

CRI SD 346
Morris/Curtis-Smith

Robert Morris

Phases (16:00)

William Albright and Robert Morris, pianos

Curtis O.B. Curtis-Smith

Five Sonorous Inventions (15:00)

Gerald Fischbach, violin; C. Curtis-Smith, piano

This album contains two compositions that use pianos in unique ways. *Phases* is designed to distribute the sound of two pianos over a wider space, and to move it around in that space by electronic means. *Five Sonorous Inventions* requires the performer to actuate the strings by means of specially designed bows, as well as less radical means, to create sounds previously unheard on pianos or other Instruments.

Robert Morris (b Cheltenham, England, 1943) grew up in and around New York, studied at the Eastman School with John La Montaine, Bernard Rogers, and Louis Menini, and at the University of Michigan (Ph.D.) with Leslie Bassett, Ross Lee Finney, Eugene Kurtz, and George Balch Wilson. At Michigan he became involved with mixed media and electronic music and co-founded a group called the Great Society. He then moved to Yale, where he became chairman of the Composition Department of the School of Music, and, in 1972, director of the Electronic Music Studio.

Probably the most immediate aspect of *Phases* is the apparent motion of the two pianos' sound in space. In concert, four loudspeakers are placed in front, to the right, in back, and to the left of the audience so that the sounds of the pianos are heard to come from any of these locations or move at various speeds and directions between and among them. This is accomplished by two additional performers who, with the aid of photo-cell-mixers or pan-pots, are able to spatially locate the sounds independently according to notations given in the score. For this recording, the quadraphonic circular presentation described above is transformed into a linear stereo version so that the four basic locations mentioned appear to be situated at the left speaker, one third of the distance between the two speakers *from* the left speaker, similarly *from* the right speaker, and *at* the right speaker. Not much of the original effect is lost however, especially if the piece is listened to with earphones. The primary reason for using the spatial effect, aside from its curiously enticing character, is to differentiate the textural and polyphonic possibilities of the two-piano format; different strands of counterpoint, melody, etc, are put into relief by their virtual locations and movements. As a result, the gestural traits of the piece are intensified.

Phases' also refers to other features of the composition. For instance, similar if not identical material is often presented by each piano at close time intervals—out of phase, as it were—producing textures of a canonic nature. Many examples of this kind of musical dialogue are heard quite early in the piece. Another aspect of the title is found in the formal design of the whole into twenty-seven '*phases*,' each developing a particular style or approach to contemporary piano writing. The first section functions as a dictionary for the rest of the phases by literally quoting and juxtaposing passages from almost every other phase. Various technical considerations involving different approaches to pitch structure, texture, form, and transformation, rhythm, spatial articulation, inform each phase and result in a sequence of views—each from a different angle—of the same basic materials undergoing cyclic change. These range in mood from the lyric to dramatic, the gentle to the fierce, the seemingly random to the focused, etc—in short, a concatenation of related but diverse sections reminding one of the fantasies and toccatas of German and Italian Baroque composers.

—Robert Morris

Curtis O.B. Curtis-Smith (b 1941, Walla Walla, Washington) attended Whitman College, Northwestern University and the University of Illinois (Ph.D.), where his piano teachers included David Burge, Guy Mombaerts, and John Ringgold. He also studied composition with Kenneth Gaburo, Herbert Brün, Bruno Maderna, Alan Stout, Anthony Donato, and Jacob Druckman. He has won numerous commissions and awards for piano playing and composition (including a Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood; a gold medal for a piano piece at the Viotti Concorso; and Honorable Mention at the Italian Contemporary Music Society's VII Concorso for *Five Sonorous Inventions*), and has had numerous performances of his music. In 1975 he was associate professor of music at Western Michigan University. His *Rhapsodies* for piano solo appears on CRI SD 345.

He writes:

“Five Sonorous Inventions is the third piece of mine to employ a method of bowing the piano strings, achieved by the use of specially devised bows. My interest in this technique was not solely for the novelty of the sounds themselves, but for the purpose of bringing the two dissimilar instruments into a closer timbral similarity.

“The bows are constructed of nylon thread of varying thicknesses and lengths, and of varying number of strands: some of the bows having as few as eighteen strands, other as many as forty-eight, depending on the register for which they are intended. These bows are threaded at various points through the piano strings prior to the performance.

“In the Second Invention, thick, extremely long bows are used near the agraffes [*A device invented and patented by Sébastien Erard as part of his first repetition action of 1808, which replaced the nut and nut-pin arrangement of earlier pianos*], to produce partials as high as the 64th (six octaves), as well as many of the lower partials. The violinist uses one of these bows near the bridge (the far end of the piano) for the first half of the piece, then enters with high pedal tones in the violin, which become an extension of the pianist's high partials.

“For the Third Invention, a second violin with a flat bridge is used, enabling the violinist to sound all four strings simultaneously using a traditional bow, while the pianist tunes the pegs up or down to produce open string glissandi and microtones. Much of the rhythmic interest of this Invention is provided by the use of a specially devised forceps mute, operated by the violinist to produce a rapid filtering (intermittent) effect, as it is clamped on and off the surface of the bridge with varying speeds.

“Other special effects which are used to create an extension and enlargement of sound are: hard rubber tuning mutes to produce the 14th partial; a wine bottle to produce glissandi of which the piano is normally not capable; a guitar pick (worn on the thumb of the right hand) to produce pizzicati closely resembling those so easily obtained on the violin.

“Five Sonorous Inventions attempts to bring the two instruments as close together as possible in terms of tone color, envelope, texture, and even tessitura. Except for the Second Invention, the piano is limited to the same range as the violin. Most of the melodic and harmonic material is derived from symmetrical formations inherent in the open fifths of the violin tuning. The two pitches which form the exact midway point between the highest and lowest open strings (F and F sharp) form sevenths with the outer strings of the violin. These sevenths (especially the minor sevenths) predominate over all the other derived intervals, often acting like a tonic at the close of sections or pieces. Other intervals are derived through simple symmetrical processes.

“Of course, the exact midway point between the highest and lowest open string is precisely halfway between F natural and F sharp. This quarter step idea, as well as microtones in between, including glissandi between these pitches, provides the essential material for the entire Invention. Thus, all four open strings are gradually tuned toward the ultimate symmetrical center, and congeal in a microtonal cluster around F natural and F sharp, in the total formal context, this Invention occupies the central symmetrical position.

“Throughout much of the work four-part harmony is the norm; two parts contributed by the violin (double stops being the limit of constant simultaneity) and two contributed by the piano (the bowing technique produces two pitches most easily—and with certain obvious exceptions, the piano is limited to two simultaneous pitches even in those passages executed on the keyboard). In the Third Invention the violin alone produces a four-part texture.”

William Albright is known to one of his groups of followers as an exceptionally gifted organist, to another as a perceptive performer and composer of piano rags, and to yet another as a composer of “serious” music (CRI SD 277). He is associate professor of music at the University of Michigan.

Gerald Fischbach has performed throughout the U.S.A. and Europe. He is founder of the Civic Symphony of Webster Groves and the St. Louis Youth Symphony and coordinator of the International String Workshop in Exeter (England). He teaches violin and is first violinist with the resident quartet at Western Michigan University.

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THIS IS A COMPOSER-SUPERVISED RECORDING

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)