

## **Alan Marks, pianist**

Notes by Alan Marks

Playing 20th century music is different than playing 19th century music. Or 18th. Not only is the language different, but the concept of what is beautiful or expressive is entirely changed.

Many music lovers have listened to Mozart, Chopin, Mahler, Stravinsky, and repeated hearings of their works have bred a familiarity where phrases and cadences, and even the larger shapes of entire movements, are anticipated. Successful performances leave listeners with a sense of rightness, of satisfaction, of completion.

Most music written within the last half century presents a few more problems for the listener since composers have chosen alternatives to the classically accepted structures of melody, harmony, tonality, phrasing, and rhythm. None of the works on this record is written in a diatonic key, and only the Chavez works have metered rhythm, yet harmonic relationships are implied, there is a rhythmic organization, and the notes do make phrases which can be grouped into larger gestures and shapes.

As a performer, it is my responsibility to discover a language in the composer's array of notes, enabling me to communicate my idea of the composer's intention to the listener. For the listener's part, if he or she is to receive all the rewards of this music, he or she must give it time and serious attention. Then creative listening can occur: suspending preconceived ideas about the expressive modes of music, approaching a new and unfamiliar system of notes without condition or judgement, allowing it to enter one's being. Maybe then it will begin to speak.

## **PIERRE BOULEZ** **PREMIERE SONATE (1946)**

The PREMIERE SONATE of PIERRE BOULEZ (b. 1925) gave me more trouble than any work I've ever encountered. I had attempted it because Carlos Chavez invited me to perform it on a contemporary music series in Mexico City. The initial 28 days of six hours' daily work putting meaningless notes into arbitrary places was an agony. I kept asking myself whether this was music. It took a full year to get a distant glimmer of Mr. Boulez's meaning and at least three years to exert any real control in articulating that meaning to an audience. I finally believe in the piece.

Boulez wrote it in 1946, when he was 20, and his academic manipulation of the notes is masterful. He chooses musical cells, or clusters of adjacent notes, and instead of presenting them as clusters, linearizes them through different octave ranges. For example, the first cell, F#-D-F-Eb-E spans four octaves, or half the keyboard. Mr. Boulez constructs the sonata out of a consecutive series of cells, many contrasting in character. The opening F#-D, an upward sixth, is the primary motif heard throughout the first movement, and the music is dramatically structured into groups of noncontinuous, isolated gestures, or faster, more continuous, if irregular (and curiously humorous) splurges of sound. The second movement is organized into three basic modes. The opening is declamatory, singular, and highly disjunct, the second is a fearsome perpetual motion, and the third is a gorgeously celestial and spatial exploration, full of rubato. The entire work is serial in nature, though not 12-tonal, and it is without key or metric indication.

## **ROGER SESSIONS**

### **SECOND PIANO SONATA (1946)**

SECOND PIANO SONATA by ROGER SESSIONS (b. 1896) is a relatively traditional work with its classical sonata-form first movement, slow expressive second and its rondo finale. The unyielding motion of 16th notes and the generally aggressive nature of the first movement poses a problem in discovering the tenderness in this work. In fact, this movement is largely eruptive, seeming almost embarrassed by its vulnerability, but the basically romantic aesthetic of the sonata is fully exposed in the middle movement. The long spun phrases, austere yet personal, are Chopinesque in construction, yet the specific intervals in the melodies and counterpoint remind us that Chopin's cadences do not fit here. The finale is a strange potpourri of musical styles, unified only by the opening theme of repeated notes. One subsidiary theme recalls Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*, another Bartok's Magyar folk dances and a third Prokofiev's dry military irony. Perhaps it would help the listener to know that when Sessions wrote the finale he was thinking of the Nazis. The work has a fundamental tonal and rhythmic coherence, is full of melody and counterpoint and has a continuity of musical thought.

## **CARLOS CHAVEZ**

### **ESTUDIO A RUBINSTEIN (1974)**

### **CINCO CAPRICHOS PARA PIANO (1975)**

CARLOS CHAVEZ (1899-1978) wrote an ingenious study in minor seconds in 1974. ESTUDIO A RUBINSTEIN is a nonstop virtuoso display in which hands interweave, cross each other and play simultaneously in parallel or contrary motion. The manuscript was presented to Artur Rubinstein on the occasion of the first international piano competition held in his honor in Israel.

The CINCO CAPRICHOS PARA PIANO is a work that I commissioned from Mr. Chavez in 1975. By definition, a capriccio is a light, spontaneous piece, but Chavez's angular and severe style lends a new interpretation to the term. Essentially, the faster movements (Nos. 1, 3, and 5) are full of starts, hesitations, and changes of intention. But the 2nd and 4th are slow, sustained, and unusually evocative in the lower registers of the keyboard. The melodic design is full of major 7ths and minor 2nds, and the texture is either stark, containing opposing harmonies, or scherzando, punctuated by frequent rests. Every capriccio is through-composed, with no repetition of musical idea, and they are predictably metric.

I gave both Chavez works their American premieres in New York City on March 16, 1976.

### **IN MEMORIAM CARLOS CHAVEZ 1899-1978**

A native of St. Louis, ALAN MARKS was a scholarship student at the Juilliard School, studying with Irwin Freundlich; later a grant from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music enabled him to work with Leon Fleisher. He has been guest soloist with the St. Louis, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Richmond, Jacksonville and American Symphonies, Buffalo Philharmonic and Hartford Chamber Orchestra. For three seasons he held an Affiliate Artist appointment in Los Angeles. He has played chamber music with the Marlboro Music Festival, the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, and the Harvard Chamber Players. In addition to annual tours throughout the United States, Marks has appeared in Europe, Mexico and Japan. He has recorded for both the Canadian and British Broadcasting Corporations, and here in the United States, has been heard on National Public Radio.

This record was made possible by grants from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, inc., and the Alice M. Dilson Fund of Columbia University.  
Produced by Carter Harman

*(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*