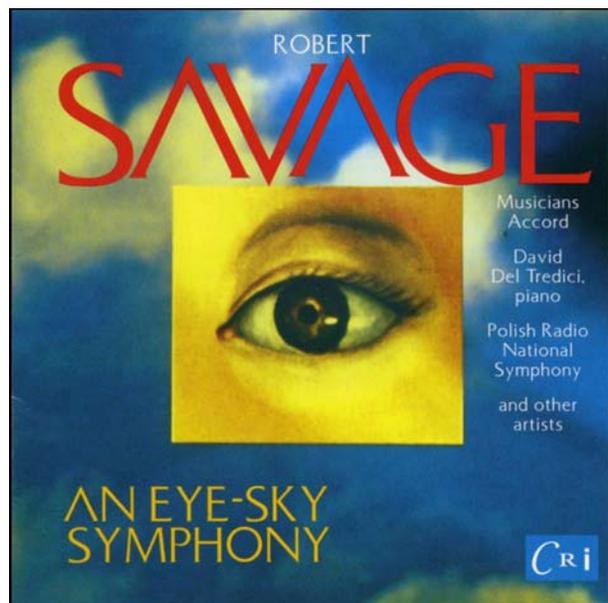


NWCR790

Robert Savage (1951–1993)

An Eye-Sky Symphony



1. *Cowboy Nocturne* (1975) (2:31)
David Del Tredici, piano
2. *Sudden Sunsets* (1989-1993) (14:02)
Musicians' Accord: Katherine Flanders Mukherji, flute; Tim Smith, bass clarinet; Julie Rosenfeld, violin; Ted Mook, cello; Sara Laimon, piano

3. *Nomad Exquisite* (1:53)
4. *Indian River* (1:38)
5. *Two Figures in Dense Violet Light* (3:28)
6. *Of Mere Being* (1:56)
7. *O Florida, Venereal Soil* (4:22)
8. *Fabliau of Florida* (1:56)
Musicians' Accord: Christine Schadeberg, soprano; Sara Laimon, piano
- An Eye-Sky Symphony* (1988) (14:26)
9. I – *The Eye-Sky* (6:28)
10. II – *During Fire* (3:15)
11. III – *Endless Spring* (4:35)
Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra; Joel Eric Suben, conductor
12. *AIDS Ward Scherzo* (1992) (9:40)
Sara Laimon, piano
13. *Frost Free* (1987) (5:30)
Musicians' Accord: Tim Smith, clarinet; Sara Laimon, piano

Total playing time: 61:22

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Notes

Robert Savage was a composer who spoke in diverse languages—the dance rhythms of the Caribbean zydeco, Chopinesque keyboard flourishes, the lilt of nineteen-thirties and forties American popular song, Stravinsky's ostinati, the pulsing patterns of Minimalism—fusing them into a post-modern voice all his own. Savage's broad compositional vision reflects his persona as a seeker—outwardly traveling to the Middle East, Latin America, and Europe; inwardly reaching toward the essence of Buddhist Enlightenment and finding ultimately creative expression in the face of AIDS.

Born of American parents in Saudi Arabia, Savage came to the United States as a teenager. He received a B.A. in music from Columbia University in 1975 where he studied with Jack Beeson. In subsequent years he studied privately with Ben Weber, Ned Rorem, David Diamond, John Corigliano, and David Del Tredici. Intensely engaged by the natural world from childhood, Savage took lengthy solo hiking trips in the nineteen-seventies and eighties in Central and South America, the Pacific Northwest, Florida, and the Southwestern mountains and deserts. These explorations not only provided compositional inspiration, but they also introduced Savage to indigenous musical forms. The zydeco, a popular dance form he encountered in a year's stay in New Orleans, became an important rhythmic force in his works.

A student of Zen Buddhism, Savage founded a Buddhist meditation group for persons with AIDS at the Gay Men's

Health Crisis in New York City. During a stay at Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York, he also wrote several essays published in the Monastery's journal, the Mountain Record, which relate his Zen practice to his experiences of nature.

A recipient of grants and fellowships from the Wurlitzer Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the MacDowell and Dorland Mountain Colonies, and Zen Mountain Monastery, Savage frequently played his music at gatherings of friends and associates but rarely performed his works in public. At age forty-two, Robert Savage died in New York City of complications from AIDS.

Cowboy Nocturne (1975) is an early work, written when Savage was twenty-three. Its surface alludes to a Chopin nocturne with widely spaced, broken-bass harmonizations of the melody in parallel sixths and abrupt dynamic shifts before the return of the main theme. However, Savage's compositional voice—the voice of the gay Cowboy—overwhelms the Chopinesque ambience, evoking the American popular song of the thirties and forties. Utilizing eight-bar phrases harmonized by ninth and seventh chords and a middle section with a contrasting “jump bass” completing a “bridge,” Savage incorporates the popular song's classic form as it was adored by the gay male culture of the time. Most striking is the final cadence ending on a ninth over a pedal

tone—a gesture unknown in Chopin’s Paris but common in every cocktail bar in Savage’s New York.

Frost Free (1987) has a savagely cryptic title. Could the composer be thinking of a refrigerator? What’s the inside joke? The obscurity of the title contrasts sharply with the clarity of the work’s emotional impact, juxtaposing extremes of sadness and joy. The opening phrase for solo clarinet states the plaintive theme which is then joined by the piano’s syncopated ostinato of C octaves in the right hand and low triads in the left. The ostinato’s funky rhythm ultimately underlies an alter ego of the sad opening melody, now dancelike, swinging and twirling in the piano, swooping into octatonic, ornamental cadenzas cross-dressed between Benny Goodman and Francis Poulenc. Ultimately, the plaintive melody returns in the coda, immediately followed by its happy cousin, this time swinging with the piano into a joyous ending in C.

Sudden Sunsets (1989-93) is Savage’s only work receiving compositional attention over a period of years. It was written for Gary Fisher, with whom Savage had his longest live-in, love relationship. The score is strewn not only with customary musical notation but with words to the players describing the emotional intent of the work: “explosively,” “ethereal,” “expressionless, white,” “funky,” and most common, “angry.” Instrumental gestures are to be played with “sudden anger” and “smoldering anger.” It is not surprising that the compositional life of this work stretches in time from Savage’s first awareness of being HIV positive to his death from AIDS.

The piece is in two sections, set apart by a slow duet for violin and cello. The first part consists of seemingly faraway images of “funky” dance music and “ethereal” solo piano in a dream-like registral spacing. The cello’s major-seventh motive provides an “angry” contrast, its double-stops repeated over and over again in rage. These images alternate throughout. The second part consists of a long minimalist section of repeating patterns, pulses, and pedal tones, and a slow conclusion of long, sustained tones. Savage marks the beginning of the final section only with the words “deep peace.” The anger is over. There is a “letting go.”

AIDS Ward Scherzo (1992) was written during a stay at Lenox Hill Hospital in 1992, the year before Savage’s death. The title of the work reveals a deep irony: “Scherzo” means “joke.” The work is written in an expanded scherzo form with two trios. The Scherzo proper begins with jazzy quartal chords that are heavily, even brutally, voiced. This passage gives way to the trio marked “Nostalgic” in the score. This languid, romantic music resumes the mood of *Cowboy Nocturne* of seventeen years before. Savage’s mixture of Chopinesque ambience and popular song is back in all its youthful glory. Both the scherzo and trio return, but each is abruptly cut-off, incomplete. The finale consists only of a single triad played over and over, louder and louder in different octaves. On the score the final triad is followed by one Japanese character, a powerful symbol of Savage’s Zen Buddhist practice.

Florida Poems (1984) on texts of Wallace Stevens is one of three surviving works for voice. Written in Taos, New Mexico, the work was conceived after a solo hiking trip to the Florida Everglades and a very social visit to Key West. The first song, “Exquisite Nomad,” is a melodious recitative in which the singer sings over only a few held chords in the piano. The intervallic contents of the singer’s lines have circular, sensual, erotic contours—with motives always imitating the setting of the word “Florida.” In contrast, the

second song, “Indian River,” evokes the word “jingle” by a light sixteenth-note ostinato in the piano, broken, however, by the stark setting of “Yet there is no spring in Florida”, a return to the opening melody of the whole cycle. The third song, “Two Figures in Dense Violet Light,” returns to the recitative style of “Exquisite Nomad,” its middle stanzas a variation of the cycle’s opening. “Of Mere Being,” the fourth song, is set in the contrasting, lilting triple meter of an early English folksong. The fifth song, “O Florida, Venereal Soil,” begins and ends with the voice accompanied by the “jump bass” of popular song. At the work’s midpoint, however, the “Fabliau of Florida,” returns to the pure recitative format of “Exquisite Nomad.” Here, however, the high ethereal harmonies accompanying the voice grow into lush, deep rolling chords—the primal “droning of the surf” at the cycle’s end.

An Eye-Sky Symphony (1988) is Savage’s most ambitious work, written when the composer first learned he was HIV-positive. Its programmatic titles reflect emotional states leading Savage to the acceptance of his own mortality. The first movement called “Eye-Sky” has the subtitles “Despair,” “Hope,” “Doubt,” and “Determination.” Musically, “Despair” and “Hope” are variations of the same material, reflecting the Buddhist assessments that both mind-states avoid the present reality to focus on an unknowable future. The slowly moving, atonal lines of “Despair”—stark in their octave settings—transform themselves into “Hope”—a lively syncopated oboe and clarinet counterpoint accompanied by rhythmically pulsating strings. Then comes denial—the next section, “Doubt,” which features a dancing, Latin melody suggesting emotional escape by remembrance of earlier youthful times, free from care. Finally the pulsating rhythms and strong orchestral chords of “Determination” stop any fantasies and prefigure the powerful second movement, “During the Fire.” Here loud chords drown out melodies with dancing Latin rhythms or Chopinesque sequences. The action winds down to a single note in the timpani, first struck *fortissimo* but quickly brought down to a virtually inaudible whisper, signaling transformation and rebirth. Then “Endless Spring” begins as a third movement whose lyrical tonal melodies connote stability and emotional maturity. The end, however, is a trumpet solo theme from the “Fires” of the second movement, penetrating sustained chords in the strings. The scoring of this passage alludes to Charles Ives’s *The Unanswered Question*, a favorite of Savage’s. Here, as in Ives’s work, the question of the solo trumpet remains unanswered, forever unknowable.

—Severine Neff

Musicians’ Accord, a new music project, founded in 1980 and directed by composer

Laura Kaminsky, is dedicated to the dissemination of contemporary music through the presentation of concerts, live broadcasts, master classes, workshops, recordings and the commissioning of new works. Presenting innovative concerts of contemporary music from a broad aesthetic spectrum, as well as classic and unknown twentieth century works, has given Musicians’ Accord a unique profile in the new music community.

In residence at the City College of New York since 1984, Musicians’ Accord has also served as regular guest artist at Fairleigh Dickinson University, N.J., as well as at the Juilliard School, New York University, Columbia University, Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music, SUNY at Stony Brook, The New School, and others. The ensemble has commissioned and/or premiered close to one hundred works to date.

Highlights of Musicians' Accord's activities outside the U.S. include performances and master classes in Macedonia and the Slovak Republic, and a three-year-long project in cooperation with the Spanish-American Joint Committee for Cultural and Educational Cooperation which brought new Spanish music to the States, and new American music to Spain, with Musicians' Accord performing on both sides of the Atlantic.

Among Musicians' Accord's many recordings, its collection *And Trouble Came: Musical Responses to AIDS* was released on CRI in 1996.

Since its inception, Musicians' Accord has been broadcast annually on radio stations such as WNYC, WQXR, WBAI, and the Voice of America, as well as others across the nation. Musicians' Accord records for the Mode, CRI and North/South labels.

The **Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra** was founded in 1935 in Warsaw by conductor-composer Grzegorz Fitelberg. The orchestra was re-founded in 1945 in Katowice. The list of conductors and soloists who have worked with the orchestra includes Arthur Rubinstein, Isaac Stern, Witold Lutoslawski, Krzysztof Penderecki, Leonard Bernstein, and Maurizio Pollini. The Polish Radio National Symphony has

made more than two hundred recordings for the EMI, Decca, Newport Classics, CRI, and Naxos labels. Under music director Antoni Wit, the orchestra maintains a high international profile through frequent appearances at major festivals and through touring in Europe and the Far East.

Joel Eric Suben has led first performances and commercial recordings of nearly two hundred works by American and European composers, among them Pulitzer Prize winners Roger Sessions and Leslie Bassett, a frequent guest conductor of major Central European Orchestras, Suben recorded, in the 1995 and 1996 seasons alone, over eleven hours of symphonic music with four different European orchestras for six different record labels. Suben's activities as a composer encompass some sixty published works. Since 1993 he has served as music advisor of the Wellesley Philharmonic in Massachusetts.

Severine Neff is professor of music theory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her latest book, co-authored with Patricia Carpenter and published by Columbia University Press, is an edition and translation of Arnold Schoenberg's *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of Its Presentation*.

Production Notes

Produced by Karl Hereim and Laura Kaminsky.

Recorded and edited by David Avidor, Home Productions.

An Eye-Sky Symphony recorded December 16 & 17, 1996 in the Concert Halls of the Polish Radio at Katowice, Poland. Produced and Edited by Beata Jankowska-Burzynska.

Sudden Sunsets, *AIDS Ward Scherzo*, and *Frost Free* recorded October 4–5, 1996 at Lenfell Hall, The Mansion, Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey.

Cowboy Nocturne and *Florida Poems* recorded December 16–17, 1996 at the Recital Hall, SUNY Purchase, New York.