

BEN WEBER: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 52
William Masselos, piano; Gerhard Samuel, conductor

CHARLES WUORINEN: Piano Concerto
Charles Wuorinen, piano; James Dixon, Conductor

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

BEN WEBER was born in St. Louis in 1916 and has lived since 1945 in New York, where he has become one of the most widely respected and best liked of all contemporary American composers. Although he was supposed to study medicine (and did, for a year), he always preferred music, and turned to it as a serious study at De Paul University. He says that his study of composition was, nevertheless, something that he undertook without a formal teacher. He has received many awards and commissions, including the Guggenheim (twice), the Paul Fromm Foundation (twice) and the Louisville Orchestra.

Weber's CONCERTO FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 52, was commissioned by William Masselos through the Ford Foundation. It received its world premiere at the hands of Mr. Masselos, Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic in 1961, the year of its completion, at which time the New York Herald Tribune reported that it was “not only imaginative, it has wit and elan—a virtuoso composition in the best concerto tradition.”

The music is constructed in Weber's personal interpretation of the "tone-row" technique of serial composers. Although the directions to the performer say “decisive”, the composer describes the first movement as a fantasia. It has a distinct development and concludes with a recognizable reprise of the early material. The second movement, “In memoriam, Dmitri Mitropoulos”, is somber and elegiac. Its middle section is a passacaglia with five variations and a coda. The finale is described as “a rondo with complications but no rhythmic doubts.” It ends with a mysterious coda and a bang.

WILLIAM MASSELOS has been playing new music at such a precipitous rate during his career of two decades that it is sometimes forgotten that he is a first class performer of older music, too. He was a student of Carl Friedberg, made his Town Hall debut at 18 and has appeared as soloist with the great orchestras of the world. Among the first performances he has given are Ives' FIRST PIANO SONATA, and Copland's PIANO FANTASY, as well as solo works of Ben Weber.

CHARLES WUORINEN is well known to CRI listeners, with three previous recordings to his credit. He is a multiple-threat musician, having had careers as pianist, conductor, teacher and writer; he is co-founder and co-director of the Group for Contemporary Music at Columbia University.

Wuorinen's PIANO CONCERTO dates from 1966, the same period as his CONCERTO FOR FLUTE AND CHAMBER ORCHESTRA (CRI 230), but is on a considerably larger scale. The orchestra is of traditional instrumentation (triple winds) but makes use of a nine-man percussion section. The percussion department acts as a multi-voiced, multi-textured unit, much of the time, with a thoroughly-heard musical (rather than punctuation) function that is characteristic of Wuorinen's work.

Mr. Wuorinen adds:

“Since the CONCERTO is in a single movement, the various contrasts of speed, texture, and so forth, that occupy different movements in older pieces, here are all present simultaneously in a multi-layered continuity. Even the general pauses may be considered windows in the piece opening on the silence in which it swims.”

JAMES DIXON, the gifted conductor of the Wuorinen CONCERTO, is Professor of Music and conductor of the University Symphony Orchestra at the University of Iowa, Iowa City. He has been resident conductor of the Seventh Army Symphony in Germany (1953-54) and the New England Conservatory Orchestra (1959-61), among others; associate conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony (1961-62) and recipient of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge International Conducting Award (1955) and the Gustav Mahler Medal (1963).

GERHARD SAMUEL, who conducted the Royal Philharmonic in Lou Harrison's SYMPHONY ON G (CRI 236), is musical director of the rising Oakland (Calif.) Symphony.

London's ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA has, since the death of its most renowned conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, functioned as a free-lance orchestra. As this recording so brilliantly illustrates, it is at home among the most difficult flights of today's advanced idioms.

The Weber recording was made possible by grants from the American Composers Alliance and the Contemporary Music Society. The Wuorinen recording was made possible by a grant from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music.

(Original Liner Notes from CRI LP Jacket)