

CRI 232

RALPH SHAPEY: *Incantations for Soprano and Ten Instruments (1961)*

Bethany Beardslee, and the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago, Ralph Shapey, conductor

JOHN MacIVOR PERKINS: *Music for Thirteen Players (1964)*

Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago, Ralph Shapey, conductor

Caprice (1963)

Easley Blackwood, pianist

This disk is one of a series of chamber music recordings in advanced styles. It features a performing group which is typical of the new situation in that it is University-based and because it represents a closer relationship between composer and players than has been common in the past 150 years.

The secession of composers from established performing groups, and their collaboration in the formation of their own has been called a revolution — of which the reverberations remain to be evaluated, The most obvious result at this time is that the new ensembles are able to play music which had heretofore been thought possible only in the electronic medium.

INCANTATIONS was described as “One of the most searing, terrifying and altogether extraordinary compositions this listener has ever heard” by Allen Hughes in the New York Times on the occasion of its premiere. That was in 1961. Four years later, the same paper's Harold Schonberg reported from Chicago that it was “the most authoritative and professional work on the program.”

Still later, in the San Francisco Chronicle, Alexander Fried called the work “an absolute masterpiece, of a daring and curious character.” Asked to write a few words of his own about his controversial work, Mr. Shapey sent the following prose-poem:

**music as an object in Time and Space . . .
aggregate sounds structured into concrete sculptured forms . . .
images existing as a totality from their inception, each
a self-involved unit of individual proportions . . .
related, interrelated and unrelated images organized into
an organic whole . . .
permutations occurring only within each self contained unit . . .
varied phases resulting from juxtaposition of designs . . .
imposed discipline by ritualistic reiteration . . .
(the voice projected as an instrument, using syllables in organized sound-structures.)**

On a more mundane level, it should be explained that INCANTATIONS is in four movements, the third (the only one without the vocalizations of the unique Bethany Beardslee) continuing without pause into the prayer-like fourth. Although a single hearing may leave the listener with a sense of participating in chaos, further attention reveals ever more clearly the composer's firm, if unconventional, control of form and texture.

RALPH SHAPEY was born in Philadelphia in 1921. He studied violin with Emmanuel Zetlin and composition with Stefan Wolpe. He has been the recipient of many awards, including the Brandeis Creative Arts, the Copley Foundation, the Stern Foundation, the Frank Huntington Beebe, the Naumburg Foundation recording awards, in addition to the recording award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters that made this disk possible. Mr. Shapey has also received commissions from Alma Morgenthau, the Dimitri Mitropoulos, Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations for several of his 56 compositions. He is Associate Professor of Music of the University of Chicago where he is also Music Director of the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago.

MUSIC FOR 13 PLAYERS was composed in 1964 and extensively revised in 1966. The original version was first performed at the Fromm-Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary American Music, for which it had been commissioned. The revision was undertaken specifically for this recording.

The composition opens quietly with a very short introduction during which melodic fragments pass from instrument to instrument usually at the rate of one note per instrument — and sustained chords are built up. The instruments are thus cooperating in a common project and allowing their individual, contrasting characteristics to come to the fore only rather hesitantly, at the most appropriate moments. At the end of the introduction, however, the percussion players begin a more independent, self-assertive activity. Almost immediately, the other instruments enter with a new abandon. The resulting dense, intricate, “all-over”, almost totally chaotic texture — the opposite extreme from the introduction — is sustained in its first appearance for about one minute, and constitutes in itself the main idea of the work. When this texture revives from time to time during the course of the piece, specific musical motives are not prominently recalled; instead, the relationship of the parts, perceived statistically, becomes an identifiable “sound”, subject to progressive modification. By the ending, for example, the “chaotic” material has been so modified, through the application of various rhythmic and harmonic constraints, that it takes on a certain aspect of orderliness. This kind of order, however, is in contrast to the relatively classical, more “expressive” introduction, which also revives periodically before it is finally engulfed.

CAPRICE was commissioned by Easley Blackwood and completed in 1963. The work is 12-tone, and can be divided into four parts. The first part, which begins after a brief introduction, sets up a basic tempo as a point of reference. The piece then begins to speed up as a faster tempo is first superimposed on the basic one, and then continued by itself. This occurs in three successive steps, with a passage in the basic tempo inserted between each step. Finally, a speed twice as fast as the basic tempo is reached. The second part is in the form of an unstable prelude followed by a short fugue whose subject begins with four repeated notes. In the third part, the piece slows down in a manner similar to the speeding up of the first part. At the same time, there is a development of very long sustained chords which have been slowly coming into prominence throughout the work. After one last fortissimo fragment in the original tempo, the final section begins. This is a slow chorale developed from the sustained chords, and occasionally interrupted by rapid pianissimo figures. The work ends quietly.

JOHN MacIVOR PERKINS was born in St. Louis in 1935. He attended Harvard University and the New England Conservatory of Music simultaneously, receiving degrees (with high honors) from both institutions in 1958. Subsequently he traveled in Europe on a Sheldon Prize Fellowship from Harvard, and studied briefly with Nadia Boulanger, Luigi Dallapiccola, and Roberto Gerhard. After returning to the United States, he took the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Brandeis University, where his teachers included Arthur Berger, Harold Shapero, and the late Irving Fine. Mr. Perkins has taught at the University of Chicago and at Harvard, where he is now Assistant Professor of Music. His solo and chamber works have been performed in several cities in this country and in Europe. The St. Louis Symphony under Eleazar de Carvalho recently played his Music for Orchestra. He is married and has one son.

—Carter Harman

The American Academy of Arts and Letters and its parent organization, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, are honorary societies with a distinguished membership of creative artists. They are chartered by an act of Congress and are devoted to the furtherance of the arts in the United States.

Through joint committees of selection, these societies every year award fifteen grants to young artists in recognition of distinction and promise. Four of these awards go annually to composers, in addition to the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award given every-third year to an established composer of distinction.

In the spring an exhibition of the works of award winners in painting and sculpture is held at the Academy building. In 1956, it was decided to inaugurate a series of recordings with the similar purpose of calling attention to the works of award winners in music. This release, presented in collaboration with Composers Recordings, Inc., offers works by 1966 award winners, Ralph Shapey and John MacIvor Perkins.

(Original Liner Notes from CRI LP Jacket)