

NWCR877

Marilyn Nonken

American Spiritual



Jeff Nichols

1. *Chelsea Square* (1999) (13:54)

Jason Eckardt

2. *Echoes' White Veil* (1996) (11:20)

Michael Finnissy

3. *North American Spirituals* (1998) (20:29)

Milton Babbitt

4. *Allegro Penseroso* (1999) (11:54)

Marilyn Nonken, piano

Total playing time: 57:32

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Notes

I am pleased to present these four works, all of which were written for me between 1996 and 1999.

When I commissioned the first work, from Jason Eckardt, I never imagined that, five years later, it would lead to this recording project. Jason's piece was written when we were both in our early twenties. Together, we had just started a contemporary music group in New York City, Ensemble 21. The piece that resulted from our collaboration, *Echoes' White Veil*, exhibits many traits characteristic of his later music. Most strikingly, there is the complexity of the surface, which expresses itself in constant cascades of notes, sudden and extreme shifts of texture, and fluid, exotic rhythms. In these aspects, the piece pays homage to the composers of the New Complexity movement such as Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy, and James Dillon (whose *Spleen* I had been playing around this same time). As in the works of these composers, the complexity of the music is something you can taste. Performance-wise, it is a constant and provoking challenge to achieve the level of detail the score demands: the clarity of articulation, the infinite degrees of dynamic and rhythmic subtlety, and the sheer physicality required to get around the keyboard. The effort required to play the piece is an integral part of its aesthetic. Yet I don't see performing *Echoes* so much as a struggle as a spiritual high. In its performance, the physical is ennobled, as it is in ballet or the forms of modern dance that require, in addition to artistic sensitivity, physical discipline.

Echoes' White Veil maintains a restless, improvisatory feel that I associate with free jazz and the composer's years as a guitarist at the Berklee College of Music. The work is written without bar lines. On the page, it looks like a continually spinning-out solo, a single, unmediated burst of creativity.

The title of Jason's work was inspired by W.S. Merwin's prose poem "Echoes." Like Merwin's poem, the music asks us to examine our own perceptions of time and consider the relationships between the past, future, and present.

Everything we hear is an echo. Anyone can see that echoes move forward and backward in time, in rings. But not everyone realizes that as a result silence becomes harder and harder for us to grasp—though it in itself is unchanged—because of the echoes pouring through us out of the past, unless we can learn to set them at rest. We are still hearing the bolting of the doors at Thermopylae, and do not recognize the sounds. How did we sound to the past? And there are sounds that rush away from us: echoes of future words.

So, we know that there are words in the future, some of them loud and terrible. And we know that there is silence in the future. But will the words recognize their unchanging homeland?

I am sitting on the shore of a lake. I am a child, in the evening, at the time when the animals lose heart for a moment. Everyone has gone, as I wanted them to go, and in the silence I call across the water, "Oh!" And I see the sound appear running away from me over the water in her white veil, growing taller, becoming a cloud with raised arms, in the dusk. Then there is such silence that the trees are bent. And afterward a shock-like wind that throws me back against the hill, for I had not known who I was calling.

Michael Finnissy's *English Country Tunes* and third piano concerto made a terrific impression upon me. When I first heard them, they redefined the capacities of piano for me and shattered my previous conceptions of technique. Michael

himself is a tremendous pianist, and his writing reveals his absolute understanding of the instrument.

North American Spirituals

Many of Michael's works are based on preexisting materials, which range from the music of Verdi to Gershwin, Machaut, and the Beatles. *North American Spirituals* is inspired by four spiritual songs that also appear in Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time*: "Steal Away," "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See," "Go Down, Moses," and "Oh, By and By." While paying homage to the black American tradition, Finnissy's work also traces American experimentalism to its earliest roots, alternately evoking the eighteenth-century composer William Billings (author of the *Manifesto to the Goddess of Discord*) and Charles Ives. Ives is perhaps the most recognizable influence, and his music is referenced in the work's opening hymn tunes and, later, in a section of brutal forearm clusters. There is a remarkably crystalline quality to Michael's writing, however, a high resolution that distinguishes it from Ives and renders it absolutely contemporary. In the best postmodern sense, *North American Spirituals* speaks many languages, communicating in several distinct dialects almost simultaneously.

North American Spirituals is the second chapter of the second book of Finnissy's epic cycle *The History of Photography in Sound*. Of his cycle, the composer writes: "Photography captures images from life on sensitive paper, sometimes altering, exploring, and exaggerating these via 'distorting' lenses, cropping, focusing, and editing . . . not unlike the processes applied to musical 'images' and 'memories' during composition."

Allegro Penseroso

I was thrilled when Milton Babbitt agreed to write a piece for me. It was written just after his second piano concerto, a grand piece whose Carnegie Hall premiere I will always remember. As the composer and soloist took their bows, those of us in the audience who applauded were well aware of those who booed and protested. It is a reminder of how controversial Babbitt's music remains to this day, long after most aesthetic arguments about atonality and serialism have fallen by the wayside. Milton's completely individual style of composition, like Schoenberg's, seems destined to remain ever revolutionary.

Allegro Penseroso joyously embodies Babbitt's late style: concise and articulate, yet exuding boundless energy and invention. Everywhere in *Allegro Penseroso* is some peculiar or fantastic occurrence. It offers a garden of delights, and I often think that Babbitt's music is Bosch-like in its richness of colors, textures, and events. Of course, Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" offers us pictures of things we can recognize (to some degree), while Babbitt's work is more abstract. It is not "about" a melody, nor does it trace a familiar musical form, a traditional dramatic curve, or narrative discourse. Instead, it is like a fabulously intricate mobile, in which each individual part alternately approaches the listener and then recedes, counterbalancing every other part. I imagine ten Calder mobiles superimposed one upon the other, each component spinning and humming. Trying to focus on any one part or to extract a traditional "message" from the music, I tend to become overwhelmed by the juxtapositions of register and dynamic: the seeming overabundance of information. But when I slightly decenter my attention, as a listener, I am able to get in touch with the music's basic flow, its pulse, which is a hard groove like any other.

Allegro Penseroso's title links it with John Milton's poems "L'Allegro" ("The Cheerful Man") and "Il Penseroso" ("The

Pensive Man"), and the piece moves seamlessly between the upbeat and downcast. Babbitt's music offers a glimpse of what the poet refers to as "the melting voice through mazes running,/ untwisting all the chains that tie/The hidden soul of harmony."

Chelsea Square

Before approaching Jeff Nichols for a solo piano piece, I had played two of his other works: his *Fantasy* (for saxophone and piano) and *Allettamenti per Camera* (for piano quartet). *Chelsea Square*, completed in the summer of 1999, captures many of the elements I admire in his other works: the elegant gestural language, warm harmonies, and a certain soulful quality.

What distinguishes this work from his others is its quirky, riddle-like structure. Formally, *Chelsea Square* moves between areas of dense and stormy polyphony, which subside in lyrical yet tension-filled interludes. How these different areas fit together is something of a puzzle. Each time I play this piece, I feel I put them together a different way. Sometimes, the ending catches me unaware. Other times, I think I know what is coming next, only to be surprised by a sudden change of direction. When the work's internal logic is clearest to me, the events seemingly unfold one into the next as if drawn by an inevitable gravity. It is a beguiling work that rewards multiple hearings.

Although *Chelsea Square* is not programmatic, its title references the poem by the same name by Douglas Crase. In its disjunctions and fractures, the music captures the craggy images of Crase's text, which in itself so beautifully reflects the breathtaking chaos of millennial Manhattan.

American Spiritual is, in some ways, a testament to the compositional tradition so inventively reconceived in Michael Finnissy's piece: the experimentalism of the early American avant-garde, which paved the way for today's astonishingly diverse breadth of musical aesthetics and styles. It is also a tribute to today's American composers—Babbitt, Eckardt, Nichols, and those both like and unlike them—who continue to pursue their craft in a culture whose tolerance for the independent musical vision wavers disconcertingly. In working with these composers, I have become ever more impressed by their dedication. To Michael, Milton, Jason, and Jeff, I thank you for these wonderful pieces. It has been my privilege and true pleasure to bring your works to life.

—Marilyn Nonken

Marilyn Nonken has emerged as one of the most gifted young musicians dedicated to the modern and contemporary repertoires. Upon her 1993 New York debut, she was heralded as "a determined protector of important music" (*New York Times*). Her Boston debut was distinguished as a highlight of the season (*Boston Globe*, "Best of '97"); she was named "Best of '99" and "Best of 2000" by the *Globe* for subsequent appearances.

Ms. Nonken's performances have been presented by Carnegie Hall, Merkin Hall, IRCAM, the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the Guggenheim Museum, Miller Theatre, Harvard and Brandeis universities, the Flea Theatre, Dartmouth and Oberlin Colleges, and the Musikakademie Rheinsberg. Recent contemporary festival appearances include June in Buffalo, Sonic Boom, the Third International Festival of New Piano Music, and Cyberarts. An acclaimed chamber musician, she performs regularly with Ensemble 21, the new music group of which she is artistic director and a co-founder. She has also appeared with the Chamber Music Society at Lincoln Center, Bargemusic, the League-ISCAM Chamber Players, and the Washington Square Contemporary

Music Society. Her repertoire includes works by Barraqué, Dillon, Feldman, Harvey, Ives, Ligeti, Martirano, Stockhausen, and the complete piano music of Arnold Schoenberg. She also has commissioned new works from Mario Davidovsky and Tristan Murail.

With a wide-ranging discography featuring releases on New World Records, Koch, Lovely Music, and CRI, Ms. Nonken has recorded music of composers diverse as Salvatore Martirano, Alvin Lucier, David Rakowski, Charles Wuorinen, and William Albright. Upcoming projects include recordings of Tristan Murail's complete piano music (Metier) and Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories* (Mode).

Ms. Nonken studied with David Burge at the Eastman School, where she received the inaugural Jan DeGaetani Award for excellence in the performance of contemporary music. The recipient of a doctorate in musicology from Columbia University, her writings have been published in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Agni*, *Current Musicology*, and the *Journal of the Institute for Studies in American Music*. She is currently guest editing an issue on performance practice for *Contemporary Music Review*.

Jason Eckardt (b 1971) played guitar in rock and jazz bands until, upon first hearing the music of Webern, he immediately devoted himself to composition. He has received commissions from Carnegie Hall, the Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations, and percussionist Evelyn Glennie; awards from the League/ISCM (National Prize), Stadt Wesel (Symposium NRW Prize), ASCAP, and the University of Illinois (Martirano Prize); and fellowships from the Fondation Royaumont, the MacDowell and Millay colonies, the Fritz Reiner Center, and the Yvar Mikhashoff Trust. His works have been recorded for the CRI, Helicon, and Mode labels and performed on four continents at festivals including Darmstadt, the ISCM World Music Days, Voix Nouvelles, Musica Nova Sofia, Currents in Musical Thought-Seoul, and Musik im 20. Jahrhundert. An active promoter of new music, Eckardt is a co-founder and the executive director of Ensemble 21, the contemporary music group.

Michael Finnissy (b 1946) is a prolific composer whose curiosity about a wide range of music, especially traditional musics, matches his fascination with mathematical structures. Formerly president of the ISCM, Finnissy has been a featured composer at the Bath, Huddersfield, Music Factory, and

Almeida festivals. As a pianist, he is highly regarded for his performances of works by living composers, including pieces written for him by Judith Weir, James Dillon, and Oliver Knussen. He teaches at the Royal Academy of Music, the University of Southampton, and the University of Leuven; he also has been associated with several dance companies including London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Ballet Rambert, Strider, and Second Stride. Of Finnissy's vast output, perhaps his most impressive work is *The History of Photography in Sound*, a piano cycle lasting nearly five hours. Finnissy's music has been recorded for CBS, Etcetera, Metier, and NMC.

Milton Babbitt (b 1916) has earned a reputation as one of the most important and controversial composers of his generation. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His awards and honors include two New York Music Critics Circle Citations, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, the Brandeis University Gold Medal, a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, the William Schuman Prize, the George Peabody Medal, and the MacArthur Fellowship. An influential teacher, with pupils ranging from Donald Martino to Stephen Sondheim, Babbitt is the William Shubael Conant Professor Emeritus at Princeton University and currently serves on the composition faculty at the Juilliard School. His compositions have been recorded for Bridge, CBS, CRI, Harmonia Mundi, Koch, and New World Records.

Jeff Nichols (b 1957) began composing at the age of nine and soon thereafter started writing music inspired by the music of Babbitt, Barraqué, Boulez, Carter, and Martino. His works have been performed by leading ensembles in the United States including the League/ISCM, Dinosaur Annex, Ensemble 21, Parnassus, and the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, as well as at festivals in Aspen, Edinburgh, and Taegu, South Korea. He was a member and, from 1987–1990, president of the Griffin Music Ensemble in Boston. With Mario Davidovsky and Bernard Rands, he currently directs the new Fromm Ensemble at Harvard. Nichols's awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a commission from the Fromm Music Foundation, and two fellowships to the Wellesley Composers Conference. From 1990–1994, he was on the faculty of Columbia University. He currently is an associate professor at Harvard University.

Production Notes

Chelsea Square, *North American Spirituals*, and *Allegro Penseroso* were recorded, produced, and edited by Judith Sherman.

Assistant engineer, Jennifer Munson;

Editing assistant, Jeanne Velonis.

Echoes' White Veil recorded and edited by Rex Anderson, produced by Jason Eckardt. *Echoes' White Veil* was recorded October 15, 1997 at the Foellinger Great Hall at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Chelsea Square recorded January 21, 2000; *North American Spirituals* recorded

May 18, 2000; *Allegro Penseroso* recorded January 17, 2000; all at the Recital Hall at the Performing Arts Center, Purchase College, State University of New York.

Publishing:

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Allegro Penseroso: C.F. Peters Corporation (BMI)