

# AMERICAN ACADEMY AND INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND LETTERS AWARD

## EUGENE O'BRIEN

### EMBARKING FOR CYTHERA

#### Reconnaissance

(Timothy Lane, flutist; Robert Hill, clarinetist; Michael Bevers, bassoonist; Christine Dolce, trumpeter; Laura Okuniewski, harpist; Anita Pontremoli, pianist/electric organist; Terri Hilyard, violinist; Ruth Dreier, cellist)

### ALLURES

The Percussion Group (James Culley, William Youhass, Allen Otte)

EUGENE O'BRIEN (b. 1945, Paterson, New Jersey) is composer-in-residence and chairman of the composition department at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He studied with Robert Beadell, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, John Eaton, Iannis Xenakis and Donald Erb, and has received fellowships and commissions from the Koussevitzky Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Ohio Arts Council, among others. In 1969-70 O'Brien held a Fulbright Fellowship for study in Cologne, Germany, and in 1971-73 was resident at the American Academy in Rome as winner of the Prix de Rome. In 1980 he received the Music Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters that made this record possible. He writes:

"EMBARKING FOR CYTHERA was written in 1978 under a grant from the Ohio Arts Council. The title, though an afterthought, is a reflection of the emotions which prompted the work; the famous painting by Watteau, *L' Embarquement pour L' Île de Cythere*, is the title's source. But curiously enough it was the description of the painting, rather than the painting itself, which finally convinced me to use the title. The description (by Giovanni Macchia) follows:

*The myth of the island of Cythera, or of love, has distant roots in French and Italian culture, in which the journey is depicted as a difficult quest. Cythera is a paradise wavering in the ephemeral and in artifice; it represents an invitation to delights amid the enchantment of nature. It is an island toward which the pilgrims embark but never arrive; it preserves its light only if it remains far on the horizon."*

ALLURES was written in 1979 for the (then) Blackearth Percussion Group, now the Percussion Group, in residence at the University of Cincinnati. The work is written for pitched percussion, an ensemble of mallet instruments which are struck and bowed, plus the bowed strings of a grand piano. The following notes were supplied by Allen Otte of the Percussion Group:

"ALLURES is a completely composed work which intends to give the effect of rather spontaneous and improvisatory music making. The composer achieves this by leaving just one element up to the discretion and 'ensemble sense' of the performers — the number of times one repeats a phrase-fragment before moving on to the next, and in so doing, giving an aural cue to the other players. Most of the piece is written in this fashion, but there are a few moments when the ensemble suddenly is brought into sharp focus."

## **MALCOLM PEYTON**

### **SONGS FROM WALT WHITMAN**

**Oh me! Oh Life!**

**Roots and leaves themselves alone are these**

**Darest thou now O soul**

**Scented herbage of my breast**

**Warble for lilac-time**

**Bethany Beardslee, soprano; Linda Quan, violinist; Malcolm Peyton, pianist**

MALCOLM PEYTON (b. 1932, New York City) began early musical training with the piano and trumpet. He studied composition with Edward Cone and Roger Sessions at Princeton University and with Wolfgang Fortner while on a Fulbright Fellowship in Germany. Piano studies were continued with Edward Steuerman in New York. At present he is acting chairman of the composition department at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he has been teaching since 1965. He writes:

"Ideas based on poems and excerpts from *Leaves of Grass* have occurred to me as far back as 1965. At the time, the poetry, intriguing as it was, was too overwhelming and diffuse for me to handle. Several projects lie abandoned. These songs are therefore, for me, a coming to terms with Walt Whitman.

"A few poems I had committed to memory but most often only a few lines would remain with me. *O Me! O Life!* uses excerpts for which I had indelible musical associations and which flowed from one to another, so I left them as such.

"*Roots and leaves themselves alone*, however, is set entirely. The strength and flow of onomatopoeia through a variety of invocations and scenes, encircled as they are by the words, 'Roots and leaves ... tall branches and trees,' inspired the complete setting of this magnificent poem. I have placed the voice in the center of a multi-faceted accompaniment. Many different formations and relationships are associated by the interval Eb 4 to E nat. 5 from beginning to end.

"As with all of the songs, the vocal line was composed before the accompaniment in *Darest thou now O soul*. Nevertheless, here the harmonic issue is of paramount importance. The note D on the word "Darest" as well as the octave D's in the accompaniment are heard as solemn and foreboding signals and all other tones are heard in various modifying relationships to these. Triadic reference gives way to two whole-tone groups spaced in different registers at the words, "Then we burst forth, we float," suspending and masking the return of more specifically tonal syntax and the D's at the ending.

"*Scented herbage of my breast*, the most intimate song of the group, is excerpted from a much larger poem. Gentle chords, rhythmically in and out of phase with the voice, form the primary idea. The coda is a prelude to the finale to which it is thematically related.

"A progression implied between the first two songs, within the third, and now again between the fourth and fifth, is one of retention or contraction followed by release. Inward-looking, pensive poetry is followed by outward-looking, ebullient poetry. And so, musically, *Warble for lilac time* is the release for the entire group and was conceived as such. Here is a much bolder sweep of line and accompaniment, sustained sequence and variations of material, new harmonies and of course, as a surprise, a new instrument.

"I will continue to set Whitman texts. The discovery and completion of these songs suggest the wherewithal to go on."

RECONNAISSANCE was formed late in 1978 by composers Donald Erb and Eugene O'Brien, and violinist Terri Hilyard. Dedicated to the performance of new music, with an emphasis on recent American works, the ensemble draws its members from the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Cleveland Orchestra, and other area institutions. In addition to performances outside of Ohio, Reconnaissance gives an annual series of four concerts in Cleveland and plays an active role in Cleveland's musical life. THE PERCUSSION GROUP has inherited the high aims and reputation of the earlier Blackearth Percussion Group (1972-79) through its director, Allen Otte, who was a founding member of the original organization. He and his colleagues, James Culley and William Youhass, are artists-in-residence and teachers at the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati. BETHANY BEARDSLEE was the original singer who could make "difficult" contemporary art music sound as effortless as a popular song and she remains the reigning queen of the idiom. She has made numerous recordings, the most recent of which is George Perle's THIRTEEN DICKINSON SONGS on CRI SD 403. LINDA QUAN is much sought-after for her eloquent performances in New York and environs. Both she and Bethany Beardslee have recorded frequently for CRI.

This record is sponsored by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters as part of its music awards program. Four cash awards and a CRI recording are given annually to honor and encourage promising composers and to help them continue their creative work; Eugene O'Brien and Malcolm Peyton were winners in 1980.

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*(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*

## SONGS FROM WALT WHITMAN

### I. O me! O Life!

O me! O life!  
Of eyes that vainly crave the light,  
Of the poor results of all,  
Of myself forever reproaching (for who more foolish, who more faithless?)  
The question, O me! so sad, recurring —

### II. Roots and leaves themselves alone

Roots and leaves themselves alone are these,  
Scents brought to men and women from the wild woods and pond side,  
Breast-sorrel and pinks of love, fingers that wind around tighter than vines,  
Gushes from the throats of birds hid in the foliage of trees as the sun is risen,  
Breezes of land and love set from living shores to you on the living sea, to you O sailors!  
Frost-mellow'd berries and Third-month twigs offer'd fresh to young persons wandering out in the fields  
when the winter  
breaks up,  
Love-buds put before you and within you whoever you are,  
Buds to be unfolded on the old terms,  
If you bring the warmth of the sun to them they will open and bring form, color, perfume, to you,  
If you become the aliment and the wet they will become flowers, fruits, tall branches and trees.

### III. Darest thou now O soul

Darest thou now O soul,  
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,  
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?

No map there, nor guide  
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,  
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.

I know it not O soul,  
Nor dost thou, all is a blank before us,  
All waits undream'd of in that region, that inaccessible land.

Till when the ties loosen,  
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,  
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us.

Then we burst forth, we float,  
In Time and Space O soul, prepared for them,  
Equal, equipt at last, (O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfill O soul.

### IV. Scented herbage of my breast

Scented herbage of my breast,  
Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best afterwards,  
Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death,  
Slender leaves! O blossoms of my blood!  
Grow up taller that I may see.

### V. Warble for lilac-time

Warble me now for joy of lilac-time,  
Sort me O tongue and lips for Nature's sake, souvenirs of earliest summer,  
Gather the welcome signs, (as children with pebbles or stringing shells,)  
Put in April and May, the hylas croaking in the ponds, the elastic air,  
Bees, butterflies, the sparrow with its simple notes,  
Blue-bird and darting swallow, nor forget the high-hole flashing his golden wings,  
The tranquil sunny haze, the clinging smoke, the vapor,  
Shimmer of waters with fish in them, the cerulean above,  
All that is jocund and sparkling, the brooks running,  
The maple woods, the crisp February days and the sugar-making,  
The robin where he hops, bright-eyed, brown-breasted,  
With musical clear call at sunrise, and again at sunset,  
Or flitting among the trees of the apple-orchard, building the nest of his mate,  
The melted snow of March, the willow with its yellow-green sprouts,  
For spring-time is here! the summer is here! and what is this in it and from it?  
Thou, soul, unloosen'd-the restlessness after I know not what;

Come, let us lag here no longer, let us be up and away!  
O if one could but fly like a bird!  
O to escape, to sail forth as in a ship!  
To glide with thee O soul, o'er all, in all, as a ship o'er the waters;  
Gathering these hints, the preludes, the blue sky, the grass, the morning drops of dew,  
The lilac-scent, the bushes with dark green heart-shaped leaves,  
Wood violets, the little delicate pale blossoms called innocence,  
Samples and sorts not for themselves alone, but for their atmosphere,  
To grace the bush I love-to sing with the birds,  
A warble for joy of lilac-time, returning in reminiscence.