Philharmonic’s Horizons Festival, Caramoor, and the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He is the pianist with Speculum Musicae, the New York League-ISCM Chamber Players, and SONOR, the contemporary music ensemble of the University of California, San Diego. Awarded a solo recitalists’ fellowship by the NEA, Karis has been honored with two Fromm Foundation grants “in recognition of his commitment to the music of our time.”

Mr. Karis has recorded for Bridge, Nonesuch, New World, Neuma, Koch, and CRI. He can be heard on CRI’s recordings of Sonor Ensemble, Eleanor Cory, Milton Babbitt, Speculum Musicae, Tobias Picker, and Paul Moravec. His solo debut album for Bridge Records of music by Chopin, Carter and Schumann was nominated as “Best Recording of the Year” by *OPUS Magazine* (1987). Also on Bridge are a Mozart recital, and, most recently, an album of Stravinsky’s piano music. Other solo and chamber music recordings include works by Carter, Wolpe, Crumb, Babbitt, Martino, Lieberman, Reynolds, Anderson, Hyla, Steiger, and Shifrin. In a new CRI disc of Speculum Musicae, Karis is the soloist in Eric Moe’s *Kicking and Screaming* (CRI CD 705).

Artur Balsam and Beveridge Webster were among his major teachers while at the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School. He credits William Daghlian as a key mentor and his most important teacher.

Karis is currently a Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

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## Production Notes

Produced by William Daghlian

Recorded and Edited by Jonathan Schultz at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in June 1994.

Electronics for *Reflections*, *Synchronisms No. 6*, and *Fantasy* realized at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. Electronics for *Secret Geometry* realized at the Presser Electronic Music Studio at the University of Pennsylvania. Electronics for *Towards “The Midnight Sun”* realized at the Center for Music Experiment at the University of California, San Diego.