

## **CONRAD CUMMINGS**

### **BEAST SONGS**

**Texts by Michael McClure**

**Susan Belling, soprano; members of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, (Paul Dunkel, flutist; John Moses, clarinetist; Kenneth Bowen, pianist; Robert Chausow, violinist; Jerry Grossman, cellist); Conrad Cummings, conductor**

### **SUMMER AIR**

**The New Music Consort (Susan Deaver, flutist; Robert Atherholt, oboist; Virgil Blackwell, soprano saxophonist; Curtis Macomber, violinist; Lois Martin, violist; Claire Heldrich and William A. Trigg, percussionists; Barbara Allen, harpist); Conrad Cummings, conductor**

CONRAD CUMMINGS (b. 1948, San Francisco) began his training at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and graduated from Yale University, receiving additional degrees from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and Columbia University. His principal teachers were Georg Gruenberg, Bülent Arel, Mario Davidovsky, and Jacob Druckman. He is, in 1983, Assistant Professor of Music at Oberlin College Conservatory in Ohio; previously he worked for fourteen months at Pierre Boulez's IRCAM in Paris.

Cummings' many awards and commissions include the Indianapolis Symphony Competition Prize, two Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund grants, the Margaret Lee Crofts Fellowship in Composition at Tanglewood, and commissions from the Smithsonian Institution (for the electronic sound installation *Dinosaur Music*), Oberlin College (for *Eros and Psyche*, opera in three acts, in celebration of Oberlin's 150th anniversary), filmmaker Faith Hubley (music for *Starlore*), the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (for *SUMMER AIR*), and the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education. A National Endowment for the Arts Composer's Fellowship permitted Cummings to study the impact of Asian traditional music and Western contemporary music in Japan, The People's Republic of China, and Indonesia in the summer of 1981. This is his first CRI recording.

Cummings' *BEAST SONGS*, for human voice, computer generated voice sounds, and chamber ensemble, was one result of his stay at what some consider the most advanced center for music and technology, the Institute for Research and Coordination of Acoustics and Music (IRCAM). There Cummings became acquainted with a system of computer vocal synthesis invented by Xavier Rodet and developed for musical use by Gerald Bennett, which resulted in the composition (in 1979) of a dramatic work contrasting the human voice and the computer voice. In *BEAST SONGS* both voices are extraordinary: the human voice in its dramatic intensity, its expressive qualities, and its passionate "beastliness"; and the computer-generated voice in its ease of vocal production, its 5-octave range, and its almost ghostly coolness.

The texts for *BEAST SONGS* are by the San Francisco poet Michael McClure. They combine normal English with an invented language of growls and roars that McClure calls "Beast Language." As Cummings has written, "The passionate quality of McClure's texts led me to compose an intense and highly expressive vocal setting for the live singer. The soprano voice is in direct contrast with the effortless, other-worldly computer synthesized singing voices, which are able to execute passages of extreme rhythmic complexity and to span an impossibly large range. At the time of composition, the computer voices were limited to vowel sounds. Like McClure's growls and roars, these computer sounds were inarticulate but charged with expressive intent."

The process of computer vocal synthesis used by Cummings begins by making generalizations about vocal sound based on observations of a number of different singers' voices. From these generalizations a group of rules is developed which can be used to define and synthesize singing vocal lines. The computer voices — the result of this "synthesis by rule" — can range from recreations of a particular singer's voice, through hybrids made by combining different singers' traits, to voices wholly divorced from any particular human personality. The possibility also exists of gradually and continuously changing between voices or voice types — or even genders — in the course of a single sung phrase.

This process differs from that used by Charles Dodge (CHI SD 340, 454) and Paul Lansky (CRI SD 456) in which the sound of a person speaking a particular phrase is analysed by computer. The composer can then radically alter or transform the voice, but the rhythm, inflection, accent, and idiosyncrasies of the original speaker and the original spoken phrase are always a part of the resulting transformation (this process is called "synthesis by analysis").

BEAST SONGS was premiered at the American Center/Paris in October 1979 by the Ensemble Kaleidocollage, with Gerda Hartmann, soprano.

Cummings wrote SUMMER AIR for nine instruments during a stay at the MacDowell Colony in 1980; in the composer's words, "it owes much of its character to the lush mid-May New Hampshire woods, to the almost palpable heavy sweetness of the air." The composer found inspiration for the work in the profusion of sounds in the summer forest — "a dense wall of green, a general wash of vibrant pulsating sound, and the occasional (sometimes raucous) animal interruption, suddenly coming to the fore, then just as suddenly receding back into the pulsating whole." The resulting musical environment, richly laden with provocative and vital sounds and rhythms, yet framed in a relaxed, calm atmosphere, leaves the listener with an impression of the "peaceful steadiness" of the natural world.

The ensemble of nine instruments used in SUMMER AIR was conceived by the composer as three trios: a woodwind trio of flute, oboe and soprano saxophone; a string trio of violin, viola and cello; and a plucking/striking trio of two percussionists and harp. The work was premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in January 1981 by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, Jean-Louis LeRoux, conductor.

## **CHINARY UNG**

### **TALL WIND**

**Poems by e.e. cummings**

**Joan Heller, soprano; Keith Underwood, flutist; Robert Atherholt, oboist;**

**David Starobin, guitarist; Chris Finckel, cellist; Arthur Weisberg, conductor**

### **KHSE BUON**

**Marc Johnson, cellist**

CHINARY UNG (b. 1942, Cambodia) emigrated to the United States to further his studies in music in 1964. He received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the Manhattan School of Music, and a D.M.A. with distinction from Columbia University. He has taught at Northern Illinois University and since 1979 has been Assistant Professor of Music at Connecticut College, where he is also Artistic Director of the New London Contemporary Chamber Ensemble and of the Southeast Asian Ensemble.

Ung has received the Goddard Lieberon Fellowship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and grants and commissions from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, JDR 3rd Fund, and the Ford Foundation. He has also lectured widely on traditional Cambodian and Asian music, has compiled two albums entitled "Cambodia" on Folkways Records, and is active as a performer (on Cambodian xylophone) of Cambodian music.

The two compositions recorded here are a welcome companion to Ung's fascinating Mohori (CRI SD 363). Together the three works provide a revealing portrait of this gifted Cambodian-American composer.

TALL WIND is a sensitive, rather spare setting of two poems by e.e. cummings ("Sunset," and "Sonnet") plus a wordless introductory song. Ung sought, as did the poet, to obtain the maximum expressive power with minimum means. The composer was attracted to cummings' poetry for its transparency, economy and brevity, as well as its images and its actual sound. TALL WIND is one of Ung's earliest pieces, written during the composer's years at Columbia University, where it won the Boris and Ida Rapaport Prize, 1970, and was premiered at Tanglewood in the same year.

Ung set out to challenge himself by using as few notes as possible (a plan that would be a challenge for any composer), and indeed, the first of the songs is limited to only five pitches. Even with such restrictions, Ung manages to create fluid, harmonious writing and a highly effective blending of instruments and voice, all of which enhances the expressiveness of cummings' poetry. Although the composer made no conscious attempt to integrate Eastern music into his work, there are suggestions of an ear attuned to the nuances of Eastern music, particularly where there is "bending" of tones.

The solo cello work KHSE BUON (Khmer words meaning "strings four," referring to the four strings of the cello) was composed 10 years after TALL WIND, and finds the composer with a decidedly different outlook. KHSE BUON is as expansive as TALL WIND is sparse, although both are surely the work of a composer who believes that music should flow and breathe. Ung attributes the outcome of KHSE BUON to two main sources — his involvement with group improvisation during the period he was teaching at Northern Illinois University, and his "close collaboration with Western string players in a search for new possibilities whose origins are to be found in indigenous instruments of the East."

In fact, there are many references in this work to Eastern music, for example, when the sound of the sarangi, an Indian bowed instrument, is evoked in the beginning of the piece. Through the freedom of improvisation and a conscious effort to expand the musical language of the cello, that most soulful of string instruments, Ung has given us an exhaustive and moving portrait in sound, one which reveals a multi-faceted and complex personality.

KHSE BUON, winner of the Chicago Society of Composers' Cello Composition Competition, 1982, was commissioned by the cellist Marc Johnson of the Vermeer Quartet. A viola version of the work has been transcribed by Susan Lee Ponders.

*-Helen Sive Paxton*

SUSAN BELLING is a frequent guest artist with many leading opera houses, including Miami, San Francisco Spring Opera, Fort Worth and St. Louis. She achieved international acclaim when she created the title role of Melusine by Aribert Reimann in its American premiere with the Santa Fe Opera. She has also appeared with major symphony orchestras and has recorded Stravinsky's opera Mavra, Luigi Nono's Canciones and Stanley Silverman's Elephant Steps. JOAN HELLER is a singer of both traditional and avant-garde music. She has sung under the direction of such notable conductors as Seiji Ozawa, Gunther Schuller, Michael Tilson Thomas and Arthur Weisberg. Her extensive repertoire includes vocal orchestral literature, chamber music, song literature and dramatic solo music. She is one of the founding members of COLLAGE Contemporary Ensemble in Boston. MARC JOHNSON has studied cello at the Eastman School of Music and Indiana University where he studied under Janos Starker and Josef Gingold. He is Artist-in-Residence and Professor of Cello at Northern Illinois University and cellist of the renowned Vermeer Quartet.

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BEAST SONGS

SUMMER AIR

Both recorded by David Hancock and produced by Carolyn Sachs, April and May, 1982, New York City

TALL WIND

Recorded by Tom Lazarus and produced by Carolyn Sachs, February, 1982, New York City

KHSE BUON

Recorded by Peter Middleton, December, 1982, Northern Illinois University

## **THIS IS A COMPOSER-SUPERVISED RECORDING**

*(original liner notes from CRI Lp jacket)*

**Michael McClure**

*Ghost Tantras*

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GOOOOOOR ! GOOOOOOOOOOO !

GOOOOOOOOOR!

GRAHHH ! GRAHH ! GRAHH!

Grah goooooor ! Ghahh ! Graaarr- ! Greeceer ! Grayowhr !

Greeeeee

GRAHHRR ! RAHHR! GRAGHHRR ! RAHR!

RAHR RAHHR! GRAHHHR ! GAHHR! HRAHR!

BE NOT SUGAR BUT BE LOVE

looking for sugar!

GAHHHHHHHHH !

ROWRR !

GROOOOOOOOOOH !

51

I LOVE TO THINK OF THE RED PURPLE ROSE  
IN THE DARKNESS COOLED BY THE NIGHT.

We are served by machines making satins  
of sounds.

Each blot of sound is a bud or a stahr.

Body cats bouquets of the ear's vista.

Gahhhrrr boody eels nom eyes deem thou.

NOH. NAH-OHH

hrooor. VOOOR-NAH GAHROOOOO ME.  
Nab drooooooh seerch. NAH THEE !  
The machines are too dull when we  
are lion-poems that move & breathe.  
WHAN WE GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOR  
hann dree myketho sharoo sreee thah noh deeeeeemed ez.  
Whan eeethoooze hrobh.

54

The motion of cool air shudders my shoulders with pleasure.  
The smoke from nostrils makes flame-shaped wings.

The air is soft.

AYE.

The air is soft and smooth.

*Aye! Aye!*

ROOHGRAHOOOOOOOOOOOR-  
DEEEEEP-AYE-GRAH

rahagraoor. Grah. Garr grahor hrahr  
miketoobrometh-por-eshkry. Rahoor gahr. Narl  
opal, nahr sorotbreth. Droon-dep karnoh pohr ell  
and deeper deeper to the feeling being  
to the risen-acting dream cave  
walking & talking.

HERE, AYE, HERE.

*AYE. AYE.*

Up-deep. Aye ! Thou I thou thoooh.

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IN TRANQUILITY THY GRAHRR AYOHH  
ROOHOOERING  
GRAHAYAOR GAHARRR GRAIHR GAHR  
THEOWSH NARR GAHROOOOOOOOH GAHR  
GRAH GAHRRR ! GRAYHEEOARR GRAHRGM  
THAHR NEEOWSH DYE YEOR GAHR  
grah groom gahr nowrt thowtoom obleeomosh.  
AHH THEEAHH ! GAHR GRAH NAYEEROOOO  
GAHROOOOOM GRHH GARAHRR OH THY  
NOOSHEORRTOMESH GREEEGRAHARR  
OH THOU HERE, HERE, HERE IN MY FLESH  
RAISING THE CURTAIN  
HAIEAYORR-REEEHORRRR  
in tranquility.

LOVE

thy

!oh my oohblesh !

**e.e. cummings**

Sunset

stinging  
gold swarms  
upon the spires  
silver

          chants the litanies the  
great bells are ringing with rose  
the lewd fat bells  
                    and a tall

wind  
is dragging  
the  
sea  
with  
dream

-S

Sonnet

a wind has blown the rain away and blown  
the sky away and all the leaves away,  
and the trees stand. I think i too have known  
autumn too long

          (and what have you to say,  
wind wind wind—did you love somebody  
and have you the petal of somewhere in your heart  
pinched from dumb summer?

                    O crazy daddy  
of death dance cruelly for us and start

the last leaf whirling in the final brain  
of air!) Let us as we have seen see  
doom's integration.....a wind has blown the rain  
away and the leaves and the sky and the  
trees stand:

          the trees stand. The trees,  
suddenly wait against the moon's face.