

Music for the Viola

A Twentieth Century Anthology, Vol. 1

MILTON BABBITT: *Composition for Viola and Piano**

RALPH SHAPEY: *Evocation No. 3***

VINCENT PERSICHETTI: *Parable XVI*

ROBERT POLLOCK: *Violament*

EMMANUEL GHENT: *Entelechy**

John Graham, violist

Robert Black*, pianist

Thomas Muraco, pianist**

It is appropriate that this anthology of twentieth-century music begin with a composition by **Milton Babbitt** (b.1916, Philadelphia). For no other modern American composer has felt less constrained about plunging entirely and wholeheartedly into an aesthetic commitment to the exploration of *IDEA*, with its music-altering ramifications, over tradition. He was the first composer in this country to carry the ideas latent in Webernian serialism to their most extreme conclusions, developing, on the brink of the 1950s, total organization, in which virtually every aspect of music—rhythm, timbre, dynamic, pitch, and register—is precisely controlled. He conceives each piece as a brave new world, defining its own form, content and aesthetic boundaries.

Babbitt's non-reliance on traditional forms is made clear in his notes on *Composition for Viola and Piano* from 1950. "If in its broadest outlines, the work is apparently sectional, there are yet no... repetitions yielding up a pattern which can be construed as one of the cherished 'forms'" He continues: "The opening and closing sections, most obviously identified by the muting of the viola, and the piano and viola solo sections, provide superficial parallelisms, but there is rather a polyphony of repetitions in the individual dimensions, as such recurrences occur 'out-of-phase' with respect to one another." In other words, aspects of the music—rhythm, pitch, dynamic, register, timbre—have their own independent patterns, and constantly shift in relationship to one another. The 'out-of-phase character of which the composer speaks is the overlapping of independent patterns to create different contrapuntal configurations.

Offending against Babbitt's canon to eschew all but purely analytical, objectively verifiable descriptions, one might observe that in this work his compositional ideas translate, at beginning and end, into passages of gentle beauty, and that an almost ubiquitous, quirky rhythmic writing (reminiscent of middle-Schoenberg) bubbles throughout, the source of the work's vital and extroverted musical energy.

The music of **Ralph Shapey** (b.1921, Philadelphia) combines two fundamentally contradictory musical impulses. His musical language is radical, containing disjunct melodies, dissonant atonal harmony, and extremes in register, dynamics, and texture. What distinguishes his music, however, is the Romantic sensibility that tempers the musical language and gives it shape; his musical structures are grandly conceived, and run the gamut of dramatic gestures.

Much of Shapey's work of the Seventies is monumental in nature, built of contrasting blocks of sound and crudely juxtaposed, independent *ostinati*, played by instruments seemingly unconscious of partnership. The composer has shaped huge, granite edifices. His music is passionate, yet at the same time distanced; his most typical gestures have been more massive than intimate. *Evocation No.3* (1981)

ultimately subordinates its own considerable monumentality in order to make more sensitive statements: this is a work of deep cognizance and interplay between the viola and piano, a work in which forbidding majesty, through the most rigorous and imaginative compositional processes gives way to simple songfulness, delicate and beautiful. For if, as composer David Froom has suggested, "one cannot attain the peak without climbing the mountain," Shapey's simplicity and songfulness are earned by the intense vicissitudes through which he puts his musical material.

If the music is to achieve a unified simplicity, it must do so from a condition of multiplicity. Shapey creates multiplicity by subjecting similar material to different treatments: note the tripping melodic line at the outset and its emulation in the passacaglia-like grandness of the piano's bass. Already the composer has created multiplicity from unity, and this multiplicity of personality and affect is going to inform the entire movement, for he carefully bifurcates the two impulses first heard together, light/tripping vs. heavy/implacable, and segregates them into sections that alternate stern *maestosos* with *dolces*, *brios*, and *vigorosos*.

The process of the piece is the working out of this "multiplicity from unity" that characterizes the first movement. The second movement, a straightforward scherzo, is certainly all of a piece, but that piece, with its insistent *ostinati* set in motion, has a machine-like character. It is not until the third movement, entitled, simply, *Song*, that the work fully achieves the human hidden truth of the kind of story for which the composer's *Parables* series is named.

Violament (1974) by **Robert Pollock** (b. 1946, New York City) is the work of a composer not yet out of his twenties, exploring through the use of serial techniques the juxtaposition of refractory musical elements. The work makes use of an enormous range of the viola's capabilities—everywhere there is an attempt to explore the instrument's timbre, and articulative possibilities. Cohesion is created partly by the repetition of certain kinds of highly-profiled music, especially harmonics and repeated-note figures, which reappear in diverse contexts. Despite these stabilizing elements, Mr. Pollock composed a work of extremes, "Contrasts, (sometimes violent) of height and depth," he writes, "quiet and loudness, speed and repose, gloom and exhilaration, serve to create a varied polyphonic texture."

Beyond its material incarnation, ***Entelechy*** (1963) by **Emmanuel Ghent** (b. 1925, Montreal) is also a rigorous testing ground, whose subject is the much larger aesthetic/philosophical question of what creates (or does not create) coherence. On the purely local level, the work dances on the very borderline between coherence and incoherence; it is an essay in several levels of opposition, and it is from this quintessentially dialectic stand that ***Entelechy***'s dynamism directly emanates.

The most fundamental and sweeping opposition is that between the pitch and harmonic language and virtually every other aspect of the music. The fastidiously worked out pitch language, which the ear hears as consistent and unifying, is in opposition to the rhythmic, gestural, and even formal world that is created with it. Despite its orderly and tight pitch design, every other aspect of the music revels in contrasts: of gesture, volume, rhythm, and timbre. And to the language of contrast within the music of each instrument, there is added the further complication of the contrast *between* the instruments. The work is remarkable for its studious avoidance of simultaneous attacks between the instruments, with the rule-proving exception of six simultaneously-played chords heard relatively early in the piece. The language between the instruments is, for the most part one of simultaneity rather than consanguinity. Nevertheless, there is also a kind of subterranean *rapprochement* between the instruments, no matter how insistently they seem to go their separate ways. In the answer by the piano to the first viola statement, one recognizes, for all its rhythmic and pitch differences, an imitation of contour. Similarly, the *ostinato* figures played by the piano throughout the piece have their genesis in early, even-pulsed statements of the viola. The two instruments are like conversants who must find exaggeratedly different ways of saying similar things. The result is that the connections between the two are

sometimes so far-fetched that they hover near the breaking point of recognizability. Clearly, the composer has put all kinds of obstacles in the way of purely local coherence, and it is that tug between pitch/harmony unity—the recognizable and stabilizing *urtext* of the piece—and the manifest disunity everywhere else, that gives *Entelechy* its vital and sometimes disorienting energy.

—Perry Goldstein

John Graham has performed throughout the United States, Europe and China in recital, orchestra and chamber music engagements, and has been active in expanding the literature for the viola through his premiere performances of new works for the instrument.

He has been guest artist with several major American string quartets, and appears frequently at the Marlboro Music Festival and the Aspen Music Festival. He has recorded the complete quintets of Mozart with the Juilliard String Quartet, quartets of Berg, Debussy and Ravel with the Galimir String Quartet and numerous American works by composers with the new music ensemble Speculum Musicae.

Graham has taught at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China. He is currently Artist-in-Residence at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and is on the faculty of the Mannes College of Music in New York City.

Conductor and pianist **Robert Black** is Music Director of the Bronx Symphony Orchestra, the New Amsterdam Symphony Orchestra, and the Prism Orchestra. A member of Speculum Musicae and founder of the New York New Music Ensemble, he has recorded solo works of Liszt (nominated for the Grand Prix du Disque), late sonatas of Beethoven and numerous works by 20th century masters. [Robert Black's previous CRI recordings include SD 428, SD 481, SD 489, SD 527 and SD/CAS 549]

Pianist **Thomas Muraco** has appeared in concerts throughout the United States, Canada, Central America and Europe. He has collaborated with a wide range of singers, instrumentalists and chamber ensembles, and has performed in the Aspen, Banff, Bermuda and Casals Music Festivals. He has recorded for Serenus, CRI and Musical Heritage.

Mr. Muraco is on the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music and has given master classes for both pianists and singers at the Aspen and Banff Music Festivals.

Shapey recorded February, 1988 at Sugar Hill Studios, Houston, TX

Engineer: Andy Bradley Producer: George Burt

All other works recorded May and July, 1980 in New York. *Previously released* as CRI SD 446 (LP format).

Engineer: David Hancock Producer: Carter Harman

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(original liner notes from CRI cassette)

original liner notes from CRI LP 446:

EMMANUEL GHENT

ENTELECHY (1963) for viola and piano

EMMANUEL GHENT (b. Montreal, 1925) received his early musical training in Canada and later studied with Ralph Shapey in New York. During the 1960's he was well known for his multi-tempo music which in some works involved spatial separation of performers, and for the coordination system that made this possible. ENTELECHY was the immediate precursor of these compositions, anticipating in its structure the multi-tempo ideas that were to be developed in the coming years. In the 1970's, a Guggenheim Fellowship enabled Ghent to immerse himself in the GROOVE real-time digital synthesis system. In addition to producing many computer music compositions created on this system, he modified it to make possible the composition of a type of theatrical lighting which had the precise time control usually associated only with music. His collaboration with the Mimi Garrard Dance Company has resulted in many performances of music/lighting/dance throughout the country. This is his first appearance on CRI. He writes:

“The building blocks for ENTELECHY are three simple intervallic structures which often appear in sequence, both harmonically and melodically. A good illustration occurs in the opening statement of both viola and piano, even though their rhythmic designs contrast with one another. On occasion, for example in the slow section, a single one of these structures forms the basis of an entire section. The title derives from Aristotle's usage denoting actualization or realization in contrast to potentiality. The soul, then, was the entelechy, where the body was merely a housing that had yet to be inhabited.”

VINCENT PERSICHETTI

PARABLE XVI (1974) for solo viola, Op. 130

VINCENT PERSICHETTI (b. Philadelphia, 1915) began studying music at the age of 5, was playing the piano professionally at age 11 and the organ at 16, and was head of the Theory Department of the Combs College of Music (while studying conducting with Fritz Reiner and piano with Olga Samaroff) at 20. Subsequently, he joined the faculty of the Philadelphia Conservatory and then of the Juilliard School, where he became chairman of the Composition Department in 1963. He is also director of publications at Elkan Vogel and vice president of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He remains a prolific composer, writing in nearly every musical medium, with more than one hundred published compositions to his credit. The *PARABLE IV* for solo bassoon is on CRI SD 353. He writes:

“*PARABLE XVI* for solo viola, Op.130, was written in 1974 and premiered by Donald McInnes on June 29, 1975 at the International Viola Congress, Ypsilanti, Michigan. It is the sixteenth in a series of *PARABLES* for various mediums. They are one-movement, non-programmatic musical essays about a single germinal idea.

“The viola has always been a potent instrument for expressing my deepest feelings and in *PARABLE XVI*, my world of musical speech becomes that of a single violist.”

ROBERT POLLOCK

VIOLAMENT (1974) for solo viola

ROBERT POLLOCK (b. New York, 1946) received his B.A. in music from Swarthmore College where he studied with Claudio Spies, and his M.F.A. in composition from Princeton, and has started winning awards (Guggenheim, MacDowell and Millay Colony Fellowships) and commissions (the National Endowment for the Arts, New Jersey State Arts Council). His music is recorded on CRI SD 265 and 333. He writes:

“VIOLAMENT (1974) for solo viola was commissioned by Mobart Music Publications which published the piece soon after its completion. The piece explores the intense quality and full expressive and timbral range of the viola by means of a consistent and thorough use of row technique. Contrasts (sometimes violent) of height and depth, quiet and loudness, speed and repose, gloom and exhilaration, serve to create a varied and polyphonic texture. A slow introduction presents motivic and harmonic fragments of the music which follows. Then, the main section of the work begins, fast and vigorous. After transitional music, a slow extended middle section (the lament) leads to the return of the fast and vigorous section. A brief echo of the slow movement is followed by an even briefer fast coda.”

MILTON BABBITT

COMPOSITION FOR VIOLA AND PIANO (1950)

MILTON BABBITT (b. Philadelphia, 1916) received his musical education at New York and Princeton Universities and in the private study of composition with Roger Sessions. He is William Shubael Conant Professor of Music at Princeton University, and a member of the Composition Faculty of the Juilliard School. He is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His music appears on CRI SD 138, 268 and 288. He writes:

“COMPOSITION FOR VIOLA AND PIANO was composed in 1950 and first performed in November of that year by the violist, Abram Loft, and the pianist, Alvin Bauman. It was the fourth in a series of my works entitled 'composition' not only to inhibit 'format' or 'historical' presuppositions, but to suggest shared central characteristics of the works: the roles played by ordering and orderings, in all dimensions and at all levels, and — particularly — by orderings of the pitch-class aggregate. Not incidentally, the intimations of 'formalism' and 'abstractness' of the term 'composition' I did not find displeasing.

“If, in its broadest outlines, the work is apparently sectional, there are yet no dimensionally conjoined repetitions yielding up a pattern which can be construed as one of the cherished 'forms.' The opening and closing sections, most obviously identified by the muting of the viola, and the piano and viola solo sections, provide superficial parallelisms, but there is rather a polyphony of repetitions in the individual dimensions, as such recurrences occur 'out of phase' with respect to one another. These different periodicities of recurrence create ever varying conjunctions of recalled components in new environments, while such replications of relations from the local through the global provide a crucial component in the achieving of paths of cumulative inter- and intradimensional continuity.”

This recording employed hand-made ribbon microphones in pairs, spaced six feet apart, in the best available acoustical environment. Their output was fed to a 30 IPS Studer A-80 tape recorder, slightly modified for constant velocity record-playback characteristics. In this way the need for conventional (and troublesome) noise reduction devices was eliminated.

