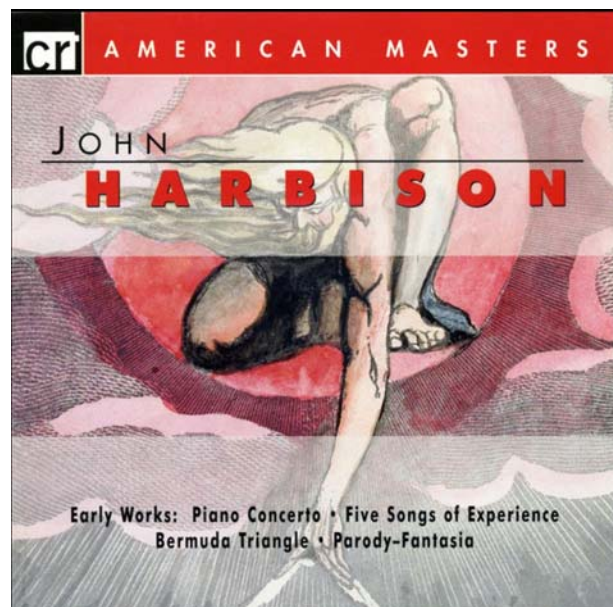


NWCR875

John Harbison

Early Works: Piano Concerto; Five Songs of Experience;
Bermuda Triangle; Parody–Fantasia



1. Piano Concerto (1978) (24:26)
Robert Miller, piano; American Composers Orchestra
Gunther Schuller, conductor

- Five Songs of Experience* (17:21)
 2. Introduction (5:40)
 3. Earth's Answer (3:11)
 4. Ah! Sun-flower! (3:53)
 5. The Voice of the Ancient Bard (3:41)
 6. A Divine Image (1:48)The Cantata Singers and Ensemble: Jane Bryden, soprano, D'Anna Fortunato, mezzo-soprano; Karl Dan Sorensen, tenor; Mark Baker, bass; Rose Mary Harbison, Erica Miner, violins; Betty Hauck, viola; Jay Humeston, cello; Benjamin Carriel, William Wiley, percussion; John Harbison, conductor
7. *Bermuda Triangle* (1970) (7:53)
Albert Regni, tenor saxophone; Helen Harbison, amplified cello; Robert D. Levin, electric organ
8. *Parody-Fantasia* (1968) (7:31)
Robert Miller, piano

Total playing time: 58:11

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Notes

"As the new century begins my purposes haven't changed, though my materials have. I still want to inhabit every piece as fully as possible, make it different from the others, find a way to make it new while carrying forward (and transforming) elements from our shared past."

—John Harbison

Throughout his compositional career, John Harbison has referred to the influence that jazz and the music of the Baroque have had on his work as a composer. His early experiences as a musician included playing jazz piano, and an important facet of his musical language derives from that harmonic, timbral and gestural world (notably the second movement of the Oboe Concerto, the final movement of the Second Symphony, the overture *Remembering Gatsby*, and various sections of the opera *The Great Gatsby*). Although his music is always completely composed with no actual improvisation, the style of jazz or its essential feel and sound are often present even though the means of its production comes directly from the tradition of Western classical music.

An apparently contrary tendency is Harbison's interest in detailed counterpoint, a sensibility with strong ties to the music of the Baroque. His love of the music of Bach, Schütz and Scheine is well known, and the intricate craftsmanship evident in Harbison's compositions bears witness to the influence these composers exert on his work. Moreover, his oeuvre is replete with examples of fugues, canons and other contrapuntal textures, and beginning with *A Winter's Tale* (1974), his treatment of the bass begins to approach that of a strong, functional bass line, another example of his affinity for Baroque methods.

Harbison's compositional sensibility in fact encompasses many such polarities: improvisatory character versus detailed composition; functional (or nearly functional) tonal harmony versus dense, cluster-like harmony; austerity versus grandeur. However, these oppositions rarely present themselves in the form of pastiche, or with a conspicuous clash of styles. On the other hand, his music generally avoids attempts at stylistic synthesis, self-consciously joining disparate styles. Harbison's approach is ultimately more delicate, subtle and complex: in his music seemingly contradictory tendencies co-exist and converse rather than compete, and their interaction often involves an inversion of roles.

John Harbison was educated at Harvard (B.A. 1960) and Princeton (M.F.A. 1963). While a student, he was also very active as a jazz pianist. From 1968–69, he was composer-in-residence at Reed College with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and he has been a professor of music at MIT since 1969.

During the period that two of the works on this recording were written, he was also musical director of the Cantata Singers, a position he held from 1969–73. These works, *Bermuda Triangle* (1970), and *Five Songs of Experience* (1973), as well as *Parody-Fantasia* (1968), extensively reflect these early experiences performing jazz and conducting choral music. The only later work on this recording, the Piano Concerto (1978), comes from the period in which Harbison first came to national attention following the premiere of his first orchestral work, *Diotima*, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1976.

—James Matheson, New York

Piano Concerto (1978)

The Piano Concerto was completed in 1978 (although the full score was not completed until two years later). Besides being the most recent work on this disc, it is the most substantial and for the largest forces. Like *Diotima*, it marks a beginning in Harbison's output, and besides being only his second work for orchestra, it is the first of the many concerti Harbison has since composed. To date there are concerti for violin (1980; rev. 1987), double brass choir (1988), viola (1989), oboe (1991), cello (1993) and flute (1993), as well as a double concerto for oboe, clarinet and strings (1985).

In the Piano Concerto and in the Violin Concerto which followed in 1980, Harbison had begun to explore a more romantic idiom than he had in previous works. The earlier works on this disc reveal firm roots in a harmonic and gestural world which commingles jazz and the second Viennese School (pre-serial Schoenberg may perhaps be heard in the margins of the *Parody-Fantasia*, as may the influence of Webern in parts of the *Five Songs of Experience*). In these two concerti, the overall harmonic palette is more diatonic, the orchestration more lush, and the rhythmic basis more pulse-oriented. Harbison has written of the Piano Concerto:

"The complementary ideals orchestra-as-piano and piano-as-orchestra, so appealing to the composers of the nineteenth century, are recalled here from a new vantage point. The mystery and magic of the piano lie in the pedal, and the "romanticism" for this concerto lies in its diffusion of piano pedal sonorities throughout the whole orchestra."

Harbison's description of the subverted natures of orchestra and piano is meant quite literally; in its role as accompanist the orchestra frequently sustains the piano's harmonies. Soloist and orchestra function together almost as a unified, multi-dimensional instrument.

The first movement, marked *Moderato cantabile*, is essentially a slow movement. Despite a few dramatic orchestral outbursts, the overall mood is subdued and melancholic. The form is a kind of fantasy, in which a handful of ideas are subjected to various modifications. A cadenza toward the end provides the expressive focal point of the movement and explores both earlier ideas and a few new ones.

The second movement consists of three sections, with a fast-slow-fast profile. The first is marked *Alla marcia* and has the forceful and dynamic character a march suggests. The second section, *Alla canzona*, is slow and tuneful, with a waltz-like, lilting quality, while the final section, *Alla danza*, is quick, light and lively.

The Piano Concerto was written at the request of Robert Miller, a longtime colleague to whom Harbison had been introduced over twenty years before the work's composition by their shared piano teacher, Matilde McKinney (Miller also played an important role in the New York-based Group for Contemporary Music, which provided Harbison several early performances in the mid to late 1960s). It was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and premiered in 1980 by Miller and the American Composers Orchestra (the performers who appear on this disc). Harbison subsequently received the Kennedy Center Arthur Friedheim Award for the work.

Five Songs of Experience (1971)

In the *Five Songs of Experience*, composed in 1971 and scored for four vocal soloists, chorus, string quartet and percussion, Harbison's musical language had already undergone a transformation. While the romanticism that came later in the decade had not yet manifested itself, there was already a paring down from previous works, a movement toward greater clarity and economy of gesture. If the influence of earlier works came largely from jazz and the Second Viennese School, and that of later works from romanticism (mixed, no doubt, with elements

of classicism), here the influence seems to come most directly from the choral writing of Stravinsky. Harbison sets Blake's five short poems with appropriate austerity and imbues them with both contrapuntal finesse and a primitive, ritualistic quality.

The first song, *Introduction*, is highly contrapuntal, containing various canons (including a few double canons). One of its most striking moments comes at the words "And fallen light renew," where Harbison introduces the metallic, pungent sound of cowbells over the dying chorus. The second song, *Earth's Answer*, juxtaposes the chorus and ensemble's sharp, asymmetrical rhythmic unisons with bold, intense lyricism from the soloists. In *Ah! Sun-flower*, the longing of Blake's text is set as an aria for soprano, which is subsequently repeated with the addition of a superimposed choral expansion of the same music.

The fourth song, *The Voice of the Ancient Bard*, is the most ritualistic of the songs and takes its structural cue from German choral tradition. The first half of the text (through the line "Dark disputes and artful teasing") is presented in a setting for the sopranos and altos, and a musically distinct setting of the remainder of the text follows, set for the tenors and basses. A third section superimposes the two settings, so that the two musics, having been heard separately, are heard simultaneously.

Perhaps the work's most inspired moment comes at the arresting beginning of the final song, *A Divine Image*. This movement follows without pause from the fourth, and begins with an assortment of "primitive percussion" performed by members of the chorus (the score calls specifically for African marimba, steel drum, water glasses and finger harp), effectively evoking the extreme severity of Blake's text. The poem itself has a mirror-like structure, which Harbison echoes through his ordering of entries of the chorus and the smaller chorus of soloists.

Harbison wrote *Five Songs of Experience* for Emmanuel Church and its music director, Craig Smith. Although he has since written a variety of works for Emmanuel Music, the work proved, in the end, too far afield at the time to be used in the liturgy. In the end, the premiere was given in February of 1973 by the forces which appear in this recording: the Cantata Singers, led by Harbison himself, the ensemble's director from 1968 to 1973.

Bermuda Triangle (1970); Parody-Fantasia (1968)

The two earliest works here, the *Parody-Fantasia* and *Bermuda Triangle*, comprise the second and third parts of the triptych *December Music* (Preludes [1967], for three treble instruments, is the first). All three works are based on "Glory to God in the Highest," the same chant used by Bach used in his tenth Cantata and the *Magnificat*, and by Mozart in the opening movement of the Requiem. In *December Music*, the chant is treated as a cantus firmus.

Harbison explored this cantus firmus idea in its clearest and simplest form in Preludes. In that work, one instrument is called upon to play the cantus firmus while the other two play what Harbison has referred to as "transposed displacements of the intervals" of the chant. In *Parody-Fantasia* and *Bermuda Triangle*, the chant is more distorted, less easily discernible in the detail.

Harbison wrote the *Parody-Fantasia* for the young Ursula Oppens, who at that time had been learning and working on the traditional piano repertoire, with little experience playing new music. Says Harbison, "I wanted to tap into the literature she had played, in a way that was structurally interesting to me as well." The work is cast in a single movement, comprising five sections: *Preamble-Take-offs-Flights-Arrivals-Games-Post-Mortem*.

Bermuda Triangle, written two years after the *Parody-Fantasia*, combines tenor saxophone, amplified cello, and a

Hammond H-112 electric organ to create the tense, mysterious quality the title invokes. In the notes for the original release of this recording Harbison remarked:

"The piece is cast in one continuous movement, and presents a conversation between the sax and the cello, with the organ playing many roles—from synthesizer-style background to dominating force. The cello, the most traditional of the three instruments, is gradually influenced by the saxophone. By the end it has begun to sound like something from the Middle or Far East, while the sax has softened into waltz fragments."

More recently, Harbison has remarked that "Anyone familiar with that organ would know that there are some very unusual registrations in that piece." In coming up with these

registrations, Harbison was attempting to lift the Hammond H-112 from its usual timbral range and transform it into a "surrogate synthesizer," evoking the color palate of then-contemporary electronic music.

The piece begins with the organ alone, playing a distortion of the cantus firmus, offering the outline of the original tune, but not the specific intervallic content. The other instruments enter, and throughout the movement play long palindromes. These lines have a highly improvisatory character, early examples of the influence jazz has continued to play in Harbison's work as a composer.

Bermuda Triangle was commissioned by the New York Camerata.

—James Matheson, New York

Fives Songs of Experience

By William Blake

1. Introduction

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who present, past and future, sees:
Whose ears have heard
The Holy word
That walked among the ancient trees.

Calling the lapsed soul,
And weeping in the evening dew;
That might control
The starry pole,
And fallen, fallen light renew! "

O Earth, O Earth, return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

"Turn away no more;
Why wilt thou turn away?
The starry floor,
The wat'ry shore,
Is giv'n thee till the break of day."

2. Earth's Answer

Earth rais'd up her head
From the darkness dread and drear.
Her light fled,
Stony dread!
And her locks cover'd with grey despair

'Prison'd on wat'ry shore,
Starry Jealousy does keep my den,
Cold and hoar,
Weeping o'er,
I hear the father of ancient men.

"Selfish father of men!
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear!
Can delight,
Chain'd in night,
The virgins of youth and morning bear?

"Does spring hide its joy
When buds and blossoms grow?
Does the sower

Sow by night
Or the plowman in darkness plow?

"Break this heavy Chain
That does freeze my bones around
Selfish! vain!
Eternal bane!
That free Love with bondage bound!"

3. Ah! Sun-flower

Ah! Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done

Where the Youth pined away with desire
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

4. The Voice of the Ancient Bard

Youth of delight, come hither,
And see the opening morn,
Image of truth new born.
Doubt is fled, and clouds of reason,
Dark disputes and artful teasing,
Folly is an endless maze,
Tangled roots perplex her ways.
How many have fallen there!
They stumble all night over bones

of the dead,
And feel they know not what but care,
And wish to lead others,
when they should be led.

5. A Divine Image

Cruelty has a Human Heart,
And Jealousy a Human Face;
Terror the Human Form Divine,
And Secrecy the Human Dress.

The Human Dress is forged Iron,
The Human Form a fiery Forge,
The Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
The Human Heart its hungry Gorge

Production Notes

Digitally remastered by Robert Wolff, engineer at Sony Music Studios, New York City on December 20, 2000.

Piano Concerto Originally released on CRI SD 440. Recorded by David Hancock at Church of the Holy Trinity, New York City, on May 13, 1980. Associated Music Publishers, Inc. (BMI). The original recording was made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. Additional support was provided by the Jerome Foundation, the American Composers Orchestra and private donors.

Five Songs of Experience: Originally released on CRI SD 313. Recorded by David Hancock at Emmanuel Church, Boston, on March 7, 1973. Associated Music Publishers, Inc. (BMI). *Bermuda Triangle*: Recorded live on April 11, 1973 at Carnegie Recital Hall, New York City. Associated Music Publishers, Inc. (BMI). The original recording of these two works was made possible by grants from the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, Wheaton College and the American Academy-National Institute of Arts and Letters, which awarded John Harbison a recording prize for musical excellence in 1972.

Parody-Fantasia: Originally released on CRI SD 293. Recorded by David Hancock at Judson Hall, New York City, on September 18, 1970. McGinnis & Marx (BMI). The original recording was made possible by grants from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, the Ford Foundation the American Composers Alliance and the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.

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