

MUSIC OF WARREN BENSON

THE DREAM NET

Frederick Hemke, saxophonist; Kronos Quartet

(David Harrington, John Sherba, violinists; Hank Dutt, violist; Joan Jeanrenaud, cellist)

STRING QUARTET NO. 1

Chester Quartet

(Peter Matzka, Susan Freier, violinists; Melissa Matson, violist; Thomas Rosenberg, cellist)

CAPRICCIO

Eastman Quartet

(Frank Glazer, pianist; Millard Taylor, violinist; Francis Tursi, violist; Ronald Leonard, cellist)

WARREN BENSON was born in Detroit in 1924 and earned B.M. and M.M. degrees from the University of Michigan. While a student at Michigan, he was timpanist with the Detroit Symphony and Ford Sunday Evening Hour orchestras. He was awarded two successive Fulbright Teacher Awards to Anatolia College in Salonica, Greece. While there, he organized the first scholastic coeducational choral group in that country, lectured on American music at the U.S. Information Services Library in Salonica, and was consultant on programming to the Voice of America.

In 1953, Benson began a fourteen-year teaching career at Ithaca College, organizing the first percussion ensemble in the eastern United States, touring extensively and recording for Golden Crest Records, eventually becoming Professor of Music and Composer-in-Residence. In 1967, he became Professor of Composition at the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music.

Benson has written pioneering works for percussion, wind ensemble and band, and has conducted his own works and lectured at leading educational centers and festivals in the United States, Mexico, South America, and Europe. In addition to his two Fulbright Teacher Awards, two Ford Foundation research grants, and a National Endowment for the Arts Composer Fellowship, he has received serious music awards from many sources and was named Kilbourn Professor for 1980-81 at Eastman. He writes:

“The three works on this record exhibit, as do many of my works, my tendency to choose language as it suits my fancy, my style not being dependent primarily on the language employed, but rather on expressive elements. I am a generalist, being inclusive rather than exclusive with regard to musical techniques, tastes, and fashion.

“The title, THE DREAM NET, came to me through the gift of a book from my friend, the composer Alec Wilder. The book was by Sigurd Olsen, a naturalist who has written a number of times about canoeing the white-water rivers of North America. The particulars of the title relate to Indians gathering wild rice in Lake Superior and leaving their young children on shore while they worked in canoes nearby. To amuse the babies, a spider-like device was woven from willow twigs and suspended on leather thongs from the low branch over the head of the baby, who could watch this interesting contraption — the dream net — wave overhead, making interesting light patterns through the intricate weave. As the children grew older, it was explained to them that this net-like object kept the evil spirits away, since the complexity of the design confused them, allowing only the good spirits to find the center hole and emerge on the other side close to the children. As the children grew older and were left to play games among themselves during the adult work, they felt perfectly safe and happy away from their parents as long as a dream net, was hanging in the immediate vicinity.

“The idea fascinated me, and I related it to Alec Wilder, whose early octets for winds and rhythm I had enjoyed for many years. Frederick Hemke, the saxophonist, was in residence at that time at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and had requested a work for saxophone which I had long promised him. I took his proximity to Lake Superior, the story, and Wilder's octets as points of departure for my work: it would deal with a kind of early jazz which tries to make its way through the work, never quite succeeding, always succumbing to other important elements in the composition.

“The fundamental composition problem was that of balancing the timbral distortion and tuning of saxophone multiphonic sonorities with the normal sounds of a string quartet. I attempted to do this through the use of variable vibrato, mixed vibrato speeds in the ensemble, quarter-tone intonations, glissandi, air noises in the saxophone, and whispering noises in the strings, which are accomplished by bowing on pieces of paper. It was foremost in my mind that the significant effect of a multiphonic sonority was not necessarily the number of tones produced, but rather the change in timbre that seemed to occur during its production. I attempted to interpolate similar timbral resources in the string writing.

“STRING QUARTET was commissioned by the West Point String Quartet upon our coming together during a spring music festival at East Carolina University some years ago. They heard a number of my works, and I heard them play, and during our meeting together it was suggested that I write a work for them. The work is essentially simple: a melodic first movement; an elementary, somewhat satiric dance movement; a rather soulful third movement with expressive solos for each instrument, and a finale, fast and wild, based on my experience with the folk music of Macedonia where I lived for two years.

“CAPRICCIO was written expressly for the Eastman Quartet to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Eastman School of Music, on commission from the School. I have tried to take advantage of the various virtuoso aspects of the individual players, their tone quality, and my interest, at that time, in music of a rather dissonant nature. The principal problem of balance between the piano and the three strings is resolved in the conclusion, where the overpowering surge of the piano comes forward in the thunderous climax.”

FREDERICK HEMKE, saxophonist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is, perforce, actively involved with 20th century music. His performances, many of them with major organizations, have won him the highest praise for his mastery of the instrument and his musicality. The San Francisco-based KRONOS QUARTET is rapidly establishing a reputation as a front-running organization, with special honors for making difficult programs sound easy and for its large repertory of American works. It may be heard on CRI SD 418, the music of Dane Rudhyar. THE CHESTER QUARTET, all its members being in their twenties, is among the youngest in the rapidly expanding string quartet field. Their New York debut in 1979 was greeted with enthusiasm as were appearances in the Northeast and California. THE EASTMAN QUARTET, counting as its members career soloists, has established itself as a top ranking group, its playing widely praised for virtuosity, elegance, warmth and maturity.

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(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)