

**CRI 277**

**WILLIAM ALBRIGHT**

**ORGANBOOK (1967)**

**JUBA (1965)**

**William Albright, organist**

**PNEUMA (1966)**

**Marilyn Mason, organist**

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT was born in 1944 in Gary, Indiana. He is widely known for his virtuosic performances of contemporary piano and organ music, which include a number of world premieres. He is also recognized as a dashing interpreter of modern and classic rag-time, an interest which he has expanded to include composition in the rag medium. He has studied with Ross Lee Finney, George Rochberg, Marilyn Mason, Olivier Messiaen and Max Deutsch.

In 1968, his work *ORGANBOOK* received the Prize of the Queen Marie-José, and he has won a number of other important music awards, including the one from the American Academy-National Institute of Arts and Letters which made this recording possible. He is now (1971) Assistant Professor of Music Composition at the University of Michigan, where he is also associate director of the Electronic Music Studio and active in the affairs of the Contemporary Directions Ensemble. Mr. Albright's comments follow:

The last decade has seen an impressive reawakening of interest on the part of composers in the organ. The literature now boasts works from some of the most important European and American composers, and the field is being constantly expanded due to the efforts of adventurous performers. The works on this disc represent only my own minute contribution to the repertoire.

With a few exceptions, the last two hundred years have not been very kind to organ music: few of the major composers during this period have shown interest in its possibilities. If the Baroque era was the "Golden Age" of the organ, the Nineteenth Century might as well be dubbed the "Age of Lead" for most of the quality displayed in the writing. The bulk of the music seemed too often the product of first-rate organists but second-rate composers. The piano and the orchestra were the appropriate medium of instrumental expression; and the organ, perhaps because of faulty designs or its being cloistered in churches in a secular age, suffered in comparison.

During the first part of the Twentieth Century, the organ saw little improvement in its basic image. One composer, however — Olivier Messiaen — was able to develop a vital and timely mode of expression in terms of organ sound. It was largely he who "radicalized" the approach to organ writing; it was he who first exploited its adventurous timbral possibilities. Since these initiatives, and concurrent with the now famous renaissance in quality organ design, there has been a steadily expanding awareness among composers of the array of sounds peculiar to this largest of instruments. Unique color possibilities, the vast and flexible dynamic range, even "marginal" sounds made possible through the variation and regulation of the wind supply: all are tempting to the ears of today. Although far from being exploited to the extent of the piano in recent years, the organ, long stagnant, is again being accepted as a mainstream instrument.

My first major organ work, *JUBA* (1965), could easily be numbered among those works indebted to Messiaen. The treatment of color and even some of the musical elements show the influence of such large scale works as *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1950) and *Livre d'orgue* (1951). The writing is frankly virtuoso, highly chromatic, but with elements of lyricism. The most difficult passages are those that reflect the restrained "rage" of the organ - a caged beast bellow - in frustration and anger. By contrast, the long middle section is a series of gently rising four-note chords, each one successively shorter in duration. Underpinning the progression is a six-note drone either held by an assistant or fixed in place by pencils; the free hand and the feet lace the texture with roulades and melodies.

PNEUMA, a composition of the following year, is one of a number of organ works commissioned by Marilyn Mason, a brilliant performer of new music. To a large extent the work explores the relations and points of tangency between a totally chromatic (atonal) approach and a strongly tonal one. For example, in fast passages that seem superficially atonal, the individual elements are most often familiar tonal devices: major-minor triads, scales and arpeggios. The intention of this and other mixing was to find a dynamic tension in the opposition of various sound-worlds and a strong formal motivation in their resolution.

Whereas the above pieces tend toward dynamic, closed forms with sharp juxtapositions and conflicts within their relatively brief lengths, ORGANBOOK (1967) deals with four static situations in the same number of movements. The title, an adaptation of the French Baroque term *Livre d'orgue*, implies a collection of relatively short works, each of which deals with a sonoral aspect of the instrument and a particular type of composition. As with many organ collections, the individual titles of the movements are pious and, in this case, semi-religious. "Benediction" employs only the softest sounds of the organ: flutes, strings, celestes. They are unrolled in expansive harmonies, the slow motion and dynamics of which allow an appreciation of the beauties of organ sound. "Melisma" is basically a single line, expanded and exaggerated beyond recognition. Scalar lines are transformed into handfuls of cluster glissandi, fast notes suddenly become static chords. The registration is soft and flutey. "Fanfare" is a demonically fast toccata-like movement using full organ. "Recessional" is atmospheric with a distorted perspective: a rich and lush wall of sound containing tonal "windows." The influence of Charles Ives is apparent throughout.

The movements of ORGANBOOK may be played in any order. As they exist here, they are not a fixed set, but are a part of a much larger scheme implying many more pieces each of which explores other sound and style capabilities peculiar to the instrument: some simple, some complex, some even working with popular idioms; all, however, hopefully demonstrating the richness and variety of organ sound.

The instrument used for these recordings is the Frieze Memorial Organ located in Hill Auditorium of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. It is a large four-manual instrument completely redesigned and rebuilt by the Aeolian-Skinner Company in the mid-fifties according to a plan of Robert Noehren. Much of the original pipe work, however, dates from the 1890's. The tonal specification in many ways reflects the concept of the "American Classical Organ," or in other words, the attempt to integrate aspects of organ tonal design from several European epochs and countries: German Baroque, French Classical, French Romantic, among others. This idea implies the availability of a vast range of colors, the mixing and juxtaposition of which influenced to a great extent the writing of these works.

Although one may suspect that my pieces seem wedded to the peculiar sounds of this organ, they all can be — and have been — realized successfully on many types of organs, including mechanical action, neo-Baroque installations. On an organ of stricter classical design the range of colors may indeed be more limited, but the individual sounds are more often than not more intriguing and satisfying, thereby demanding fewer changes of color.

In fact, part of the role of the contemporary organist is facing the challenge of manipulating the wide diversity of instrument types and situations available today. If, as I feel, this very diversity implies the existence of a healthy and vital medium of expression, I, as composer and organist, am happy to remain flexible and open to all the possibilities.

— WILLIAM ALBRIGHT

MARILYN MASON is one of the foremost concert organists of our time. Her performances are in demand not only in the United States, but also in Europe, Australia and South America. In addition to her concertizing, she has helped expand the repertoire of new organ music by regularly commissioning works from American composers. She is currently chairman of the organ department at the University of Michigan.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the American Academy-National Institute of Arts and Letters. This organization makes awards every year to four outstanding young composers, of which a recording is part of the prize. William Albright was a 1970 winner.

*(Original Liner Notes from CRI LP Jacket)*