

HENRY BRANT

ORBITS: A Spatial Symphonic Ritual for 80 Trombones, Organ and Soprano Voice

Bay Bones Trombone Choir and assisting artists;

Will Sudmeier and Billy Robinson, directors; Henry Brant, organ; Amy Snyder, voice;

Gerhard Samuel, conductor

Berlioz is said to have exclaimed “No instrument can lift you from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven as can the trombone.” Perhaps this was after hearing the sinister unisons of pedal tones on eight trombones in his Requiem, notes previously unknown or thought impossible by trombonists. But what might Berlioz have thought of a complete orchestra of trombones, eighty strong, playing at times in eighty real parts, and spanning a better than five octave gamut, comprising soprano, alto, tenor, bass and contrabass trombones?

This is what HENRY BRANT has undertaken in his ORBITS, and the present CRI recording was made during the first performance on February 11, 1979, described in the following account of the concert in Time Magazine's issue of March 5, 1979.

“The scene at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco was vaguely surreal. In the pews was an audience of 1500, sedate as any church-goers. Ranged about them in a huge semicircle was a gleaming array of 80 trombonists, as if a parade had lost its way and sought sanctuary.

“But when the music began, the sound was a far cry from Sousa. Separated by staccato commentaries from the cathedral's pipe organ, densely dissonant sonorities clashed and blended over the listeners' heads. Full-throated blares, splintery muted phrases, the crooning tones of the soprano trombone, the rumble of its contrabass relative — all seemed to accelerate in a circular motion, spinning into the cathedral's 190-foot cupola like an earthly echo of the music of the spheres.”

Veteran Avant-Gardist Brant, 65, has long believed space is as important an element in composition as pitch or time values. In such works as *Prevailing Winds* (1974), for woodwind quintet, or the orchestral piece *Antiphony One* (1953), which requires five conductors, he deployed musicians all over the boxes, balconies and aisles of the hall instead of clustering them solely on stage. Greater complexity and expressiveness are his aim. “It's easier on the nervous system to have the music spaced,” he says, “because you don't get it in a compact blast — you get it fragmented from different sources.”

The premiere of ORBITS was one of his most ambitious formations yet. Many of the performers belonged to a busy San Francisco trombone choir called the Bay Bones, whose founders, Will Sudmeier and Billy Robinson, organized the cathedral concert. Reinforcements included the entire trombone sections of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony and the Oakland Symphony. One musician came all the way from Florida. Brant's music is fairly frequently played by major ensembles, but he has no illusions about the practicality of a work for 80 trombones. “I think no further than the first performance,” he says. “Probably when Berlioz wrote his Requiem, which needs four brass bands, it didn't appear practicable either. But he wrote it and it got played.”

In recent years Brant, who teaches at Bennington College in Vermont, has sought even wider spaces for his music than concert halls afford, by going outdoors. In 1972 his *Immortal Combat* positioned instrumental groups on various balconies and plazas at Manhattan's Lincoln Center. Traffic noise and a thunderstorm made the results “ludicrous,” Brant admits. Undaunted, he merely drew the moral that any bold experimenter would have. “The thunderclap,” he says, “showed me the scale that sound would have to be on, to be heard.”

GERHARD SAMUEL

WHAT OF MY MUSIC! (Emily Dickinson)

Nelga Lynn, soprano;

36 string basses from the International Summer School for Double Bass of the International Society of Bassists (Barry Green and Paul Ellison, soloists);

Allen Otte, James Culley, and Michael Hakes, percussion;

Gerhard Samuel, conductor

GERHARD SAMUEL (b. Bonn, Germany, 1924) has become a major force on the American music scene through his continued efforts on behalf of American and European composers. Many distinguished works have had their first performances at his initiative and under his leadership. He began violin studies at age six and is a graduate of the Eastman School and Yale University where he studied composition with Paul Hindemith. His works have been performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Denver Symphony, National Symphony of Mexico, Cabrillo Festival, St. Paul and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestras, LaSalle Quartet, and many others. He has held conducting posts with the Minneapolis Symphony, Oakland Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and San Francisco Ballet. He is an international guest conductor of symphony orchestras and operas and is an established recording artist. He is professor of Music at the College-Conservatory at the University of Cincinnati. He writes:

“WHAT OF MY MUSIC! was written between March 13 and 29, 1979 at the request of Barry Green on behalf of the International Society of Bassists which holds an annual summer school at the College-Conservatory. I have dedicated the composition to Allen Sapp, Dean of the College-Conservatory and a splendid composer himself, who has been extraordinarily helpful to me in my efforts on behalf of new music.

“WHAT OF MY MUSIC! requires a lyric coloratura soprano, two solo double basses, (also two solo basses in the ensemble), twenty-eight tutti basses and three percussion players playing flexatone, vibraphones, marimbas, tam-tams, suspended cymbal, triangle, crotales, snare drum, chimes, thermos-shell and gourd. On a basic level the soprano represents the exterior manifestation of Emily Dickinson's intense quest for reaching 'the sole ear I care to charm'; the basses carry the interior monologue. But, as always when talking about music, this is gross oversimplification, since fundamentally WHAT OF MY MUSIC! is, after all, my reaction to Miss Dickinson's poem.

“I thank Barry Green for giving me the opportunity to work with such unusual and challenging resources, Nelga Lynn for her great talent and musical intelligence, the College-Conservatory for financial assistance, and of course all the participants for their incredible cooperation, including Chris Lanz and Stephen Miles who served as production assistants. Special thanks go to Station WGUC for making their studios and staff available for this recording.”

PUT UP MY LUTE

— Emily Dickinson, c. 1861

Put up my lute!

What of — my Music!

Since the sole ear I cared to charm —

Passive — as Granite — laps My Music

Sobbing — will suit — as well as psalm!

Would but the "Memnon" of the Desert —

Teach me the strain
That vanquished Him —
When He — surrendered to the Sunrise —
Maybe — that — would awaken — them!

AMY SNYDER, composer, soprano and percussionist, is founder and director of the Dromas Ensemble, a group of composer/performers specializing in new American music.

NELGA LYNN has performed extensively as soloist and with orchestras, choruses, and chamber ensembles, as well as in operatic roles throughout the country. She has given premiere performances of 20th century compositions on International Society for Contemporary Music concerts in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Tanglewood, and Buenos Aires.

This record was made possible by a grant from Betty Freeman and the cooperation of the Bay Bones, the Percussion Group of Cincinnati, the ISB Bass School and Congress of Strings, and the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati.

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)