

CRI 243

DAVID DEL TREDICI

Night Conjure-Verse

BENITA VALENTE, soprano; MARY BURGESS, mezzo-soprano; with players from the MARLBORO FESTIVAL, conducted by the composer

PHILIP BATSTONE

A Mother Goose Primer

ALDEN ASHFORTH

The Unquiet Heart

BETHANY BEARDSLEE, soprano; VICTORIA BOND, echo; U.C.L.A. Chamber Ensemble, JOHN DARE, conductor

This recording presents two of today's outstanding sopranos in compositions by three of today's important younger composers. DAVID DEL TREDICI is one of the most frequently-honored in the country, with residencies at Tanglewood, Marlboro, and the MacDowell Colony and a glittering array of important awards and commissions. He began his career as a pianist in the San Francisco area, won his M.F.A. at Princeton and now teaches at Harvard. PHILIP BATSTONE is a New Englander who includes study in Germany with Boris Blacher among his credits, as well as a Princeton Ph.D. He now teaches at the University of Colorado. ALDEN ASHFORTH is New York-born, Princeton-educated and now teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles.

NIGHT CONJURE-VERSE is a song-cycle to poems by James Joyce, the second of what has turned out to be a series of works for soprano and instrumental groups. Mr. Del Tredici writes:

“The first idea and, indeed, much of the ensuing technical apparatus for the piece came from the poetic image of the second poem, which is a mirror commenting on what has been reflected in it. That idea was to oppose two like voices—a soprano—the 'real' voice (the actual events before the mirror) and a counter-tenor—the 'false voice' (the reflection in the mirror). Both have the same range of notes although a very different tone quality. This, then, was modified (because a counter-tenor is often hard to find) to soprano versus mezzo-soprano, as in this recording.

“When I began to compose, the idea of mirror reflection expanded into technical means; that is both poetic image and technic became, in my mind, the same—a symbiosis I find necessary before I can set any poem. To be specific: musical passages are followed by their mirror (backwards) versions, in both small details and over long sections; two opposing sonority groups; string quartet versus wind septet are employed behind the two opposing voices; extremely high tessitura in general is used in all parts to suggest (perhaps) flashes of light from a mirror, etc. There is frequent splintering of syllables of the text and retrograding of the text.

“The setting of the first poem, *Simples*, I composed last and thought of it as another 'light' poem, although a much softer, more mysterious 'moonlight' in contrast to the glaring mirror reflections of 'A Memory....' It, too, abounds in much retrograded motion (rhythmic and melodic) and canonic chasing or similar lines—though here with a more playful, delicate, 'moonlighting' quality.

“I composed *Night Conjure-Verse* like one puts together a mosaic or jig-saw puzzle. At first I gathered together 7 or 8 notebooks full of little ideas or different versions of the same idea, with no idea where they would eventually fit.

“As the pressure of so much material on my hands 'without a home' increased, so would my instincts (or whatever) suddenly snap different bits together and this, in turn, would suggest other large fittings – and so it went in different spots all over the piece at once. (A jigsaw puzzle is not a bad image for the process). Perhaps the only guiding hand through it all was the text (like the picture of the completed jig-saw on every puzzle cover) to which the different tiny elements would adhere in more and more profusion.”

The players are: Judith Schenkman, piccolo; Ornulf Gulbrandsen, flute; Patricia Grignet, oboe; Harold Wright, clarinet; Donald Stewart, bass clarinet; Kenneth Moore, bassoon; Myron Bloom, horn; Jerome Rosen, violin; Marilyn Dubow, violin; Philipp Naegele, viola; Ko Iwasaki, cello.

Mr. Batstone writes:

"A MOTHER GOOSE PRIMER is a dramatic music-word poem. It contains no music which is independent of the words; no words – beyond merely individual lines – which can in any way be thought of as independent of the music. The creation, the arrangement, the composition of the words, the music, and the staging was simultaneous and interdependent.

“A small bell calls the singer (mother, bird, witch, girl, child), on to the stage. The players, playing their usual role in the concert hall, are musicians, grouped to one side and mute at first until, after being recognized, they begin playing tentatively – as pupils. As the flight begins, their role is more active – (although they never really supply support the voice in the usual sense; rather, their role is one of commentary and obligato). Finally, one of them is moved to join in the singing.

“After the game is over (Bandbox!), and the bedtime prayer is sung (Night!) the players again become mute – save this one who provides the echo from across the lake. After delivering a short speech at the apron of the stage our Phoenix/housewife moves nonchalantly toward the wings having left the drama in the hands of the audience. Finally she is called away by the same bell which called her in the beginning.

“This work is strictly serial with regard to both pitches and rhythms. It is dedicated, with admiration and respect, to Miss Bethany Beardslee.”

Mr. Batstone created the final mix at the University of Colorado Electronic Music Laboratory.

About THE UNQUIET HEART, Mr. Ashforth writes:

“Although The Unquiet Heart was originally conceived, in a version for voice and piano, at the instigation of the Japanese-American soprano Florence Kunitomo (since turned contralto), it was actually composed with Bethany Beardslee's unique voice always in mind – a fact betrayed not only in the work's pyrotechnical requirements, but in its call for extreme flexibility of coloration and inflection, and a special sense of involvement with words. It was to enhance further her singular vocal characteristics that I undertook in 1968 to re-work the cycle, using instrumental sonorities which I felt would be congenial both to her voice and to the text, drawn from Kenneth Rexroth's 100 Poems from the Japanese (after eighth, ninth and tenth century originals).

“Rexroth's renderings are far from mere translations; their language and their overwhelming sense of isolation and estrangement are unmistakably twentieth-century in flavor. It is primarily in the recurring traditional symbolic imagery that one senses the poetic origin in medieval tanka.

“I have tried to reflect some of this imagistic consistency in the cycle by a progression from the birds and flowers of spring to the stags and leaves of autumn, and in the freely associative conjunction of rotating modular sonorities with these images as they recur. And again, in response to the nature of the poetry, I have sometimes negated our usual sense of time and development: the instrumental opening is more a peroration than an introduction; the first song, as it emerges unaccompanied, has no real 'beginning' and the last, no real 'ending.’”

Players for Messrs. Batstone and Ashforth are:

Susan Greenberg, flute, alto flute, piccolo; Gary Gray, clarinet; Gary Foster, clarinet; David Atkins, bass clarinet; Lou Anne Neill, harp; Frederick Hammond, harpsichord; Natalie Limonick, piano; Jeffrey Solow, cello; Eric Remsen, Emily Just, percussion.

When BETHANY BEARDSLEE sings modern music, the most awkward notes float out as easily as if she were singing a popular song, and as warmly as if she were singing Mahler – which she also does, beautifully. She is internationally famous as the outstanding interpreter of new music.

BENITA VALENTE is as famed for her singing of traditional music, especially opera, as she is for her elegant performances of contemporary works. She is familiar to audiences at the Aspen, Marlboro and Spoleto music festivals, as well as those of the major symphony orchestras.

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(Original Liner Notes from CRI LP Jacket)