

MORE RECORDINGS

BLACK COMPOSERS ON NEW WORLD

With this new release, *Videmus: Works by T. J. Anderson, David Baker, Donal Fox, and Olly Wilson* (New World Records 80423-2), Videmus, a Boston-based chamber ensemble that seeks to promote the music of minority and women composers, has done us all a great service. Good recordings of music by living African-American composers are all too rare. Of the seven works presented here, the earliest is Olly Wilson's *Sometimes* (1976) for tenor and tape, and the most recent are Donal Fox's *Four Chords from T. J.'s Intermezzi* for piano, *Duetto for Clarinet and Piano*, and *Jazz Sets and Tone Rows*—all composed in 1991.

This CD is a study in continuities and contrasts. The continuity lies in the connections, both internal and external, that bind these assorted works together as a unified whole. Two of Fox's compositions, for example, were inspired by T. J. Anderson's *Intermezzi* (1983), which is also featured here. Perhaps the most significant link is that all these composers (and most of the performers) have extensive backgrounds in improvisation and jazz. Given the diversity of their stylistic and formal expressions, it is remarkable that a shared background can speak in such different ways.

Unlike some of their predecessors from earlier generations, these composers convey no trepidation about using African-American vernacular forms as a resource for a new and vital concert music. The traditional spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" serves as the principal text for Wilson's electronic *Sometimes* as well as for the sixth movement of David Baker's *Through This Vale of Tears* (1986), which is set for voice, piano, and string quartet. Both works also feature the gifted and versatile tenor William Brown. The treatment of the voice in several of these pieces is consistently satisfying. At times it is used as an instrument, exploiting the traditional jazz and folk practices of scat singing and falsetto and also creating vocabularies that successfully explore new sonic possibilities. At other moments it conveys the power and pathos of texts by Mari Evans, Solomon Edwards, and Carl Hines.

There is little to complain about here, except to wonder why no African-American women composers were included. All the performances are convincing, and Donal Fox deserves mention as a striking new voice on the American musical scene. His compositions and improvisations reveal not only a breadth of vision but the musical intelligence and technique to articulate it. He and saxophonist Oliver Lake are an especially formidable duo in his *Jazz Sets and Tone Rows*. This recording serves as a powerful reminder that the important legacies of American vernacular and folk traditions—especially improvisation—still hold great potential to inform, influence, and energize the concert repertoire of today and tomorrow.

Yet one disappointment speaks almost as pointedly as the pieces considered here. In spite of the growing number of African-American composers and their longstanding contribution to the concert repertoire of this century, they continue to be virtually invisible in the historical literature. It is hard to find a solitary reference to any of these figures even as the number of new volumes about American music continues to increase. The composers have done their jobs by writing the music. Have we done ours?

—Dwight D. Andrews (Emory University)

ROCKABYE—BUT NO BABY!

It's a small voice but surprisingly arresting—reminiscent of the young Joan Baez some thirty years ago. Unlike Baez, though, Robin Holcomb writes her own songs, in her own style. Or *styles*, since there's quite a mix on her second CD, *Rockabye* (Elektra Musician 61289-2). (Her first, *Robin Holcomb*, came out in 1990.) You blink your eyes and rub your ears and ask, "What is this?" as she jolts you gently through a set of ten songs that are deceptively soft and sweet and yet have as much kick as a shot of Southern Comfort. Their music has a tinge of country, a touch of folk, some bits of gospel, the backbeat of rock and roll, and the surprise of jazz. Their lyrics are direct, photographic, nonlinear: Holcomb tells no tales, but a message emerges from each of her songs out of a crazy quilt of woven images. The title song, "Rockabye," tries to be a lullaby; it begins "Put pen to paper and sign / The lines on both sides of your hand / I can read / What settles out at the bottom / Of a bottle of wine / Are promises, lies / You can choose to believe." Another pleads for "The Natural World": "... Celebrate all high and private places / ... How much more can the waters hold? / How many more beats in the hallelujah? / Who can read these directions for turning around?" All linger in the ear and insistently demand relistening. A major musical and literate talent as singer-songwriter lies beneath the fragile front.

PAINE ON THE PIANO

How mysterious and magical is musicality! That platitude is inescapable as one listens to the early piano music of a kid from Maine who, at age nineteen, went to Berlin to study music. That was in 1858; a year later he was composing such assured Beethovenian works as the twenty-five minute Sonata No. 1 in A minor, which he proudly dubbed Opus 1. This was, of course, John Knowles Paine. On a New World set of two CDs (80424-2), Denver Oldham offers the A-minor sonata and practically all the other known piano works of Paine in clean, crisp, and sympathetic readings. (He is apparently embarking on a long-range program to enrich us with substantial recordings of neglected American piano music, having released earlier John Alden Carpenter: *Collected Piano Works* [New World NW 328/329], R. Nathaniel Dett: *Piano Works* [New World NW 367-2], and *Piano Music of William Grant Still* [Koch International Classics 3-7084-2H1]). The Paine sampler includes mostly character pieces in such sets as *Four Characteristic Pieces* (Op. 25; 1876) and *Ten Sketches: In The Country* (Op. 26; ca. 1873). The scores are readily available in John Schmidt's compilation of Paine's *Complete Piano Music* (Earlier American Piano Music, vol. 27)—which, however, is not quite complete, omitting two unpublished works (the Op. 1 sonata and the Lisztian *Valse Caprice*) and the *Four Character Pieces* (Op. 11; publ. 1872) played here by Oldham. The last piece of Op. 11 is genially headed in the manuscript "Welcome Home to my Darling Lizzie, from John, March 31, 1868." Professor Paine, indeed!

—H.W.H.