

CRI-LP-144
Gunther Schuller/Easley Blackwood
Music for Brass Quintet

- Gunther Schuller
1. *Music for Brass Quintet*..... (11:50)
New York Brass Quintet:
Robert Nagel and John Glasel, trumpets; Ray Alonge, horn;
John Swallow, trombone; Harvey Phillips, tuba
 2. *Fantasy Quartet for Four Celli* (6:20)
Laszlo Varga; Michael Rudiakow;
Jules Eskin; Sterling Hunkins
- Easley Blackwood
3. *Chamber Symphony for Fourteen Wind Instruments* (18:15)
Contemporary Chamber Ensemble
Arthur Weisberg, conductor

Gunther Schuller's *Music far Brass Quintet* was commissioned by the Library of Congress, and first performed there in January 1961 by the New York Brass Quintet. The score calls for two trumpets, horn, trombone, and tuba. Metronome markings serve as tempo indications, but the clearly divided movements each have a basic tempo: I is moderate; II, scherzo-like; and III, slow.

Every note of this score bears the authority of individuality. There is tension and delicacy, drama and poetry, to a degree far in excess of that expected from music for brass. However, the music more than speaks for itself.

The form is characterized by spontaneity and the entire work is stylistically unified. Improvisatory throughout, the *Music for Brass* contains vestigial reprises in movements I and II; movement III, at the close, uses the atypical tuba call of the opening movement.

The composer states that the first movement “develops an organic continuity by means of fragmentation.” And indeed, the phrases are complex and asymmetrical, but they hew closely to an assimilable length. Repeated hearings indicate that the paragraphs of traditional form are still operative. The time-spacing of these paragraphs, in particular, is reminiscent of song-forms. And about movement III, Schuller, in fact, mentions an ABA form, with the B replaced (untraditionally) by solo cadenzas, which lends credence to the possible influence of these forms in the other movements.

Schuller speaks of the evolving melodic and rhythmic material of movement II as an “initial maximum of fragmentation, which produces an almost completely suspended time feeling, gradually giving way to an intensification and thickening of texture.”

Excitement of sound occurs in both the *Music far Brass* and the *Fantasy for Four Celli*. The hackneyed aspects of the instrumental sounds are avoided so completely that the listener may well forget which instruments are playing. At one time the sounds may be percussive in attack, at another, shimmering and pale, or agile as a woodwind. The tuba part, and its performance on this record, is noteworthy. *Would that some past innovators, like Berlioz, for instance . . . could hear some of these new sounds.* Schuller's fine instrumental writing is one of the “known” secrets of his art.

Schuller's use of sustained and rhythmic elements is intriguing. The sustained notes do more than bind the active part-writing; they do more than just “let out” the music slowly, as it were. Movements I and II contrast extreme rhythmic activity with the sustained elements. Yet, it is an activity that carries no significant motivic relationship, and is too brief to be called a new section. Schuller's usage seems to ask that the rhythmic be seen as a “planting” of the sustained, as all actual part of it. If read correctly, he asks us to hear the sustained with an implied rhythmic subdivision which is far smaller than usual.

In hearing any melody, the listener unconsciously supplies a subdivision of the meter, which forms one component of the rhythmic lilt. Schuller's unusual subdivision of the meter makes his slow movements more slow than they "rightfully" should be. Accounting for his rhythmic elasticity, it also lends to his sustained tones some of the aura of pure melody.

Four Celli is a grouping of instruments that is not without precedent. There have recently been Celli "quartets" and "orchestras." Some nineteenth century examples come to mind in addition to a few well-known contemporary ones. With the *Fantasy for Four Celli*, as with the *Music for Brass*, every available resource of the instruments is brought into play—with a result relaxed and unenforced. Think for a moment of the loss in hearing the same music performed by a string quartet. Or think of the *Fantasy* as performed by the brass, or vice-versa. They are irreversible; further proof of the composer's careful use of instruments.

Of this work, Mr. Schuller writes, "though, in one movement, [it] is divided into two main sections, the first primarily lyrical in nature; the second more agitated and virtuosic. The work employs, as do all my compositions of the last ten years, the so-called twelve-tone system, limited in this work only to pitch relationships."

Schuller's achievement is perhaps the greater for his being self-taught. Born in 1925, by 1945 he was performing his own Horn Concerto with the Cincinnati Orchestra. He recently ended a fifteen-year tenure at the Metropolitan Opera, where he achieved the rank of first-chair horn. Performances with symphonic and jazz groups have rounded out experiences that have placed him close to the music of many styles (including medieval and Japanese). He is the winner of many awards and commissions, including the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, a Ford Foundation-American Music Center Commission, and a joint commission from Balanchine and the City Center Ballet Company. In 1960 he was selected as a U.S. representative at the I.S.C.M. Festival in Cologne. His music has been performed by major orchestras, and several recordings are available. Schuller has composed orchestral and chamber works as well as some songs.

Easley Blackwood

Chamber Symphony for Fourteen Wind Instruments

Easley Blackwood's *Chamber Symphony for Fourteen Wind Instruments, Op. 2* was composed in 1955. It is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and four horns; in the last movement a flute alternates with piccolo. The work is divided into three movements: I Sonata (Moderato), II Romanza (Lento amoroso), III Toccata (Allegro energico), with an introductory section to movement I, marked Andantino.

This is an unusually mature work to bear the opus number of 2; and at that, it was the creation of a twenty-year-old! Its array of sound is broad and expressive. Widely spaced chords in the second movement, with the sounds of bass clarinet and contrabassoon predominating, are sounds not easily forgotten.

The *Chamber Symphony* is in a tonal but highly chromatic idiom. Virtually a cyclic work, the introductory passage to movement I contains some of the fundamental materials, three of which are basic: the serpentine chromatic figure (often appearing in triplet form), the dotted rhythmic figure, and the melodic minor third and sixth. Each hearing bears out their crucial function. The result is a musical integration that is sometimes subtle but always satisfying. The rightness of the entire work is unlocked by this key.

Movement I is a finely wrought sonata form. Following the introduction, a solo clarinet announces the principal subject, in a dotted rhythm. A slow and chromatic horn figure (also beginning with a dotted rhythm) prepares the way for the large second group. This consists of a horn chorale and the dotted rhythm turned to a saucy bounce together with a triplet figure. The development uses all of these elements, with primary emphasis on the first theme; the climax arrives overlapping with an abbreviated recapitulation. Material of the second group returns in a new guise, resignation, closing the movement.

The Romanza might possibly be viewed in different ways. But it is most remarkable when viewed as a

monothematic movement. A solo oboe announces the theme. It is heard twice again with accompaniment, with added decoration, and with the slowly repeated horn chords (a most ingratiating use of the instrument). The climax is of large proportion, and it again overlaps with the last entrance of the theme. The striking horn passage precedes a .simultaneously ascending and descending line that dissolves into the close. A bridge to the last movement, serving at the same time as a coda, consists of sustained chords interrupted by a slow bassoon cadenza.

The Toccata is the most complex of the three movements, forming a capstone to the entire work. Here we see an even greater use of all the basic elements of the work—achieving an elucidation, a reworking, and a tightening of the materials of the entire work. The overall form is the rondo. Four tutti chords introduce a syncopated and fleet main theme in the clarinets, answered by the horns in a dotted rhythm. This melody darts here and there and is transformed first into an oboe solo, then into a flute solo.

The latter gets caught up in a repeated figure that has the rhythm of theme I from the first movement. A return of the initial material of this movement leads to further motivic development. The use of the extreme registers of the instruments, trills, and rhythmic complexity are the outward forms of this activity. The main theme of movement II can be heard played by the clarinet. The previously mentioned repeated figure appears, halts the activity, and the dynamics become quiet. But the momentum is established, directed unmistakably toward its mark: the full peroration of the material—several ideas at a time: An unexpected upward sweep, punctuated by horn chords, brings the movement to a close. .

Philosophically, movement I leaves an impression of resignation, movement II, a mature calmness, and III, affirmation. In spite of the Symphony's large climaxes and infectious rhythmic displays, there is an underlying stratum of the doleful and wary, notable especially in the instrumentation. The composer's choice of scales and penchant for the interchange of a duple with a triple rhythm add a quality of languor.

Easley Blackwood was born in 1933, and appeared as a piano soloist with the Indianapolis Symphony at the age of thirteen. His career as a composer has been nourished and stimulated by a variety of teachers, from Messiaen to Bernhard Heiden, Hindemith to Boulanger. In addition to bachelor's and master's degrees, Easley has garnered many awards and commissions, including a Ditson Scholarship, a Fulbright Grant (and renewal), a Fontainebleau Scholarship, and the Lili Boulanger Memorial Award. He also is a member of the faculty of the University of Chicago.

For its 100th anniversary, G. Schirmer's commissioned a new work, his Symphony No. 2, Op. 9, first performed by the Cleveland Orchestra, with George Szell. The Fromm Music Foundation commissioned his First String Quartet, Op. 4, widely performed by the Kroll and Budapest Quartets; the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, his Second String Quartet. His First Symphony has been recorded by the Boston Symphony (Munch).

Notes by Carl Sigmon

The **New York Brass Quintet** is one of the leading brass ensembles of the United States. Members of the Quintet often appear as soloists with major orchestras and ensembles, and hold outstanding orchestral and teaching positions. They also are founders of a publishing house, Mentor Music, Inc., exclusively devoted to brass music.

Arthur Weisberg, who makes his recording debut here, belongs to a rising group of compelling young American-born, American-trained conductors, as much at home with contemporary music as with the standard repertoire. He founded and conducted the New Chamber Orchestra of Westchester, conducted the Goddard-Riverside Community Orchestra, and currently is conductor and musical director of Musica Viva of New York, an organization devoted exclusively to music of the twentieth century.

Mr. Weisberg has also become recognized as one of the country's outstanding bassoonists. In this capacity, he has been associated with the Symphony of the Air and the Houston, Baltimore, and Cleveland orchestras. He is now a member of the New York Woodwind Quintet, with which he has toured the U.S.

and Europe and recorded extensively. He also served on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin summer music school.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)