

NWCR883

Richard Toensing

Flute Concertos



1. Concerto for Flutes and Wind Ensemble (1983) . (16:41)
Leone Buyse, flutes; National Symphony of Ukraine, Theodore Kuchar, conductor
2. *Fantasia* (of Angels and Shepherds) (1993-1994) (12:13)
Carol Ou, cello; John Kinzie, Scott Higgins, percussion
- Concerto for Flutes and Orchestra (1995) (26:01)
3. Allegro con spirito (8:03)
4. Lento; Mesto (9:10)
5. Alla Marcia (8:48)
Leone Buyse, flutes; National Symphony of Ukraine, Theodore Kuchar, conductor

Total playing time: (55:01)

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Notes

Raised in the Lutheran faith, Richard Toensing converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church four years ago, a decision that was "the end of a long journey" begun when he was a teenager. Initially drawn to the Eastern arm of Christianity through its holy art—the gold-leafed icons of Byzantium—Toensing soon became fascinated with Orthodoxy's rich traditions, centuries-long continuity and, ultimately, its teachings. "One thing led to another and I began to say 'I understand this,'" he says of his faith's natural progression.

While not a "religious composer," Toensing says it is religious philosophy and theology that "get the juices flowing." Both Eastern and Western Christian religious traditions inform Toensing's works, whether as model for a piece's form or as an inspirational starting point.

Toensing's most ambitious work thus far is his *Responsoria*, three books of chanted Roman Catholic prayer services for Holy Week. These responsorial texts have been set by several composers, most notably the sixteenth-century madrigal writer Gesualdo, who gave Toensing the inspiration to compose his own responsoria. (Written in 1995 before Toensing's conversion to the Eastern Church, the *Responsoria* is perhaps the composer's own symbolic bridge over the thousand-year schism between Latin and Byzantine churches.)

In all of Toensing's works large and small, however, a listener is most struck by a transparency of sound. By placing but a single idea in each register, Toensing achieves that which many composers have attempted but few (Berio, Bach, Machaut come to mind) have accomplished: a sparkling clarity of parts.

Toensing begins his compositional process with a chord sequence or group of harmonies, which he frequently uses in strict order "very much like the old chaconne idea of the

Baroque period." The result is both modern sounding and melodic.

"My music has gotten more diatonic as I've gotten older," confesses Toensing. (Compare the first flute concerto on this disc, written in 1983, and the second one, written eleven years later.) "I've been through the atonal revolution. When I started my graduate work in Michigan, everybody was doing twelve-tone work and when I graduated, no one was." He cites the Polish texture music composer Krzysztof Penderecki—a kindred soul who also found inspiration in religious rituals including those of Orthodox Christianity—as one who helped turn the tide in the 1960s away from rigorous atonality and towards blocks of sonorities. With the end of the '60s came the end of, as Toensing deftly puts it, "really complicated intellectual music that didn't seem to be speaking to very many people."

Toensing cites the influential modality of yet another spiritually inspired composer, Arvo Pärt. "His work gave us permission to write simple gestures—very clear, straightforward music," says Toensing. Such simplicity is an important part of the aesthetic that informs much of Toensing's music. Slowly moving harmonic rhythm is another part. A piece of music that races through in the harmonic fast lane poses an aural problem to a man like Toensing. "There's all these notes, but which one of them means something?" he asks.

A flutist throughout high school and college, Toensing readily admits to a predilection for flute and has written two flute concerti, both heard here for the first time on disc. "Of all the instruments there are, it's the one I probably know the best," he says. "And I'm sure that if somebody asked me for another flute concerto, I would do it." (Toensing also professes great affinity for percussion, perhaps stemming from a stint as bass

drummer in high school marching band as relief from the "unrewarding" task of marching as a flute player.)

Both concertos here were recorded with the National Symphony of the Ukraine, a happy occurrence for the recently converted Russian Orthodox composer. Theodore Kuchar, Toensing's colleague from the University of Colorado and a man "passionately in love with twentieth-century Russian music" also serves as conductor of the Ukraine National Symphony. In light of Kuchar's personal mission to bring American music to the Ukraine and Toensing's passion for the Russian Church, as well as looking to record a concerto inspired by a Russian martyr (and having a wife who speaks Russian), doing the recording in the Ukraine seemed a fortuitous thing to do.

They recorded in Kiev at Kino Studio B, an old Russian B-movie orchestra recording studio. Looking not unlike a dilapidated factory fronted by an overgrown lawn on which was parked a bent-bladed decades-old Russian helicopter, the Studio had no heat and, in spite of May's spring thaw, held the chill from a Russian winter. Electric heaters were brought in to warm up the hall and shut off during the recording. The less-than-optimum circumstances, however, didn't faze the musicians, whose attitudes were "wonderful," says Toensing, and both concerti were recorded in five days. (The *Fantasia* on this disc was recorded in America at the University of Colorado in Boulder.)

While in the Ukraine, Toensing visited St. Sophia's Cathedral, Kiev's oldest surviving church and "mother church" of Russian Orthodoxy. His "long journey" complete, Richard Toensing now has only to capture that journey in sound so that we can take it with him.

Wind Ensemble (1983)

"I was concerned at the time to compose a work which would be beautiful," writes Toensing of his first flute concerto, "both in the popular sense of the word (euphonious) and in the more classical sense of 'well-proportioned.' The solo part exploits the various characters of the flute family—pastoral, lyrical, sprightly, intense, even (occasionally) shrill."

Cast in seven sections, the concerto's first six sections proportionally decrease in length while increasing in intensity. The final section is an apotheosis, which returns to the calm of the opening, with special emphasis on the singing qualities of the flute.

Toensing's intimate knowledge of the flute allows him to create a part in which the flute, alto flute and piccolo become one instrument, each providing a different register to make a fantastical four-and-a-half-octave flute.

The low register of this imaginary flute—the alto flute—opens the work. It is peaceful and quiet. Percussion and celesta create glimmering background sheen. The pastoral flute seems wary of the brass's punctuation, but remains calm as it continues legato phrases over increasingly staccato bursts from the rest of the ensemble.

Brass and percussion become more agitated. Excited at last by the drums and crotales, the flute is forced into its higher register—the piccolo—by the propulsive percussion and becomes shrill as it flits about like a trapped bird.

After a period of calmness from the ensemble, the flute backs down (in agitation as well as register) and returns to its singing legato phrases, more careful this time, as wood percussion mumbles in the background. Tense and eerie sustained notes rise from the ensemble, which the flute steps through carefully like a lost animal in the forest, slowly rebuilding its confidence as the wind and percussion die out after a few more quiet punctuations. The work ends as it began, calmly, the flute in the end

unruffled, the ensemble providing background luster instead of intrusions.

The Concerto for Flutes and Wind Ensemble won the first prize in the Ohio State University Flute Concerto Competition in 1983 and was premiered May 19, 1985 at the VII Foro Internacional de Musica Nueva in Mexico City. Ruben Islas was the soloist and the Wind Ensemble of the ISSTE was conducted by Fernando Lozano. The U.S. premiere took place November 21, 1991 in Boston with Leone Buyse as soloist and the New England Conservatory Wind Ensemble conducted by Frank Battisti.

Fantasia (of Angels and Shepherds) (1993-1994)

Fantasia (of Angels and Shepherds) for cello and percussion is inspired by the Biblical tale of Christ's birth and the miraculous appearance of angels to "shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night." Musically, the *Fantasia* is based on three elements: a sequence of chords first presented in arpeggiated fashion by bowed crotales and bowed vibraphone, the old Znamenny chant "Slava v vishnikh Bogu (Glory be to God)" played in various guises and disguises by the cello, and the chorale "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' (All Glory Be to God on High)" which appears at the end of the work.

Znamenny (from the Russian *znamia*, "sign") chant was the principal chant of the Russian Orthodox Church from the twelfth century, two centuries after Christianity was imported from Byzantium by Vladimir I, until the late seventeenth century, when newer forms of music became predominant. These five centuries of Slavic chant have provided a huge body of inspiration for Russian composers and those non-Russian composers who have had the fortune to hear them.

Toensing heard znamenny for the first time on a recording of Rachmaninov's *Vespers*, which a Russian émigré friend had brought back from a return visit to her homeland. "I was completely blown away," says the composer of hearing the Orthodox chants and enjoined his friend to bring back the score on her next trip. "Slava," the chant Toensing uses to open his *Fantasia* (and one of the chants used by Rachmaninov in his *Vespers*) became the first of many chants transcribed by Toensing, used for both inspiration and composition.

Toensing frequently uses cantus firmus, the employing of an existing melody for the basis of a new piece of music—a technique used by Western composers like Bach and Palestrina. He is, however, not strict with the tune's incarnation. "It's a religiously inspired work, obviously," he says of the *Fantasia*, "but it's not a religious work per se, so I treat it with a lot more freedom."

Cantus firmus is used a second time here with "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr,'" a sixteenth-century hymn by Nikolaus Decius. "It has a joyous anthem-like quality about it which seemed to me the proper way to end the *Fantasia*," says Toensing of this "Lutheran Gloria."

Fantasia is divided into six sections. The first, marked Calmo, presents a highly ornamented version of the Slava chant, sounding much like a gypsy lament, in the cello ("I can find it but I'm not sure anybody else can," says Toensing), accompanied by long notes in bowed percussion.

The second section, Brilliante, unites the three players in a virtuosic, glittering rhythmic display. It is followed by a singing Cantando e Maestoso, announced by the tubular bells, in which a long-breathed tune in the cello is echoed by various percussion instruments.

A short presto duet between cello and marimba follows, the cello still gypsy as both instruments create an effervescence.

They join in unison and lead into the explosive pyrotechnics of section five, where rapid figures in irregular rhythm alternate with sonorous chords in the percussion.

After rising to a climax the music slows down briefly before ending with a coda based on "Allein Gott," now transformed into an airy and elegant court dance.

Fantasia was written for cellist Evelyn Elsing, who premiered the work at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., in December, 1994.

Concerto for Flutes and Orchestra (1995)

Toensing's second flute concerto is dedicated to the memory of two Christians martyred by the Nazis during World War II.: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Maria (Skobtsova).

Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become widely known in the West since the War for his writing on theology and philosophy. Implicated in the 1944 plot on the life of Hitler, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned at Tegel. Later moved to the Flossenbürg concentration camp, he was shot on April 9, 1945.

Mother Maria Skobtsova, a Russian Orthodox nun, is less widely known. She worked among the destitute and homeless in the Russian émigré community in Paris, running a soup kitchen and a shelter. Because her shelter provided sanctuary to Jews during the War, she was arrested by the Nazis and imprisoned. She met her death on March 31, 1945, in the gas chambers at Ravensbrück, where legend has it that she voluntarily took the place of a mother with a child.

"If you're Lutheran, you can't help but know about Bonheffer and if you're Orthodox, you can't help but know about Mother Maria," says Toensing. As the unique man who has been both in his lifetime, Toensing draws inspiration from them equally. A work of Bonhoeffer's, *Letter and Papers from Prison* (written during the period from his arrest in 1943 to his execution in 1945), particularly struck Toensing with its undaunted courage and unshakable faith, as did a biography on Mother Maria, who exhibited, says the composer, "calm and cheerfulness till the very end."

When asked by Leone Buyse to compose a second flute concerto, Toensing had both of these works on his mind and felt compelled to write about them. The timing seemed right as well, since 1995 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

With such profoundly tragic subject matter, it is a surprise to first hear the Concerto. It is a shimmering, optimistic work. This seeming contradiction is a purposeful move on Toensing's part, who fashioned the dramatic curve of his concerto as "light to dark to light again."

"Light" opens the work: a sparkling flute and shimmering bells. This first movement (*Allegro con spirito*) speaks of hope, beauty, a world where something wonderful lies just ahead. Airy and clear, the flute continues its "cheerfulness" even as brass and winds strike unsettling chords and low rumbles of brass and drum are heard in the distance, notes of imminent doom out of place with the breathy innocence of the flute. The rumble grows, becomes chordal; the flute continues unshaken, but the movement ends perilously with a harmonic cliffhanger.

A solitary alto flute playing a somber melody begins the "dark" center movement (*Lento; Mesto*) which embodies Mother Maria. The orchestra pulses quietly underneath the haunting flute until the strings come forward with a modal melody lined with, a stronger pulse. An increasingly bolder flute melody continues to juxtapose with orchestral modality, at times producing an eerie iridescence, at times sounding darkly triumphant. Two abrupt field drum strikes (gunshots?) silence

it all. A quiet coda of winds and flute with strings slowly marking time end the piece, a solemn acceptance of life's tragedy.

A militaristic motif of fifths announces the ending movement (*Alla Marcia*), titled "Lux luceat in tenebris (The light shines in the darkness)" after a passage in the Gospel of John ("The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"). Spiky and "nasty" (as Toensing calls it), the march evokes ancient brutalities that show no signs of abating in the modern world. The flute, however, cannot be silenced by the orchestra's march. Tossing off arpeggios and spinning ornaments fashioned out of air, the flute transforms into a butterfly that flutters up and over the barbed wire. It is a triumphant ending, with flute victorious and life continuing in spite of atrocities encountered.

Concerto for Flutes and Orchestra was written at the request of Leone Buyse, distinguished faculty flutist at Rice University.

—Notes by Mic Holwin with Richard Toensing

Richard Toensing (b 1940) has had his works performed in major concert venues throughout the United States, including premieres at Alice Tully Hall and the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. His music has also received performances at festivals in the U.S. and abroad, including the Aspen Music Festival, the International Contemporary Organ Music Festival, the International Wind Ensemble Conference and the VII Foro Internacional de Musica Nueva.

The composer's compositions span a variety of styles, from the gestural, free atonal work of the '60s and '70s to a renewed interest in various forms of diatonic music in more recent years. He has written numerous works for chorus, chamber music in various genres and works for large ensembles. His music has been influenced by Russian Orthodox chant, Lutheran chorales, and by the works of other composers such as Schütz, Gesualdo, Varèse, Finney and Pärt.

Of the works by Toensing that are currently recorded, the most recent release is the monumental choral work *Responsoria*, which has been received warmly by the press. Lasting nearly two hours, the work was recorded in 1998 by the Choir of the Church of St. Luke in the Fields (New York) and is believed to be one of the few full sets of Holy Day responsoria composed since those by Don Carlo Gesualdo were created almost four centuries ago. It is also the first complete cycle of its kind composed in the twentieth century, as well as the first of its genre written by an American composer.

Toensing has received numerous awards for composition, including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet The Composer, the Jerome Foundation, the Neodata Foundation and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust. He has been a MacDowell Colony Fellow three times and received a Guggenheim Fellowship for Composition in 1987.

He earned a bachelor of music degree with honors from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1962 and master (1963) and doctor (1967) of music degrees from the University of Michigan, where he studied with Ross Lee Finney and Leslie Bassett. Toensing returned to the University of Michigan for post-doctoral work in electronic music in the summer of 1968.

Since 1973, Toensing has been a member of the composition faculty at the University of Colorado at Boulder and has been department chair since 1984. In addition to teaching, he has directed the University's Electronic Music Studio, conducted the New Music Ensemble and organized the biennial University of Colorado Festival of New Music.

The only American prize-winner in the 1969 Geneva International Flute Competition, **Leone Buyse** has presented recitals and master classes across the United States and in Canada, Japan and New Zealand. Buyse is currently professor of flute and chamber music at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music in Houston. Previously professor of flute at the University of Michigan, she relinquished her principal positions with the Boston Symphony and Boston Pops in 1993 to pursue a more active solo and teaching career after twenty-two years as an orchestral musician. A former member of the San Francisco Symphony and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, she has appeared as soloist on numerous occasions with those orchestras and also with the Boston Symphony, the Boston Pops, the Utah Symphony and l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. She has performed with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players throughout Europe and Japan; with the Tokyo, Juilliard and Muir String quartets; and at chamber music festivals across the globe. She has recorded regularly as a soloist of American music for the flute and is widely recognized as one of the country's foremost flute pedagogues, having taught at the New England Conservatory, Boston University, the Tanglewood Music Center and as a visiting professor at the Eastman School of Music.

Founded in 1937 as the Ukrainian State Symphony Orchestra, the National Symphony of Ukraine has become today the most frequently recorded orchestra of the former Soviet Union. Under the leadership of conductor **Theodore Kuchar**, the orchestra has recorded nearly fifty compact discs, including the complete symphonies of Prokofiev, Kalinnikov, Lyatoshynsky and Martinů, as well as symphonies and major works of Antheil, Bernstein, Gould, Harris and Piston. Their recording of the complete works for violin and orchestra of Walter Piston was selected by Gramophone as an "Editor's Choice" and received mention as a "Record of the Year" in 1999. During the concert seasons of the past five years, the NSO has undertaken the performance of the complete symphonies of Anton Bruckner and Franz Schubert.

Ukrainian conductor Theodore Kuchar was appointed artistic director and principal conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine in 1994 and was named conductor

laureate for life in 2000. Kuchar began his musical career as a violinist and later a violist, having graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Music and serving as the principal violist of orchestras such as the Cleveland and Helsinki. He received a Paul Fromm Fellowship in 1980, which allowed him to undertake advanced study at Tanglewood under the tutelage of Leonard Bernstein, Colin Davis, Seiji Ozawa and André Previn. After his Australian debut in 1987, Kuchar was appointed music director of the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra in Brisbane. Since 1990 he has served as artistic director of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music. In 1996 he commenced duties as music director and principal conductor of the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra. A strong advocate for new composers, Kuchar has recently conducted the works, in the presence of the composers, of Schnittke, Crumb, Gubaidulina and Foss. Soloists whom Kuchar has collaborated with in the 2000 season have included Itzhak Perlman, Jessye Norman, Mstislav Rostropovich, Yo-Yo Ma, James Galway and Sarah Chang.

Cellist **Carol Ou** has been a top prize winner in the National Federation of Music Clubs Young Artist Competition and the Irving M. Klein International String Competition. Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Ou came to the United States when she was ten and began studying the cello with Gretchen Geber in Los Angeles. Since then, she has also studied with Ronald Leonard, Janos Starker and Aldo Parisot. A graduate of Yale University, Ou received a bachelor of arts degree from Yale College and a master's and doctorate degrees from the Yale School of Music. She is currently on the faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. A versatile artist, Ou has performed across the United States, Canada, Singapore and Taiwan. She has been soloist with the Contemporary Ensemble of Taipei, the Taipei District Symphony Orchestra and the Jupiter Symphony of New York, among others. An avid chamber musician, Ou frequently collaborates with celebrated artists such as Midori, Felix Galimir, Timothy Eddy, Andrés Schiff and Richard Goode. In recent years, Ou has appeared at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, La Jolla Chamber Music Festival and the Marlboro Music Festival.

Production Notes

Produced by Michael Webster (Concertos) and Richard Toensing (Concertos and *Fantasia*). Recording engineer of *Fantasia*: Kevin Harbison Editor: Joseph Lukasik

Concerto for Flutes and Wind Ensemble published by Carl Fischer, Inc. (BMI).

Fantasia (of Angels and Shepherds) and Concerto for Flutes and Orchestra published by Troparion Music LLC (troparion@richardtoensing.com) (BMI).

For more information on the composer goto www.richardtoensing.com

Cover print: "Iron Markings" by Louise Kalin. Photographs courtesy of the composer.

Concept & Design: Lost In Brooklyn Studio (www.lostinbrooklyn.com)

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Executive Director: John G. Schultz

This recording has been partially funded by the University of Colorado Council on Research and Creative Work.