

NWCR874

Robert Helps

New Music for the Piano



Ingolf Dahl		
1. <i>Fanfares</i> (1958)	(2:50)	
Kent Kennan		
2. Two Preludes (1951)	(3:20)	
I. Rather freely; with a feeling of yearning and unrest		
II. Boldly, with vigor		
Samuel Adler		
3. <i>Capriccio</i> (1954)	(1:14)	
Hall Overton		
4. <i>Polarities</i> No. 1 (1958)	(2:53)	
Milton Babbitt		
5. <i>Partitions</i> (1957)	(1:45)	
Miriam Gideon		
6. <i>Piano Suite</i> No. 3 (1951)	(3:51)	
I. Restlessly		
II. Tenderly		
III. Vehemently		
Sol Berkowitz		
7. <i>Syncopations</i> (1958)	(1:37)	
Ben Weber		
8. <i>Humoreske</i> , Op. 49 (1958)	(2:46)	

Paul A. Pisk		
9. <i>Nocturnal Interlude</i>	(3:51)	
Mel Powell		
10. <i>Etude</i> (1957)	(1:46)	
Morton Gould		
11. <i>Rag-Blues-Rag</i>	(4:25)	
Alan Hovhaness		
12. <i>Allegro on a Pakistani Lute Tune</i> , Op. 104, No. 6 (1952)	(2:02)	
George Perle		
13. <i>Six Preludes</i> , Op. 20B (1946)	(4:20)	
Norman Cazden		
14. <i>Sonata</i> , Op. 53, No. 3 (1950)	(7:41)	
Joseph Probstakoff		
15. Two Bagatelles [[d.??]]	(3:41)	
I. Adagio molto e espressivo		
II. Con moto		
Peggy Glanville-Hicks		
16. <i>Prelude for a Pensive Pupil</i> (1963)	(2:28)	
Ernst Bacon		
17. <i>The Pig Town Fling</i> [[d.??]]	(3:17)	
Robert Helps		
18. <i>Image</i> (1957)	(3:01)	
Mark Brunswick		
19. <i>Six Bagatelles</i> (1958)	(4:40)	
I. Andante		
II. Allegro non troppo		
III. Lento		
IV. Allegro vivace		
V. Allegro scherzando		
VI. Allegro molto enrico		
Earl Kim		
20. Two Bagatelles (1948/50)	(2:48)	
I. Allegro scherzando (1950)		
II. Andante sostenuto (1948)		
Josef Alexander		
21. <i>Incantation</i> (1964)	(4:04)	
Robert Helps, piano		
Total playing time: 67:53		
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Notes

The years have passed—three decades and counting—since the time when the works in this collection could stand tall under the rubric “New Music for the Piano.” Robert Helps recorded this collection in 1966 (during, he remembers, a transit strike that had New York City walking if not staggering).

The music came from a published anthology of the same name, a collection of American pieces compiled under the auspices of the Abby Whiteside Foundation by Joseph Probstakoff, a student of the late Abby Whiteside. “They knew

practically every composer in the country,” Helps remembers, “and asked many of them for pieces for the collection. Some said they were too busy, but all of them at least sent their good wishes.”

Think of the state of music in America—in New York in particular—in 1966. Lincoln Center was brand new, and with it the concept of a centralized performing arts center in every major city, not merely as concert halls and opera houses but also as a creative force governing (and even funding) the

works of new composers and the emergence of new performers. For better or for worse, government was getting into the act, through the creation of the National Endowment. Music had its stars—Beverly Sills, Leonard Bernstein, Glenn Gould—and it also had its new languages. Electronic music, exotic scales, and instruments from Asia and Africa, multimedia “happenings” that involved the interaction of sight and sound, abstract expressionism and chance music—these all combined to project the notion that everything we’d heard in music up until then was merely the base of the mountain.

From the evidence of this collection, however, even the “base of the mountain” was a lively place. Take this hour-long sampling of the work of twenty-one greatly eminent Americans, whose music here ranges in date from 1946 (George Perle’s *Six Preludes*) to 1964 (Josef Alexander’s *Incantation*), as a document of an era, of a time of ending and beginning. (For an update, see CRI’s recent release *Solo Flights*, another American piano anthology that brings us up to 1997.) The variety is remarkable; there was not then, and there is not now, any single definition of “American music” that covered the territory. The metaphor of the “melting pot,” long associated with “new Americans” from all over the world drawn to this country since it was new, applies to the country’s music as well.

Even before the cultural purges instigated by Adolf Hitler’s Nazis, composers emigrating from abroad had introduced a magnificent impurity into the American musical mix. Joseph Probstakoff, composer, teacher, and editor of this collection, had arrived in 1922. Paul Pisk came in 1936, Ingolf Dahl in 1938, Samuel Adler a year later. Native-born composers had access to their teaching, and as well to the guiding presence of Arnold Schoenberg and Darius Milhaud on the West Coast, Paul Hindemith at Yale, Ernst Krenek in Minnesota, and Karol Rathaus at Queens College.

There were other kinds of “impurity” as well, all contributing to the vitality and the indefinability of America’s “New Music” circa 1964. There was, for one thing, jazz—already a shaping force in the world’s music for nearly fifty years, and still making its way further into the “serious” music world, thanks in part to three of the composers whose works appear on this CD: Morton Gould, Hall Overton, and Sol Berkowitz. There was also a growing tendency for composers to examine their own backgrounds and draw inspirations therefrom: thus, the music of Norman Cazden and Ernst Bacon clearly draw on American roots, while Alan Hovhaness’s voluminous output is deeply influenced by the Armenian tradition.

While in his teens, **Robert Helps** (b Passaic, NJ, 23 Sept 1928; d Tampa, FL, 1 Dec 2001) began serious musical study in both performance and composition: piano with Abby Whiteside, composition with Roger Sessions. He remembers Whiteside’s teaching particularly for its emphasis on “the physical aspects, how you use your body to create rhythm ... really, the most basic questions of ‘how d’ya play the piano?’ ” A longtime student of composer Roger Sessions (in New York, Berkeley, and Princeton), Helps has turned out an impressive body of work that has attracted other pianists—notably William Masselos and Beveridge Webster—along with soprano Bethany Beardslee and violinist Isidore Cohen. His First Symphony earned a Naumburg Foundation award and his Serenade was commissioned by the Fromm Foundation. The new CRI recording *Solo Flights* contains a more recent work by Helps, his 1977 *In Retrospect*. It is, of course, played by him. Since 1978 Helps has been on the music faculty of the University of South Florida in Tampa.

Helps took on the New Music for Piano project at Whiteside’s urging; the original recording, on RCA Victor, was distributed by the Abby Whiteside Foundation to six hundred libraries and educational radio stations. It was later reissued on CRI, again with Foundation support. “There were three or four pieces I didn’t like,” says Helps, “and they were the hard ones to learn. I’ve forgotten which ones they were, and I never listen to my own recordings anymore.”

Asked whether given the changes in the whole definition of music since the 1960s, he would still encourage a youngster to go into music—as a pianist or a composer—Helps replied: “Oh sure. Sometimes I get pessimistic, but then I discover that whatever it was isn’t as bad as I’d thought. After all, the alternative to *doing* is *not doing*, and that’s worse. I will always encourage a youngster to pursue a career in music *provided*—and that’s a big word—that there’s absolutely nothing else in that person’s life. If there is ... forget it.”

Ingolf Dahl (b Hamburg, Germany, 9 June 1912; d Frutigen, nr Bern, Switzerland, 6 Aug 1970) settled in Los Angeles in 1938, and studied with Nadia Boulanger when she gave master classes on the West Coast. On the faculty at the University of Southern California, he numbered Michael Tilson Thomas among his students. His most characteristic music, which includes this brief piano work and his popular *Concerto a Tre*, has a jaunty, Coplandesque character that testifies to his assimilation into the American musical scene.

Kent Kennan (b Milwaukee, WI, 18 April 1913; d Austin, TX, 1 Nov 2003) studied at the University of Michigan and the Eastman School of Music, and with Ildebrando Pizzetti in Rome as winner of the 1936 Prix de Rome. His *Night Soliloquy* for flute and orchestra was performed by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. His textbooks on orchestration and counterpoint are still widely used; his 1951 Preludes show a tendency toward the lean, athletic contrapuntal style of, among others, Paul Hindemith.

Samuel Adler (b Mannheim, Germany, 4 March 1928) came to the United States in 1939. His composition teachers included Walter Piston and Paul Hindemith; he also studied conducting with Serge Koussevitzky. Formerly teacher of composition at North Texas State University, he later moved to Eastman where he was professor of composition for almost thirty years. He is currently on the composition faculty of the Juilliard School. His compositions include a folk-opera based on Bret Harte’s *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*; his 1954 Capriccio has some of the same folksy lilt.

While best known as a composer operating on the cusp between “serious” music and jazz—his *Polarities* No. 1 echoes the exquisite harmonies of Duke Ellington—**Hall Overton** (b Bangor, MI, 23 Feb 1920; d New York City, 24 Nov 1972) only came to an involvement with the latter art while on combat duty overseas with the U.S. Third Armored Division. Before that he had studied counterpoint in Chicago with Gustav Dunkelberger; after the war he studied composition with Vincent Persichetti at Juilliard. His output, therefore, includes string quartets, symphonies, and a chamber opera, as well as a splendid legacy of jazz-tinged compositions.

A composer, theorist, formidable teacher (at Princeton, Juilliard, wherever), and proponent of the abstruse art of music at the cutting edge, **Milton Babbitt** (b Philadelphia, PA, 10 May 1916) was before any of the above a composer of popular songs and show tunes. He claims, probably with accuracy, that he wasn’t responsible for the title of his most famous article, “Who Cares If You Listen,” a guide for braving the perils of hardcore atonality. His *Partitions*, delightfully quirky

for all its terrifying complexity, was composed for Robert Helps.

Miriam Gideon (b Greeley, CO, 23 Oct 1906; d New York City, 18 June 1996) received her master's in musicology at Columbia University. She studied piano with Abby Whiteside; her composition teachers were Lazare Saminsky and Roger Sessions. Among her major works are an opera, *Fortunato*, and a cantata, *The Habitable Earth*, but her legacy includes choral works, song cycles, several sonatas, and chamber music as well.

Sol Berkowitz (b Warren, OH, 1922) was another Abby Whiteside-trained pianist. After moving to New York at an early age, he studied composition with Karol Rathaus at Queens College and Otto Luening at Columbia. In 1956 Berkowitz composed the jazz opera *Fat Tuesday* on a Ford Foundation grant; from then on, most of his compositions were for theater and television. If his 1958 *Syncopations* reminds you a little of the grand old "stride piano" style of James P. Johnson or Fats Waller, you're hearing correctly.

Originally headed toward a medical career, **William Jennings Bryan ("Ben") Weber** (b St. Louis, MO, 23 July 1916; d New York City, 16 June 1979) had his course diverted after meeting Arnold Schoenberg. Largely self-taught in music, he evolved a musical style that respected Schoenberg's tone-row principles to a degree, while maintaining a hold on tonality. Weber moved to New York in 1945. His legacy includes concertos for piano and violin and his *Symphony on Poems of William Blake*, recorded by Leopold Stokowski and still available.

Closely associated with the Second Viennese School during the 1920s, **Paul Amadeus Pisk** (b Vienna, Austria, 16 May 1893; d Los Angeles, CA, 12 Jan 1990) was also one of the founders of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), one of the foremost organizations dedicated to maintaining the musical cutting edge. He emigrated to the United States in 1936 and was best known for founding the music department at the University of Redlands, an enclave of high cultural achievement in the California desert. His *Nocturnal Interlude* manages in less than four minutes to epitomize the European musical scene he was obliged to abandon: it contains some Schoenberg (atonal but not serial), some Hindemith, and, above all, some Bach.

Mel Powell (b New York City, 12 Feb 1923; d Van Nuys, CA, 24 April 1998) first gained attention through his wonderful touch as a jazz pianist; some of Benny Goodman's best old recordings feature the teenage Powell on piano; later, heading his own band, Powell had Goodman returning the favor on clarinet. From there Powell moved on to Yale, where he founded one of the country's first electronic music studios. He then founded the experimental music department at the Disney-funded California Institute of the Arts. His own beautifully chiseled musical output, much of it consisting of small, perfect jewels like the Etude heard on this recording, was capped by *Duplicates*, a massive two-piano concerto that earned the 1990 Pulitzer Prize.

Like many names already noted in this compendium, **Morton Gould** (b New York City, 10 Dec 1913; d Orlando, FL, 21 Feb 1996) spent a productive life on a commute between "serious" music and jazz. His orchestral works included the evergreen *Spirituals for Orchestra* and the *Latin-American Symphonette*. For the ballet he created *Fall River Legend* and *Interplay*; Broadway welcomed his *Billion-Dollar Baby* and *Arms and the Girl*. Gould studied piano with Abby Whiteside and composition with Vincent Jones. His works remains fresh and widely popular.

At the time of his death, **Alan Hovhaness** (b Somerville, MA, 8 March 1911; d Seattle, WA, 21 June 2000) had composed nearly eighty symphonies, in addition to producing an output of comparable size in several other forms. Of Scottish-Armenian parentage, he most often drew on the latter side of his heritage, creating music full of Near Eastern melodic shapes and harmonies. These are found even in smaller works like the Allegro heard here, which features a sinuous melody over a repeated, drum-like bass.

Renowned as one of the foremost authorities on the music of the Second Viennese School, most of all for his books on Alban Berg, **George Perle** (b Bayonne, NJ, 6 May 1915) is equally known for a long list of compositions that, even in his ninth decade, he continues to add to, with no sign of the well running dry. Perle studied composition with Wesley La Violette and Ernst Krenek, taught at Yale, the University of Southern California, and the University of California at Davis, and is now emeritus professor of composition at Queens College.

Pianist, musical scholar, and composer **Norman Cazden** (b New York City, 23 Sept 1914; d Bangor, ME, 18 Aug 1980) gave his first piano recital at twelve in New York's Town Hall. He studied composition with Walter Piston and Aaron Copland, worked as a pianist with several major dance companies, composed incidental music for productions of Shakespeare plays (*The Tempest* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and has taken his tape recorder into rural areas to collect and annotate American folksongs. His interest in folk sources is clearly audible in the Sonata heard on this recording.

Joseph Probstakoff (b Kokand, Central Asia, 1911; d 1980) was brought to the United States, at age eleven, in 1922. He studied composition with Mark Brunswick and Karol Rathaus, and piano with Abby Whiteside. He worked with Whiteside and with Sophia Rosoff in maintaining the Whiteside Foundation, in preparing Whiteside's own writings on various aspects of piano playing, and in assembling the anthology that led to this recording; he was also highly regarded as a piano teacher in his own right. His compositions include works for small instrumental ensemble, voice, and piano.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks (b Melbourne, Australia, 29 Dec 1912; d Sydney, Australia, 25 June 1990) emigrated from her native Australia first to England and France, where she studied with Ralph Vaughan Williams, Egon Wellesz, and Nadia Boulanger, and in 1939 to the United States. In New York she wrote criticism for the late *Herald Tribune*, and received awards from the National Institute of the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. She wrote four operas, including *Nausicaä*, in which Maria Callas sang the title role, and *The Transposed Heads*, commissioned and recorded by the Louisville Orchestra. The charming small piano piece heard here suggests that Glanville-Hicks's heart remained, at least in part, in France.

As the title *The Pig Town Fling* suggests, **Ernst Bacon** (b Chicago, IL, 26 May 1898; d Orinda, CA, 16 March 1990) was deeply committed to American folksong and subjects drawn from the American scene. Bacon studied composition with Ernest Bloch in San Francisco and conducting with Eugene Goossens in Rochester. From 1934 to 1937 he was director of the Federal Music Project in San Francisco. At nineteen he published a short book, *Our Musical Idiom*, a remarkably wise look at where music ought to be going. His *Words on Music*, written in 1960, suggested that it hadn't quite gotten there yet.

Mark Brunswick (b New York City, 6 Jan 1902; d London, 26 May 1971) studied composition with Rubin Goldmark and Ernest Bloch. During an extended stay in Europe (1925–1938) he worked with Nadia Boulanger and earned the notice of Anton Webern, who admired Brunswick’s Two Movements for String Quartet. Back in New York, Brunswick became chairman of the music department at the City College of New York. He left a considerable legacy of chamber and choral works, but one project close to his heart, an opera on Ibsen’s *The Master Builder*, lay unfinished at his death.

The son of Korean immigrants to the United States, **Earl Kim** (b Dinuba, CA, 6 Jan 1920; d Cambridge, MA, 19 Nov 2000) studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg and Roger Sessions. The Bagatelles were composed while both Kim and Robert Helps worked with Sessions at Berkeley. During the years 1952 to 1967, Kim first taught composition at Princeton, then became James Edward Ditson Professor of Music at Harvard. Among his major works are several settings of the words of Samuel Beckett. A Violin Concerto

(1979) performed by Itzhak Perlman won high praise and was recorded; honors include a Prix de Paris, a National Institute of Arts and Letters award, a Brandeis University Creative Arts award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim and the National Endowment.

Josef Alexander (b Boston, MA, 15 May 1907; d Seattle, WA, 23 Dec 1989) studied at the New England Conservatory and at Harvard; his impressive succession of teachers included Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, and Nadia Boulanger. In 1943 he was appointed to the music faculty at Brooklyn College, from which he retired a professor emeritus in 1977. According to Nicolas Slonimsky, his music “adopted a facile, laissez-faire idiom marked by a pleasurable admixture of euphonious dissonances.”

—Alan Rich

Alan Rich is a music critic for *L.A. Weekly* and the author of “American Pioneers” in Phaidon’s *20th-Century Composers* series.

Production Notes

All pieces published by Lawson-Gould (G. Schirmer)

Dahl (ASCAP)
Kennan (ASCAP)
Adler (ASCAP)
Overton (BMI)
Babbitt (BMI)
Gideon (BMI)
Berkowitz (ASCAP)
Weber (BMI)
Pisk (BMI)
Powell (ASCAP)
Gould (ASCAP)
Hovhanness (BMI)
Perle (ASCAP)
Prostakoff (No Affiliation)
Glanville-Hicks (BMI)
Bacon (ASCAP)
Helps (BMI)
Brunswick (BMI)
Kim (BMI)
Alexander (ASCAP)