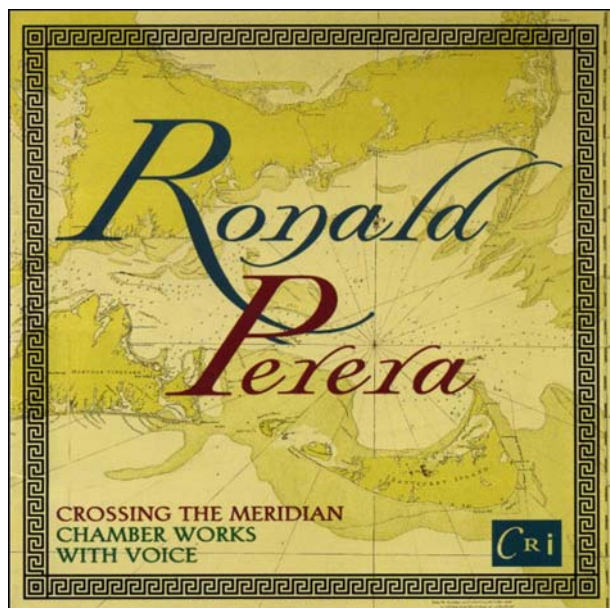


NWCR796

Ronald Perera

Crossing The Meridian



Crossing The Meridian (1982) (21:58)

1. I July 18, 1846, crossing the
2. Great Divide (4:42)
3. II That Sensual Phosphorescence (2:54)
4. III Meticulous, Past Midnight (6:25)
5. IV Danse Russe (2:09)
6. V Math (5:48)

John Aler, tenor; Boston Musica Viva: Renèe Krimsier, flute; Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Vytas Baksys, piano; Richard Flanagan, percussion; Bayla Keyes, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Ronald Lowry, cello; Richard Pittman, conductor

Three Poems of Günter Grass (1974) (22:14)

(Tape part produced at Smith College Electronic Music Studio)

7. I – Gleisdreieck (Gleisdreieck) (9:12)
8. II – Klappstühle (Folding Chairs) (7:52)
9. III – Schlaflos (Sleepless) (5:10)

Elsa Charlston, soprano; Boston Musica Viva: J. Fenwick Smith, flute; William Wrzesien, clarinet Evelyn Zukerman, piano; Daniel Stepner, violin; Aaron Picht, viola; Bruce Coppock, cello; Richard Pittman, conductor

Visions (1992) (15:16)

10. I – Sky Above Clouds (3:54)
11. II – The Writer (6:27)
12. III – After Brancusi (4:55)

Jane Bryden, soprano; Karen Smith Emerson, soprano; Boston Musica Viva: Renèe Krimsier, flute; Laura Ahlbeck, oboe; Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Seth Orgel, horn; Richard Ranti, bassoon; Geoffrey Burleson, piano; Bayla Keyes, violin; Jennifer Elowitch, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Ronald Lowry, cello; James Orleans, bass; Richard Pittman, conductor

13. *Alternate Routes* for electronic tape (1971) (8:14)

(Produced at Bregman Electronic Music Studio, Dartmouth College.)

Total playing time: 67:42

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Notes

Ronald Perera's music is filled with color and imagery. This is as true of his purely instrumental music and his many vocal settings as it is of works that add real-life sounds recorded on tape and of his synthesized electronic music. His vivid images are not designed to project some kind of pat program, but rather serve with great flexibility to underscore the emotional character of a work and of its changing emotional states, especially in settings of carefully chosen, strongly felt poetry.

Ronald Perera was born in Boston on December 25, 1941. He grew up in the Boston area, attended Harvard University, where he studied with Leon Kirchner. Later he pursued electronic music at the University of Utrecht, with Gottfried Michael Koenig. He also worked independently with Randall Thompson in choral music and with Mario Davidovsky in electronic music. Perera's extensive work in the field of electronic and computer music led to the completion of a major text with Jon Appleton, *The Development and Practice of Electronic Music* (1975). Since 1971 he has taught at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he holds the Elsie Irwin Sweeney chair in music.

Through the 1970s, he composed a great deal of electronic music, including both works for tape alone (such as *Alternate Routes*, 1971) and a number of compositions for tape with a singer, a chorus, an instrumentalist, or an entire chamber ensemble with vocalist (*Three Poems of Günter Grass*, 1974). More recently he has concentrated on acoustic instruments and voice, with song cycles, choral works, and two operas, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (based on a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1989) and *S.* (based on the novel by John Updike, 1995). Probably his most characteristic works are those that link a series of poems on a given theme (often an anthology from various poets) set for a voice, or several voices, with a chamber ensemble. In these works—including *Crossing the Meridian* (1982) and *Visions* (1993)—he grasps the expressive as an answer to Hamilton's discontent world of each text and projects it immediately through the vividness of his musical gestures and images, while creating a music of wonderful vocality that is fully responsive to the diction of the poems.

Alternate Routes (1971)

The earliest work in this program is one of Perera's purely electronic ventures, composed while he was acting director of the Dartmouth Electronic Music Studio. At Dartmouth he met the dancer Alison Becker Chase (who was later to become the co-founder and a prime inspiration for the famous dance ensemble Pilobolus). *Alternate Routes* was composed as the score for a dance work, growing out of the tension between two materials, one dense and percussive, the other transparently fragile. These alternate throughout in taking the predominant role. The work is made up entirely of electronic sounds produced on a Moog synthesizer.

"I conceived of all the sounds as having kinetic properties: wild spins and runs versus infinitely delicate and subtle departures from complete stillness... Another kind of alternation involved here has to do with a device on the synthesizer known as the electronic switch, which can route an input signal back and forth between two outputs. When an audio signal is alternately routed to two different speakers at a speed approaching an audio rate (around twenty times a second), a strange shimmering effect is created. This shimmering is characteristic of the lighter of the two materials in the piece."

Three Poems of Günter Grass (1974)

Given Perera's interest in and experience with electronic modes of composition, it is not surprising that many of his works naturally make use of tape in conjunction with live musicians. One of the best known of these is *Three Poems of Günter Grass*, which fuses quotations or imitations of widely differing kinds of music (jazz, marches, waltzes) with the taped sound of a train departing Berlin and other "actual" sounds (the term normally used to describe such sounds used in a composition is *musique concrète*) to achieve remarkable expressive effects.

Three Poems of Günter Grass was commissioned by the Goethe Institute of Boston for the Boston Musica Viva, Richard Pittman, director; the premiere took place on November 19, 1974. The work calls for the ensemble's core instrumentation—flute, clarinet, piano, violin, viola, and cello—plus a soprano soloist and an accompanying tape part of *musique concrète* derived from contemporary and historical German sound sources—a railroad train, a fragment of a Hitler rally, and so on.

Günter Grass (born 1929) published in 1959 the extraordinary first novel *The Tin Drum*, a ribald, picaresque, fantastic treatment of the Hitler era, which at once made him the literary spokesman of the generation that had grown up in Nazi Germany. All of his novels, as well as his poems, are politically topical. The poems set by Ronald Perera are the product of the period in which Germany was physically and politically divided. The music, made more specific in its imagery and mood by the particular sounds on the tape that focus the listener's attention even before the work starts and at other points during the three pieces, also vividly recalls the tormented Cold War years.

"Gleisdreieck" takes its name from that of a station on the Berlin elevated railway. Before the notorious Berlin wall was erected, this station was a frontier crossing point between East and West Berlin. The taped sound of a train's arrival at once establishes the milieu. But the song is not so much about a particular political situation as about the necessity of "choosing between conflicting alternatives, whether political, ethical, or personal," which, as the composer has noted, "can be transposed to any time or culture." The German text, the geographical location implied by the poem, and the adroit fusion of jazzy musical elements into the musical flow, as if

half-heard from a nearby cabaret, call to mind the work of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, though Perera's music is in no way an imitation of Weill's, but goes its own way.

"Klappstühle" (Folding Chairs), a "waltz fantasy," evokes the apparently innocent world of the past when a melody from Johann Strauss's *Künstlerleben* (Artist's Life) is heard on an old-fashioned music box. But the fragmented treatment of Strauss's theme suggests the shattering of that comfortable, old, solid society, particularly when it foreshadows fragments of the Nazi march *Die Jugend marschiert* (Youth marches).

"This somewhat bizarre musical setting was suggested by the bittersweet, at times almost nostalgic, character of a poem about refugees embarking on the trans-Atlantic journey to a new land while the culture they have left behind is engulfed."

"Schlaflos" (Sleepless) sets Grass's surrealist poem of a man who tries to count himself to sleep and does so by counting and recounting everything in his life.

"Counting back he finally arrives at the events of the war and comes face to face with the guilt which he cannot erase, and for which, in his waking life, he can obtain only a token absolution. The music makes a dramatic and narrative journey into his past."

Crossing the Meridian (1982)

Like the Günter Grass settings, *Crossing the Meridian* was composed for Boston Musica Viva, which gave the first performance under the direction of Richard Pittman in December 1982. Unlike the earlier piece, *Crossing the Meridian* is entirely for acoustic instruments without the use of tape, computers, or other electronic devices, and, as the composer's own commentary explains, is generally less complex than the kind of music he and others were writing in the previous decades. For the premiere, the composer wrote:

"Celestial navigators check their longitude by timing the exact moment the sun crosses their meridian. At this transit the sun seems to hang at its zenith, neither rising nor descending. So, also, can our lives seem to hang still in a moment of passage. *Crossing the Meridian* is about those moments when time can seem almost frozen to us, about those eternal-seeming moments when we perceive ourselves in the middle of experience: in "July 18, 1846, crossing the Great Divide," a pioneer woman at the symbolic midpoint of her journey westward; in "That Sensual Phosphorescence" the persistence of desire; in "Meticulous, Past Midnight" a premonition of lovers parting; in "Danse Russe" a moment of reflection before a mirror; in "Math" the ecstasy of the moment of breakthrough in a creative act."

The five poems by five very different American poets—Ruth Whitman, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and James Dickey—all share a subtext involving some kind of journey, whether it is physical, as in the crossing of the Great Divide of the first poem, a returning in memory to an earlier time of adolescent sexual awakening, as in "That Sensual Phosphorescence," or internal voyage of self-awareness (treated playfully) in "Danse Russe." Over the course of the cycle, the music traces an arc from a bright major-key orientation through the complex chromaticism of the third song to a regained brightness, celebrating a successful passage ending harmonically at the starting point—an echo of the first song's opening line: "An end or a beginning: is this the place..." The first and last songs are related in another way, too, as the composer explains:

"In this work I have also explored the use of very small note collections, especially in the first and last songs. The first song is a continuous variation on the pitch succession C, G, B-flat, F, E. The last song uses only the pitches generated by

the overtone series of C up to the twelfth harmonic—C, G, B-flat, D, E, F-sharp—only two notes different from the note collection in the “theme” of the first song. The music works itself out in quite opposite ways in these two songs, however, the first being tentative and searching in character, the last continuous and ecstatic.”

The second and fourth songs serve as short scherzos between the three pillars of the score, the one a fleeting memory of a distant sensual vision, the other a jaunty, even “zany” (the composer’s direction in the score) recollection of a private moment of hilarity.”

In addition to the tenor solo, *Crossing the Meridian* calls for the full core ensemble of the Boston Musica Viva: flute, clarinet, percussion, piano, violin, viola, and cello. The full ensemble performs in the first and fifth movements; the second is scored for flute, clarinet, and percussion; the fourth for clarinet and marimba; the third for strings and piano.

Visions (1992)

The most recent of the works to be heard here, for two sopranos and a large chamber ensemble of eleven instruments, offers three views of the artistic endeavor—the painter, the writer, and the sculptor—from three different American poets. Here, even more than in the earlier works, Perera’s lyrical approach to the poetry blossoms with the two soprano voices, providing mutual support, intertwining with one another, musical siblings, as it were. This quality is entirely fitting for the piece, which is dedicated to the memory of the composer’s older brother, Phillips Perera, a talented amateur painter, who died of cancer in 1992 at the age of 58. The Boston Musica Viva gave the first performance in October 1997.

Each of the three movements has its own character. The constant run of eighth-notes in “Sky Above Clouds” suggests the hovering of the clouds, which, though seemingly static are always in motion. The two singers both alternate and mirror one another’s lines, while long-held notes in changing groups of instruments suggests the vast expanse of the sky itself. “The Writer” opens with a series of rhythmically repeated notes (built from a twelve-tone row) that conjure up the monotonous, sometimes fitful click of the typewriter keys as the young writer—the poet’s daughter—composes her story. The image of the clicking keys recurs—“a bunched clamor of strokes”—throughout the setting of Richard Wilbur’s narrative poem, stopping to be replaced by more expressive gestures as the girl pauses to think, then taking up again with the dry rhythmic thrust. But the fitful attempt at writing reminds the poet of a starling trapped in the same room on an earlier occasion, trying again and again, painfully and sometimes in a frenzy, to escape to freedom—just as the writer, of whatever age, seeks to fly beyond the confines of the page-bound word. The trilling song of the trapped bird soars—just as the writer’s imagination aims to do.

“After Brancusi” is set with the sopranos’ sibling voices mostly in homophonic duet, “grounded in a bedrock of B-flat major,” as the composer notes, “through which rising scales push up and out like lava.” The breadth of line, the confident harmonic directness, emphasize the poetic certainty of the enduring quality of the sculpture, the work of art—and of love.

—Steven Ledbetter

Program Annotator for the
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Production Notes

Compact disc produced by Jeff Harrison at Harrison Digital Audio Services, Granby, MA.

Crossing the Meridian: recorded February 1996 by Jeff Harrison.

Three Poems of Günther Grass originally from CRI SD 420. Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded by the Hessian Radio, 1976.

Digital transfer of *Three Poems of Günther Grass* and *Alternate Routes* by Jeff Harrison.

Visions recorded October 1997 at Sweeney Concert Hall, Smith College by Jeff Harrison.

Three Poems of Günther Grass and *Crossing the Meridian* are published by E.C. Schirmer Music Co., Boston, MA.

Visions: ms; *Alternate Routes*: ms.

All works are ASCAP.