

CR SD 494

Music of Robert Erickson

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Composers Award

Night Music (18:00)

Arch Ensemble featuring David Burkhart, trumpet;
Robert Hughes, conductor

The Idea of Order at Key West (10:55)

Text by Wallace Stevens
Carol Plantamura, mezzo-soprano; Arch Ensemble;
Robert Hughes, conductor

Pacific Sirens (13:25)

Arch Ensemble; Gregory Barber, conductor
Tape part realized at the Electronic Music Studio, University of California, San Diego

In an unpublished memoir called *Remembered Sounds* **Robert Erickson** (b 1917, Marquette, Michigan) reveals the vivid sonic landscape that surrounded his early years in Michigan where he was raised and educated. He writes about the “clank and thud” of his uncle's upright piano, of his aunt's zither virtuosity; he remembers the “water sounds” of summer, the “neat and precise” crackle of winter, the trains, and scratchy old records.

“When you come right down to it,” Erickson told me on a radio interview a couple of years ago, “every composer really composes his environment. I don't listen to music; I listen to sounds. And when I compose, I compose sounds.” *Sound Structure in Music* (Univ. of Calif. Press; 1975) is Erickson's ultimate disquisition on the primacy of timbre as a central musical concept; it ought to be required reading for anyone—composer, listener, or both—who cares about the ear and what goes into it.

Erickson's major influence was Ernst Krenek, who taught at Hemline University at St. Paul in the early 1940s. He had tried twelve-tone writing on his own as early as 1936. “I gave up on serialism long before most composers of my generation even knew what it was,” he remembers. Of all the Schoenbergian precepts, the concept of the *Klangfarbenmelodie*, the “melodic line” of tone-colors rather than of pitches, remained with him the longest. The 1960 *Chamber Concerto* (CRI SD 218) shows late traces of this concept, along with an infusion of a lively sense of improvisation totally at odds with Schoenbergian principles.

Erickson moved to San Francisco in 1953, where he taught at the University of California at Berkeley and at the San Francisco Conservatory. At the latter institution in particular he was paterfamilias to a whole generation of rebellious young composers—among them Morton Subotnick, Pauline Oliveros, and Loren Rush—who were discovering the new realm of electronic music and, with it, the wonderful realization that musical creation could be whatever its composer said it was. (The degree of revolution implicit in that philosophy resulted in the ejection of several of these Young Turks from the Conservatory.) Erickson and his American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Composers Award students formed a remarkably cohesive unit in San Francisco in the late 1950s; the music of both teacher and students veered more and more decisively from “normal” structural principles and sounds, and in the direction of sound experimentation.

In 1966 Erickson, along with several other progressive composers, was invited to form a new music department at the University of California at San Diego, a school whose sybaritic setting belied its remarkable leanings toward the far-out in a number of academic disciplines. “We decided to make a place where composers could feel at home,” Erickson recalls, “the way musical scholars feel at home in most other music departments. We wanted students who would ‘do’ music, the way scientists in other departments ‘do’ chemistry or physics. The result is that the scientists on campus are much more sympathetic to what we're doing than the humanities people.”

It is a remarkable school, peopled not only with progressive composers but also with performers eager to expand the techniques of their respective instruments. One of these is a fabulous trumpeter named Edwin Harkins, whose abilities to “bend” pitches and otherwise humanize his instrument directly inspired Erickson’s *Night Music* (along with a solo piece called *Kryl* in honor of the legendary Midwest virtuoso); another is the remarkable soprano Carol Plantamura, one of that rare breed of singers (like Jan DeGaetani, the late Cathy Berberian—who else?) totally in command of the most abstruse vocal demands, for whom *The Idea of Order at Key West* was composed.

Above all, Erickson has retained that boyhood fascination with sounds, and with the most generous definition of the musical experience. *Pacific Sirens* is a broad, rhetorical examination of the notion that “composers compose their environment”; in a companion piece, the haunting *Summer Music*, a solo violin forms a descant over an “orchestra” consisting of Sequoia mountain brooks recorded and electronically tuned to finite pitches. In his teaching, he imparts a healthy disrespect for textbook definitions of sounds and music; in one of the fascinating courses in the UC - San Diego curriculum students are encouraged to tape natural sounds of their own choosing and work them through electronic techniques into extended compositions—as Erickson himself did in *Pacific Sirens*. One interesting aspect of this course is that it is accessible to the entire University, not just music majors but anyone with ears and a willingness to use them.

Night Music (1978) is for solo trumpet and ensemble. If I had to choose a single work to demonstrate the persistence of beauty in contemporary music, it might well be this haunting evocation, with the solo trumpet weaving an audible garland around a single obsessive note and the other instruments moving in and out of range like moonbeams. “Time flows free and unmeasured,” Erickson writes, “or in a kind of rhythmic polyphony that has worked its way into my music in recent years. The composition stems neither from the eighteenth-century *Nachtmusik* nor from the Mahlerian evocation of it. Rather, it evokes the kind of night that belongs to dreaming, an oceanic night.”

The Idea of Order at Key West (1979) is a cantata for Carol Plantamura. “I got acquainted with Wallace Stevens’ poem in 1953,” says Erickson. “The range of feeling in the brilliant language spoke strongly to me, and I was especially attracted by its images of singer and sea, its internal music and its rich and complex rhythms.”

Pacific Sirens (1969) comprises an instrumental ensemble (wind, brass, timpani, gongs, and string bass) playing “into” the sounds of California surf which have been electronically filtered and retuned to approximate pitches. “Ever since childhood,” Erickson writes, “I have wondered about the songs the Sirens sang to Ulysses and his men.” This could be that music. Erickson’s score is a single page of quasi-graphic notations; the players improvise, sometimes counterpointing and sometimes matching the sounds on tape to produce a continuous siren song.

—Alan Rich
Music Critic, *Newsweek*

The **Arch Ensemble** is known nationally and internationally for its consistently high standards of performance of the music of (largely) living West Coast composers. Comprised of fourteen instrumentalists (one of each orchestral instrument), the group presents concert series throughout the year in the San Francisco Bay Area and Northern California. Begun in 1977 as a project of 1750 Arch Concerts, the Ensemble has been since its inception under the joint directorship of Robert Hughes and Tom Buckner. Hughes is a conductor, composer, and bassoonist. He has conducted the Oakland Symphony, San Francisco Ballet, the Cabrillo Music Festival, and has made guest appearances with orchestras from Alaska to Southern California and in Italy.

Gregory Barber holds solo bassoon positions with the Oakland Symphony Orchestra and the orchestras of the San Luis Obispo Mozart and Cabrillo Music Festivals. As its assistant conductor, he has led the Arch Ensemble in performances in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, and Europe. Barber has also appeared as a guest conductor with the Oakland Symphony and the Cabrillo Music Festival. He is a faculty member of Mills College.

Carol Plantamura was a founding member of the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at SUNY Buffalo under the guidance of Lukas Foss. From 1966-78 she lived in Europe and performed in virtually every opera house, concert hall, and radio and television station in Eastern and Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand with some of today's finest performing ensembles of both new music and of Baroque music. Since 1978 she has been associate professor of music at the University of California, San Diego, and continues to perform throughout the world.

David Burkhart is principal trumpet with the Oakland Symphony, the Arch Ensemble and the Vintage Brass Ensemble. He also serves on the faculty of San Jose State and Stanford Universities.

Members of the Arch Ensemble performing on this record are:

Night Music

Patrice Hambelton, flute
Larry London, B-flat clarinet
William Wohlmacher, E-flat and bass clarinets
David Burkhart, trumpet soloist (assisted by George Mealy)
Dan Livesay, trombone
Norman Peck and Ward Spangler, percussion
Ami Radunskaya, cello
Mel Graves and J. Karla Lemon, bass

Pacific Sirens

Patrice Hambelton, flute
Larry London, B-flat clarinet
William Wohlmacher, E-flat and bass clarinets
George Mealy, French horn
David Burkhart, trumpet
Dan Livesay, trombone
Norman Peck and Ward Spangler, percussion
Nathan Rubin, viola
Ami Radunskaya, cello
Mel Graves, bass

The Idea of Order at Key West

Patrice Hambelton, flute
William Wohlmacher, E-flat and bass clarinets
David Burkhart, trumpet
Nathan Rubin, viola
Ami Radunskaya, cello

This record is sponsored by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters as part of its music awards program. Cash awards and CRI recordings are given annually to honor four outstanding composers and to help them continue their creative work; Robert Erickson was a winner in 1981. Additional funding was generously provided by Betty Freeman.

Night Music: ACA (BMI).

Recorded by Tony Gnezzo, Hayward, CA, Jan. 1983

Ideas of Order at Key West: ACA (BMI)

Recorded by George Craig, Oakland, Jan. 1983

Pacific Sirens: ACA (BMI)

Recorded by Tony Gnazzo, Hayward, CA, Jan. 1983

Produced by Carter Harman

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)

