

MEL POWELL:
CHAMBER MUSIC

TRIO for Piano, Violin and Cello

HELURA TRIO

LUCILLE BURNHAM, piano

HERBERT SORKIN, violin

RAY SCHWEITZER, cello

DIVERTIMENTO for Violin and Harp

HERBERT SORKIN, violin

MARGARET ROSS, harp

DIVERTIMENTO for Five Winds

FAIRFIELD WIND ENSEMBLE

with MURRAY KARPILOVSKY, trumpet

THOMAS PARSHLEY, flute

DAVID WEBER, clarinet

HARRY SHULMAN, oboe

ELIAS CARMEN, bassoon

Mel Powell was born in New York City in 1923, and at the age of five began his studies in piano and theory with Sara Barg. His later studies were with Nadia Reisenberg (piano) and Paul Hindemith (composition). The principal period of formal training at Yale University followed three years of service in the U. S. Army Air Force during World War II.

Breadwinning activities have included a variety of efforts: a season of semi-pro baseball (at age 13), a career as a noted jazz pianist (1940 - 42 and sporadic recordings thereafter), a teaching position at Queens College, and free-lance composing and conducting of scores for documentary films.

One of his first student works, a *Suite for Orchestra*, received a Louisville Symphony award. His *Recitative and Toccata Percossa for Harpsichord* was commissioned for Fernando Valenti by the Juilliard Festival of American Music. The choral work “*Sweet Lovers Love the Spring*” won the American Music Award in 1956, and the *Divertimento for Five Winds* was chosen by S. P. A. M. for its 1957 publication award. Other works include piano, choral and chamber music.

He lives in New Canaan, Connecticut with his wife, actress Martha Scott, and their two children.

Certain aspects of Mel Powell’s past deserve raised eyebrows! More worthy of our astonishment however is the purity and clarity of expression he so effortlessly demonstrates here, and the early emergence of a sensitive and organic musical personality from the potentially disparate elements of his background. This achievement has doubtless been the fruit of concentrated and intelligent effort, a diligent quest for an adequately flexible and idiomatic musical standard. Once captured by each composer in his own way for his own purposes, this standard technique may liberate the imaginative capacities and reveal the most intonate recesses of the artistic personality. To this end, Mel Powell has taken giant steps and his work reflects fidelity to the art as well as to himself.

His is an art of moderation, invention, economy. With a few choice notes he builds castles in the air, enchanted structures of sound, classic, chaste, modest, yet of a bewitching and precise charm, remarkable for their elegance and the justness of their proportion. The work is strongly controlled, guided by an active intellectual process which disdains wasted motion or superfluous material. This intellectual toughness is a palpable virtue – the charm, the very loveliness of the music disguises the inner fortification, the iron-work of inventive discipline; and this technical, intellectual aspect is an inherent part of the charm of this music, giving it added resilience and durable fascination.

In all the pieces recorded here, Mr. Powell reveals marked ability to invoke those qualities associated with ideal chamber music: intimacy of expression, modesty of proportion, frugality of means and pleasure of execution. The forms are appositely chosen and clearly manipulated. He shows notable skill in confining the frame, creating a balance of expressive intent, chosen material and structural and instrumental technique. Powell's position represents a commitment to measure, balance, restraint, serious but pleasurable communication, which are large, not minor virtues in a generally confused esthetic picture.

The basic premise upon which his manner is founded is a neo-classic one. But here the premise concerns us less than the elaboration of it. With a style so established we are interested more in the warmth and richness of expression and the finesse in handling the material, than we are in conceptual innovations and startling sounds.

Of the works recorded on this disc, the *Trio for Piano, Violin and Cello* is the most serious and ambitious. It is also the most recent and perhaps most clearly exemplifies Powell's evolving Constructive technique. The theme or head motive, stated at the very start, supplies the generating material for much of the whole piece. Sometimes its reappearance is quickly recognizable but it almost never recurs literally — always a variation in time values or in accent will change the emphasis. Or it will be divided and served up in its constituent parts, or stated in inversion or in retrograde, or adorned with passing and neighboring tones. Its characteristic intervals are the key to certain chord structures and often motivate the contrapuntal progress of the inner or subsidiary parts.

The first movement can profitably be called a sonata, with the order of recurrence of themes and thematic derivations changed in the recapitulation where the principal themes overlap. The development begins serenely with the piano stating in retrograde the end of the original head-motive. The atmosphere is suddenly ratified, the sonority special, the themes fragmented.

The second movement is aptly marked *Marcia Grottesca*, (it follows an A B A formal scheme) constantly maintaining a march beat. The angularity, the cynical, disjunct statements are altogether intentional and contribute an important dimension to the larger expressive scheme of the *Trio*. There are here, as in every movement, close motivic and harmonic connections with the original head motive stated in the movement. The first chord, for example, of the *Marcia Grottesca* is a vertical statement of the head-motive.

A handsomely elaborated Theme and Variations occupies the position of slow movement in the *Trio*. The essence of the Theme is the retrograde of the original head motive, newly garbed in suitable harmonies. The presentation of the full Theme pursues classical models and is laid out A A B A. Four variations follow, of different affections, disguising through their wonderful variety the tenacity with which the theme is adhered to. The fourth variation, beginning with intimations of a gamelan, resolves into a more literal statement of the final strophe of the theme. The movement ends with a cadence, heard before, of surpassing purity and calm.

The final movement, introduced by a fresh paraphrase of the original head motive, is toccata like in its lively and continuous motion, interrupted only briefly by a faint reference to the development section of movement I. Against this background of motion the principal expressive material, once again based on the same head-motive, gains ascendancy. Whether coyly hinted at, hidden by inversion, tossed from instrument to instrument or nakedly exposed, it is always seen in a newly expressive and convincing light.

Following the first performance, *The New York Times* (January 28, 1957) commented: "The twenty minute *Trio* made a hit with the audience, whose applause brought the composer to his feet several times. And the approbation was well bestowed. It is a very appealing work . . . written with the control and craftsmanship of a man who knows how to develop his material skillfully, and much of it was songful."

The *Divertimento for Violin and Harp* and the *Divertimento for Five Winds* are works worthy of exhaustive examination and analysis, but they can be only briefly commented upon here. Both are true to the implications of their title, but the purity and refinement of their sentiment elevates them above mere diversion. While they do not exhibit identical stylistic orientation (the Violin-Harp piece is earlier), the basic procedure is strongly characteristic of Powell's approach. The initial thematic material, while lively and warm, is highly economical and it is constantly enriched, varied, elaborated, juxtaposed during the course of the entire composition. The consistency of this method is more clearly apparent in the *Divertimento for Five Winds*. Here a small grouping of notes (Powell calls it a "pocket") comprising a second, a fourth, a minor third, gives the essential design for the fabric of the whole piece. (The instrumentation is the "classical" wind quintet, but with trumpet instead of French Horn.)

The works on this record clearly reveal the man as artist: sensitive, fastidious, economical, cultivated, imaginative. They are fashioned by the mind of a craftsman whose mastery is firmly but unobtrusively demonstrated. There is pertinency about every gesture made and the means chosen to make it. In a word, this is fine art.

— Notes by Yehudi Wyner

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)