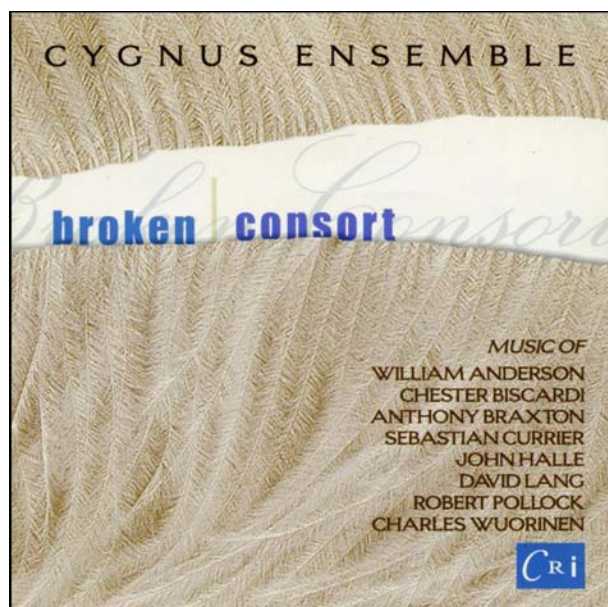


NWCR834

Cygnus Ensemble: Broken Consort



Sebastian Currier

1. *Broken Consort* (1996) (14:14)
For violin, cello, flute, oboe, and two guitars

John Halle

2. *Spooks* (1996) (7:54)
For violin, cello, flute, oboe, and two guitars

Charles Wuorinen

- Fenton Songs* (1997-98) (9:45)
3. I. Beauty, Danger, and Dismay (1:57)
4. II. Out of Danger (2:57)

5. III. Serious (1:28)
6. IV. Hinterhof (3:23)
For soprano, violin, cello, and two guitars

Chester Biscardi

7. *Resisting Stillness* (1996) (5:06)
For two guitars

David Lang

8. *Frag* (1984) (6:58)
For cello, flute, and oboe

William Anderson

- Ear Conception* (1994-95) (11:23)
9. I. (6:18)
10. II. (5:05)
For piano, violin, cello, flute, oboe, and two guitars

Anthony Braxton

11. *Composition No. 186* (1996) (12:10)
For violin, cello, flute, oboe, and two guitars

Robert Pollock

- Cygnature Piece* (1997) (9:28)
12. I. Mysteriously (5:29)
13. II. Dance (3:59)
For violin, cello, flute, oboe, and two guitars
Cygnus Ensemble: Jacqui Carrasco, violin; John Whitfield, cello; Tara Helen O'Connor, flute; Jacqueline Leclair, oboe; Oren Fader and William Anderson, guitars;
Guest Artists: Elizabeth Farnum, soprano (in Fenton Songs); Joan Forsyth, piano (in Ear Conception).

Total playing time: 76:58

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Notes

Necessity is the mother of, for both composers and performers of this age. If a group of talented musicians who love new music wish to perform together, but their instrumentation does not fit traditional ensemble templates, do they give up? Certainly not, as the musicians of the Cygnus Ensemble prove. Their instrumentation is unusual, but their blend of flute, oboe, violin, cello and two guitars does have precedent in the “broken consort” of Elizabethan times, with its blend of recorders, viols, and lutes (and in fact, the ensemble is not so far from that of much chamber music, as soon as one realizes the two guitars can fulfill the textural role usually taken by a piano). Further, these players know that if they announce their availability, composers will come. In fact, composers relish the chance to create new repertoire as much as performers, since their work may come to define a sound others will want to exploit. And Cygnus’s sound is infectious—light and clear, capable of both delicacy and drive, timbrally rich, transparent yet able to accommodate whatever degree of complexity one might desire.

Sebastian Currier is a New York composer whose music defies easy categorization. It is more synthetic than eclectic, blending a variety of elements into a seamless personal whole. (As just one example, his *Theo’s Notebook*, the musical diary of an imaginary composer, is one of the most original piano

works of the 1990s.) *Broken Consort* (1996) gains its name from the aforementioned Elizabethan term, and while Currier was inspired by that ancient sound, his own take on this ensemble timbre is utterly twentieth century. The piece combines a highly continuous flow with lightning-fast splices of material, cinematic in nature. There is a Stravinskian propulsion that seems to unite the most disparate materials; like the music of that master, this dances with a vengeance.

John Halle comes from somewhere else entirely. A talented jazz pianist, his *Spooks* (1996) has a subversive agenda, using elements of pop and minimalism. The title refers to clandestine operatives who are used to infiltrate groups, translated musically into the user-friendly blues riffs which open the piece. But these musical ideas are in a constant state of mutation, assuming different guises (a little like the virtual “agents” of *The Matrix*). They lead the music to more melancholic and chromatic moments, as well as to farther-flung explorations of pure sound and texture. By the piece’s end, we may not be sure exactly where we are (indeed, much of the original spirit of the work returns), but we certainly know we’ve gone somewhere.

Charles Wuorinen (b 1938) is one of the most eminent musicians in New York, a multiple threat as composer, conductor, pianist, and polemicist. While identified as his

generation's leading exponent of serialism, in fact he has so internalized the basic techniques of his craft that his music now is essentially "intuitive" the same way it was for masters of the tonal tradition. The 1997-8 *Fenton Songs* are concise and incisive settings of four love poems by James Fenton, with whom the composer is collaborating on an opera, the libretto based on Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The composer comments that the texts "progress from public to private, from agitation to repose, with local ups and downs along the way." Certainly the final song, "Hinterhof," is the goal of the set, with both its elegaic tone and its final consonant chord, a hard-won instant of serenity.

A fundamental lyricism has been a defining characteristic of **Chester Biscardi's** (b 1948) music throughout his career, and *Resisting Stillness* (1996), for the two guitars of Cygnus, is no exception. Unlike the preceding three pieces of the program, this is music whose rhythmic sense is extremely fluid and leisurely, which projects its meaning above all through the delicate interplay of timbre and pitch. Like much of Biscardi's work, there is an impressionistic sensitivity to the expressive power of pure sound, wedded to a bel canto line. The two guitars in fact become like a single dreamy meta-instrument, dropping handfuls of glistening harmonics which dapple the music's surface like light on water. This work was also commissioned by the International Guitar Festival of Morelia (Michoacan, Mexico) for William Anderson and Oren Fader.

David Lang (b 1957) has always searched for ways to tweak classical music conventions, which is immediately suggested by such titles as *Eating Living Monkeys* and *Cheating, Lying, Stealing*. *Frag* is an abbreviation for fragmentation bomb, though the music is more subversive than revolutionary. Written in 1984, the work attempts to completely demystify itself, laying bare all its technique for any listener to comprehend. The music consists of a single melodic line, presented in a sort of mutating unison by the trio of flute, oboe, and cello (the latter in very high register pizzicato). Only near the end does a simple counterpoint emerge between a pointillistic flute and a slow singing line in the other two instruments, as though a new sort of music is beginning to evolve out of the primal monophony which preceded it.

William Anderson is one of Cygnus's two guitarists, and his 1994-5 diptych *Ear Conception* shows an instinctive feel for the gossamer textures spun by his instrument. Inspired by a hymn whose first line states, "Thou that hast conceived by ear..." its two movements explore different but complementary states—the composer speaks of *agape/eros*, immanence/transcendence, amongst others. In purely musical terms, the music first presents a world of delicate, floating sounds, rhythmic not in a pulsed sense, but more like the lapping of waves. Out of this "oscillating stillness" emerges the second movement, which becomes dance-like and overtly gracious in its sounds and gestures. And near its conclusion, a magical stroke occurs. While the sound of a glass harmonica (Benjamin Franklin's invention) has been a part of the piece throughout, it now rises to a new prominence, giving a glistening sheen to chords. The music seems to move into a new realm entirely, a form of "transcendence" given very concrete musical form.

While decades of acclaim have established **Anthony Braxton** (b 1945) as a master of progressive jazz, he finds that label constricting, and justifiably so. In fact, Braxton has carved out a reputation as one of the leaders within that world where notated and improvised traditions intersect. His equal devotion to European and African-American traditions makes him a truly multicultural composer, and also one who attracts controversial reactions from both ends of the musical

spectrum. His 1996 Composition No. 186 is part of his "Ghost-Trance" series, pieces whose basic materials have a hypnotic uniformity (in this case represented by the even rhythms and unison texture which pervades the ensemble for large stretches of the piece). But this uniformity is deceptive; it exists in large part as a template against which we become aware of very different events occurring. The score is single line, without specified instrumentation or even clefs. Braxton gives this freedom so as to allow the performers to bend time, speeding up and slowing down the tempo of the music at will, to similarly inflect the sound with slippery glissandi (sliding tones), and to disrupt the regularity by allowing overlays of improvisation, or interpolations of other pieces of his. Thus the piece becomes very much a collaboration between the composer, a type of "prime mover" who plants a musical seed, and the performers, who realize his concept by bringing their own creative ideas to the work.

Robert Pollock, in his *Cygnature Piece* (1997), explores something of the same terrain as Anderson, but the music is more overtly dance like. What really drives the sound is the use of mandolin on the second guitar part. The first movement has almost the feel of a fandango with its rhythmic strumming, and in the second, the dance rhythms begin to support a tune whose directness imbues the music with a freshness and exuberance that belies the refinement of the writing. Pollock has created music which exploits the quintessential Cygnus sound—incisive and lilting—and makes a perfect coda to this ensemble recital.

—Robert Carl

The **Cygnus Ensemble**, founded in 1986 and based in New York City, interprets many periods and styles of music with its unique instrumentation and musical breadth.

The musicians of Cygnus are experts in styles spanning from Argentinean tango to the music of Harry Partch and Milton Babbitt, and they engage audiences by imaginatively exploring today's many musical languages. The group's core of two guitars, flute, oboe, violin, and cello is inspired by the seventeenth-century Broken Consort, and provides composers and audiences with sounds and ideas not available in other ensembles. Cygnus is particularly active in promoting the composition of new music and has commissioned many new works by a diverse collection of American composers. As of this writing, thirty-six pieces have been written for and premiered by the Cygnus Ensemble.

Cygnus performs throughout the world, and presents an annual New York City concert series in Merkin Concert Hall. They have toured Holland and Denmark, reached tens of thousands of listeners through a Polish National Radio broadcast, and performed a recital in Moscow, Russia, followed by a week-long residency in the new music festival "Europe/Asia" in Kazan, Tatarstan. Cygnus has appeared at festivals such as the Festival of New American Music at the California State University at Sacramento and the Waterloo Festival in New Jersey.

Cygnus is the recipient of numerous grants, including awards from the New York State Council on the Arts, the BMI Foundation, the Aaron Copland Fund, the Ditson Fund, the Kosciuszko Foundation, the American Composers Forum, the Koussevitzky Music Foundation of the Library of Congress, and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust.

The Cygnus Ensemble is a not-for-profit organization whose artistic direction is guided collectively by members of the ensemble: Jacqui Carrasco, violin; John Whitfield, cello; Tara Helen O'Connor, flute; Jacqueline Leclair, oboe; Oren Fader and William Anderson, guitars.

Guest Artists:

Pianist **Joan Forsyth** is from Vancouver, British Columbia. She is active as a chamber musician, recitalist and soloist with orchestra, appearing at the Kennedy Center with the Theater Chamber Players, as soloist with the Westchester Philharmonic, and on tours in Europe with the Cygnus Ensemble. She has recorded for CRI and Soundspells Productions, and has co-authored a book on the music of Robert Schumann. Ms. Forsyth now teaches privately in Bronxville where her studio is full and very active.

Versatile soprano **Elizabeth Farnum** specializes in twentieth-century music and is an active performer in the oratorio and recital fields. In high demand for her performances of new music, she has premiered pieces by Luciano Berio, Tristan Keuris and John Schlenck at Alice Tully Hall. Other premieres include Charles Wuorinen's *Fenton Songs*, Toby

Twining's *Chrysalid Requiem*, James Bassi's *Carol Symphony*, Anthony Braxton's opera, *Shala Fears for the Poor*, in which she created the role of Alva, and Roland Moser's *Nach Deutsche Volksliedern* with modern music ensemble Parnassus. In the oratorio field, Elizabeth has performed much of the standard repertoire, appearing as guest soloist with such orchestras as the American Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Leon Botstein, the Jupiter Symphony, and the Bronx Arts Ensemble. She is a member of the acclaimed early music group Pomerium, and has appeared as soloist with the Waverly Consort, Musica Sacra, BachWorks, and the New York Virtuoso Singers. Ms. Farnum is featured on recordings of Koch International, Helicon, BIS, Vox and New World Records. She has recorded four CDs for Deutsche Grammophon with Pomerium, the third of which was nominated for a Grammy in 1999.

Production Notes

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Engineering and editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis.

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