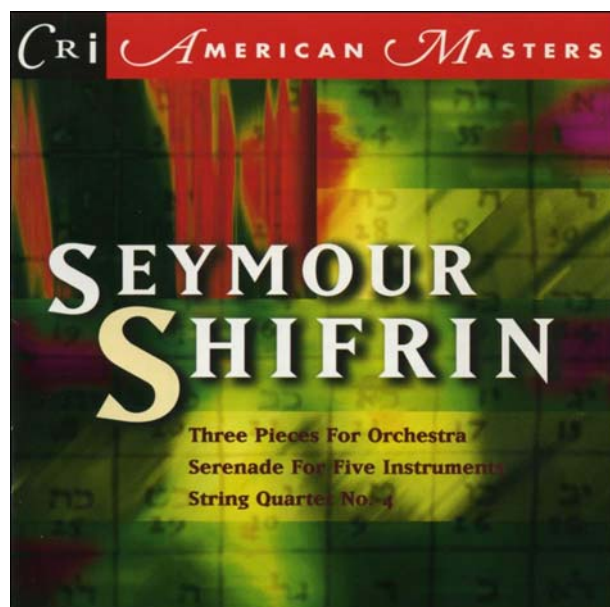


NWCR793

Seymour Shifrin (1926–1979)



Three Pieces for Orchestra (1958)	(22:57)
1. Allegro vivace	(6:50)
2. Largo assai	(10:51)
3. Allegro molto	(5:17)
London Sinfonietta; Jacques Monod, conductor	
String Quartet No. 4 (1966–67)	(21:52)
4. I – Lirico	(7:40)
5. II – Comodo, delicately, leisurely	(7:28)
6. III – Misurato; Allegro	(6:44)
Fine Arts Quartet: Leonard Sorkin, violin; George Sopkin, violin; Bernard Zaslow, viola; Abram Loft, cello	
Serenade for Five Instruments (1956)	(21:24)
7. I – Allegro molto	(7:45)
8. II – Largo assai	(9:40)
9. III – Presto molto	(3:59)
Melvin Kaplan, oboe; Charles Russo, clarinet; Robert Cecil, French horn; Ynez Lynch, viola; Harriet Wingreen, piano	
Total playing time: 66:28	

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Notes

Among the American composers who were born between the world wars and who came of age during the nineteen-thirties and forties, a small handful have captured the lion's share of public and critical attention—admittedly worthy artists such as Lukas Foss, Gunther Schuller, Ralph Shapey, and George Crumb—at the expense of a number of top-drawer musicians who still await adequate notice. One composer in the latter category is **Seymour Shifrin**, who was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1926 and died in 1979, aged fifty-three, in the Boston suburb of Natick. While there seems little question that, had Shifrin lived at least into his seventies, he might have achieved greater acclaim, nevertheless his legacy of some fifty brilliantly crafted works offers rich rewards for those seeking a more complete picture of the astonishing variety of American music after World War II.

The present disc presents three broadly representative works by the American master whom *Time Magazine* hailed early on as “one of the most significant composers of his generation.” The *Three Pieces for Orchestra* (1958) manifest the composer's orchestral aplomb, the *Serenade for Five Instruments* (1956) reveals his lyrical, linear ingenuity, and the *String Quartet No. 4* (1966–67) shows the full rigor of his structural mastery.

Shifrin began his musical studies at the age of six, and he soon demonstrated a precocity that was recognized by the composer William Schuman, who was at that time still in the employ of G. Schirmer. In 1942, when Shifrin was a pupil at the city's High School of Music and Art, Schuman (who three years later would become the influential president of the Juilliard School) offered the youth private study in composition. Two years later Shifrin entered Columbia University, where in 1947 he earned a B.A. and in 1949, an M.A. in composition. At Columbia his principal instruction was from the highly original and experimental composer Otto Luening,

whose meticulous attention to structural and linear detail can often be heard echoing in Shifrin's music.

After holding brief teaching positions at Columbia and at City College, CUNY, Shifrin received a Fulbright for study abroad, and in 1951–52 he was a student of Darius Milhaud in Paris—another whose influence is felt in Shifrin's music, particularly in his scherzando style, which has something of the fleeting “bounce” of French composers of the neoclassicist tradition. The remainder of Shifrin's career was divided between the American coasts: upon returning from France he taught at the University of California at Berkeley (1952–66), and from 1966 to his death he was on the faculty of Brandeis.

Shifrin's music is notable for a hard-edged chromaticism, which often crosses over into atonality and even serialism, but which is tempered by a consistent and intelligent use of forms and periodic phrase-structures familiar to most listeners. His catalogue includes cantatas, songs, theatrical and orchestral works, and many chamber works. *His Satires of Circumstance* from 1964, on a text by Thomas Hardy, is one of the vital vocal-chamber works of the era. Scored for a Pierrot-like accompaniment of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, double bass and piano (with mezzo-soprano), it received the Koussevitzky International Recording Award for 1970. Among other honors and awards he garnered were Columbia University's Bearn's Prize (1949), the Copley Award, the Horblit Prize (1963), and two Guggenheim Fellowships, in 1956 and 1960. He received numerous commissions and grants, including those from the Koussevitzky, Fromm, and Naumburg Foundations, and from the National Institute of Arts and Letters which made possible the present CRI recording.

The *Three Pieces* were composed in Berkeley on commission from Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, for the ISCM-League of Composers. Completed on December 21, 1958, the set won the Naumburg Award that year, and the

original CRI release of the present recording won the composer a second Koussevitzky Recording Award, in 1972. It is a prime illustration of Shifrin's dazzling skill at orchestral color, which here mitigates even the most aurally demanding of dissonant counterpoint. The first movement (*Allegro vivace*), which the composer has called "enunciatory and celebrative," has the character of an introduction. An ascending triplet-figure, heard in the cellos and bassoons at the outset, becomes the primary building-block of the piece, which is cast in three sections. "The opening is strongly accented, heraldic, with a trumpet call dominating," writes the composer. "The middle section draws extensively on its opening material to give an impression of kaleidoscopic plasticity—preparing for the return of the affirmative material of the first section, however developed and extended." The second movement (*Largo assai*), a richly hued "night-piece," builds from a delicate texture (though featuring percussion) into a vigorous climax, before regaining its initial composure. The big *Allegro molto* that forms the third piece is built from four explosive germ motives heard in the first nine bars, each explored in a cumulative fashion. "The texture, though constantly changing, grows by interrelation," the composer points out.

Another product of Shifrin's initial Berkeley years was the *Serenade* for Five Instruments, commissioned by the Juilliard School as part of its fiftieth anniversary celebrations. Completed in 1956, it received its premiere at Juilliard on February 17 of that year, performed by members of the school's faculty. Contrary to the nature of the term "serenade" (which normally would imply light, uncomplicated music), Shifrin's score is rigorous in design. "The title is given not in any generic sense," the composer has written. "It derives primarily from the character of the slow middle movement, and the relative directness and simplicity of the formal procedures used throughout." The first movement (*Allegro molto*) is imbued with a vigorous sense of forward-motion by the striking contrast between the opening part—"in which line and motive pass from one instrument to the other, with no one instrument predominating," as the composer writes—and the

second section, characterized by a continuously lyric clarinet line.

The central *Largo assai* again touches upon the Bartókian night-song character, with an initial theme in the piano that reappears at the movement's climax. The final *Presto molto*, which begins by resolving the last (unresolved) harmony of the previous movement, is a lively rondo that features the daunting chromaticism and rapid repeated-note passages characteristic of much of Shifrin's more animated music.

The full range of Shifrin's chromatic mastery is heard in the Fourth String Quartet, written in late 1966 and early 1967 on commission from the Fine Arts Music Foundation of Chicago. It received its first performance by the Fine Arts Quartet, to whom it is dedicated. Cast in three movements that are performed with only slight pauses between, the piece draws upon all aspects of a quartet's contrapuntal and rhythmic abilities. The first movement (*Lirico*) begins with a muted section of striking intervallic material, contrasted with florid arabesques and chordal interjections to challenge the predominantly linear nature of the piece. A central section without mutes "extracts from the opening those aspects that were secondary—the chordal interjection, the arabesque figures—and evolves from them a continuity in discontinuities," as the composer writes. "Gradually the harmonies refer more closely to the opening and there grows a sense of the lyric line emerging again, transformed." A second movement (*Comodo*) contrasts ever-shifting timbral colors with "a refrain-like melody, simple and songlike, but it, too, is unpredictable in its coming and going," Shifrin writes. "Suddenly the web is interrupted and an angular explosive succession of trumpet-like contrapuntal figures is announced, overlaps, builds to an intense *stretto* and ends abruptly." The original tempo is restored, "but the seeming simplicity of the opening is never fully regained." The finale (*Misurato-Allegro*) presents a slow introduction, to anchor the harmonic relationships that will ensue, then launches into a dazzling *Allegro* that builds to a climactic "point of union between these harmonies and those of the first movement."

—Paul J. Horsley

Production Notes

From CRI SD 123:

Serenade for Five Instruments: Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded October 1957, Blake Studios, NYC. Original recording made possible by a grant from The American Academy of Arts and Letters.

From CRI SD 275:

Three pieces for Orchestra: Produced by Carter Harman. Orchestra recorded by Eric Tomlinson. Original recording made possible by a grant from the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation.

From CRI SD 358:

String Quartet No. 4: Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded by Jerry Newman, New York, March 5, 1961. Original recording made possible by grants from the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University and the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc.

This recording has been made possible through the generous support of the Aaron Copland fund for Music.

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