

Milton Babbitt

Piano Music Since 1983



1. *Canonical Form* (1983) (16:10)
2. *Emblems (ARS Emblematica)* (1989) (15:57)
3. *Preludes, Interludes, and Postlude* (1991) (12:10)
4. *Tutte le corde* (1994) (15:58)

Martin Goldray, piano

Total playing time: 60:15

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Notes

Milton Byron Babbitt (b Philadelphia, PA, 10 May 1916) was raised in Jackson, Mississippi, but soon made his way to New York City, where he was deeply excited by the musical and intellectual culture of the 1930s. That culture was marked by lively political, philosophical, and aesthetic debate, and by the increasing presence of European refugees, some of whom brought with them the Viennese ideas that shaped Babbitt's work so decisively. Babbitt's early influences—the music of Arnold Schoenberg, the musical theories of Heinrich Schenker, the science-oriented philosophy of the Vienna Circle, the literary ideas of British and American “New Criticism”—came together into a remarkable whole, setting an agenda that he has continued to pursue with determination and imagination.

Schoenberg's twelve-tone music showed Babbitt some extraordinary new possibilities of musical organization. Schenker's theories about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German music showed the possibility of insightful technical generalizations about the historical music that mattered most to Babbitt. Far more than Schoenberg's theoretical writings, Schenker's work revealed the shared compositional principles of an important musical repertoire. The philosophy of logical empiricism, with its emphasis on testable hypotheses and explicit formulation of scientific theories, suggested the exciting program of recasting music-theoretical ideas into a new no-nonsense language, unpretentious, lucid, and useful. “New Criticism,” with its meticulous attention to individual literary texts, its emphasis on detail and internal integration, supported a similar approach to musical compositions, an analytical approach that would address their internal workings and individuality, turning away from the distractions of biographical and historical information.

Putting these ideas together, Babbitt made himself into an impressive composer and theorist of music. Hired to teach at a top liberal arts school (Princeton), as well as a top conservatory

(Juilliard), he created an imposing, influential image: that of the academic composer/theorist, a new musical role that Babbitt exemplified, whose thoughts about music met the highest standards of academic discourse and whose compositional projects were integrated with theoretical and analytical work. In his writing and teaching, Babbitt showed several generations of music theorists how to extract a clear theory of tonality from Schenker's writings, setting aside as irrelevant Schenker's nationalism, numerology, poetic metaphors, and harsh evaluations of post-tonal music. Alongside Schenker's cleaned-up theory Babbitt placed his own deep and original theory of twelve-tone music; this used mathematical models that allowed Babbitt to discover and state many properties of twelve-tone pitch relations. Schenkerian tonality and Babbitt's twelve-tone system were supposed to stand together as rich, complex musical languages suitable for “serious music.” And, while Babbitt made these theoretical contributions, he also insisted on attention to the individual qualities of each composition, a concern that was especially evident in his teaching.

Babbitt's theoretical work became the most important influence on the new academic discipline of music theory, increasingly visible in North America from the 1950s to the 1970s. And he became known as the outstanding American composer in the postwar serial “movement” that also included well-publicized Europeans such as Boulez and Stockhausen. Remarkable musicians played Babbitt's compositions and sometimes recorded them; theorists and composers studied them, usually analyzing them in the terms provided by Babbitt's own theoretical work.

Today, almost 50 years after Babbitt's first theoretical publications, his ideas remain influential for some thinkers, but their peak of acceptance has passed. Indeed, many of his basic attitudes and intellectual orientations have become about as unfashionable as possible. Logical empiricism has been

attacked as a dehumanizing, acontextual discipline; similarly, many music scholars reject the music-theoretical work that developed under Babbitt's influence, arguing that professional theory and analysis have diverted scholarly attention from evocative descriptions of musical experience and from urgent personal, social, and political issues. (Incidentally, I agree with many aspects of these criticisms.) No doubt the apparent integration of Babbitt's theoretical and compositional work helped him to become as famous as he is. But now, admiration for his music can motivate an opposite impulse, a desire to distinguish the various strands of his achievements and evaluate them separately. Because Babbitt's ideas have come to seem so problematic, it may be easier than before to approach his music in terms different from his own.

In fact, Babbitt's theories and compositions do "go together" in obvious ways: his general discoveries about twelve-tone structure obviously shaped his compositional choices. But many of his admirers have been too impressed by this match, and have written enthusiastically about Babbitt's pieces as though the compositions are examples in support of his theories. Such writing sometimes seems to imply that Babbitt's music is a kind of advanced ear-training test—which most of us are bound to fail!

Perhaps, all along, theorists and critics should have paid more attention to Babbitt's emphasis on the individuality of compositions, and to his early claim that "there is no authority of ultimate validity beyond the formed, informed, and intelligently experienced musical perception." What you need to do, in the presence of Babbitt's music, is just listen, attentively. Pay close attention to the precise sounds that you hear; let them sink in, work on you, and let the pieces emerge as the startling individuals that they are.

This recording of recent piano music performed by Martin Goldray provides a wonderful opportunity to hear some of Babbitt's most attractive compositions. Like so much of his music, these pieces are incredibly pretty, persistently so, to the point of sustained voluptuousness. They are extreme, even reckless, in their delicacy and transparency. (In these ways they are completely at odds with some people's stereotype of Babbitt as a macho modernist.) Once you shed your preconceptions about how this music is likely to develop, you can hear every note, and as the pieces become familiar they seem more and more melodious, with intense, idiosyncratic lines sustained, somehow, through the blurts and discontinuities.

Piano music has been central to Babbitt's output throughout his career, and his music makes a marvelous new instrument out of the piano we have inherited from the late nineteenth century. His piano music creates a new kind of virtuosity, dazzling in live performance and heady enough in recorded sound. He

relies especially on the piano's clarity of articulation and the easy accessibility of its huge registral span. And he makes the most imaginative, dramatic, and varied use of the timbral contrasts of different registers; often the registers seem to interact like partners in a lively conversation.

Like other valuable parts of the piano repertory, Babbitt's pieces respond to the contrasting styles of different performers, providing a sensitive medium for communication of the performer's sensibility. Alan Feinberg's steely sheen, almost aggressive, is utterly different from Robert Taub's darker timbres and impetuous rhythms. Martin Goldray's performances add a distinctive new voice—my personal favorite for this music. In Goldray's hands these pieces often seem delicate, almost fragile; more than other performers, he brings out the fascination of the quieter parts of the pieces. He has a precision of dynamic and timbral control akin to Schnabel's, that allows him to create stunningly diverse surfaces and to make full use of the piano's timbral richness and differentiation. He shapes every motion, every silence, into meaningful gesture. Listening to Goldray, you hear the intensity of his concentration and the intensity of his own listening. It has never been easier to be drawn into Babbitt's music, to hang on every note, every odd, beautiful event, from beginning to end.

—Fred Everett Maus

As a pianist, conductor, and educator, **Martin Goldray** has excelled in all styles of contemporary American music. He has appeared as soloist and chamber musician with groups such as the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, the New Music Consort, Speculum Musicae, Parnassus, the Consortium, the Group for Contemporary Music, and the League/ISCM, and has premiered works written for him by Augusta Read Thomas, Milton Babbitt, and many others. He has been a member of the Philip Glass Ensemble since 1983 and has performed hundreds of concerts worldwide with that seven-member group. He has also conducted the premieres of several of Glass's operas.

Among the works that Goldray has recorded are Elliott Carter's Duo (with violinist Rolf Schulte), Andrew Imbrie's *Roethke Songs* (with Susan Naruki), piano pieces by J. K. Randall (collected on two CDs), and, with an ensemble, numerous Philip Glass works, including *Hydrogen Jukebox*, *Einstein on the Beach*, and *Music in Twelve Parts*. He has been a visiting artist in the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, and since 1991 has been on the faculty of the Composers Conference at Wellesley College.

Goldray received a B.A. from Cornell University, an M.M. from the University of Illinois, and a doctorate in piano from Yale University; he subsequently studied in Paris on a Fulbright scholarship. His teachers have included Malcolm Bilson, Carlos Buhler, and Yvonne Loriod, and his earliest musical studies were at the Dalcroze School of Music in New York City.

Production Notes

Produced by Martin Goldray and James Moses.
Executive producer: Joseph R. Dalton.
Recording engineer: James Moses.

Recorded July 1996 and January 1997 at Taplin Auditorium, Princeton, NJ.

Tutte le corde was written for Martin Goldray, who first performed it in the 1994 Composers Conference at Wellesley College. *Canonical Form*, *Emblems*, and *Preludes, Interludes, and Postlude* were written for and first performed by Robert Taub.

All works published by C. F. Peters (BMI).

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