

Charles Wuorinen: Adapting to the Times

program note for Albany Records (Troy 871) compact disc of the same title

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The music of Charles Wuorinen is well-known for its formidable intellectual rigor, its daunting notational complexity, and the extraordinary virtuosity required of its performers. It is also widely noted as a seminal contribution to the repertoire and theory of “American Serialism,” a catch-all term describing compositional techniques developed by mid-twentieth-century American composers (especially Milton Babbitt) from the twelve-tone method of Arnold Schoenberg. Of primary import to these developments is the “time-point system,” Babbitt’s method of deriving rhythmic information from twelve-tone pitch rows. In the 1950s, Babbitt, by correlating pitch interval and time interval in an apposite way, was able to expand on the integral serialism experiments of Messiaen, Boulez, and Stockhausen to create a compositional technique that has enabled him to produce over the past six decades works of ever increasing self reference and intra-contextuality, while the Europeans mostly abandoned integral serialism after the creation of only a handful of works. In the 1960s, Wuorinen made a major contribution to American time-point theory with the isomorphic application of time-point principles not only to the surface of a musical work, but to its large-scale structure as well. In many of Wuorinen’s compositions, time-point structures exert influence on three hierarchical levels: foreground, middleground, and background, providing for each new work a unique, custom-designed form that perfectly reflects the specificities of its content, much as classical-era sonata form reinforces the dominant-tonic relationships found in tonal music. This analogue to music of past eras is not coincidental: Wuorinen is in many ways a traditionalist, for whom music still possesses certain inalienable truths and standards. Seeking to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, Wuorinen has never sought to denigrate, ignore, or replace music of the past. Nor has he ever indulged cynically in pandering, disposable “entertainment music” designed for mass consumption. Instead, his compositions aspire to an idealistic potential future in which serious listeners will have opportunity to interact intelligently with challenging new musical compositions of grace, depth, and complex beauty. The selections on this compact disc are excerpted from nearly 35 years of prolific compositional activity, and though each work is a unique instantiation of musical idea and compositional technique, all have in common expert craftsmanship, an engaging rhetoric, and a satisfying sense of completeness. Above all, these works possess an exuberant musicality, a striking freshness and vigor, and an intelligence that invites and rewards attentive, active listening.

Katz Fugue is inscribed “to the perpetual memory of Katherine (‘Kitty’) Katz,” a feline companion memorialized in this three-minute work. Written in 1995 for James Winn, the piece utilizes repeated notes and chords as it climbs, leaps, and skitters across the registers of the piano. An accelerating rhythmic figuration on two pitches (two sixteenth notes, followed by three sixteenth-note triplets, then four thirty-second notes) is heard three times, unifying the work.

Christes Crosse, a song composed in 1597 by Thomas Morley, was recomposed by Wuorinen for soprano and piano in 1994. Dedicated to Mary Sharp Cronson and written for pianist Alan Feinberg, this work is a study in the possibilities of metric modulation. As the voice sings Morley's original melody four times, in steady note values, the piano accompaniment increases the speed of its metric pulse during the course of each cycle until the final frenzied iteration, in which the soprano adds vibrato and octave displacement of the melody to add additional entropy to the unsettling but delightful confusion.

Composed December 9–17, 1973, *Twelve Short Pieces* for piano is dedicated to Stephen Fisher. The work was written at the time of *Simple Composition*, Wuorinen's textbook explicating twelve-tone serial methods. The book strives to illuminate the relative simplicity of twelve-tone relationships and structures, and these short works for piano are designed to do the same. Each composition is based on the same twelve-tone row (E, C, F, D, G, E-flat, A-flat, G-flat, A, B-flat, D-flat, B), utilizing transformations and formal structures discussed in *Simple Composition*. The first piece presents the original row; the second considers the row in retrograde; the third combines the original row with a transposition of its inversion; and so on as the movements become gradually more complex.

The *Self-Similar Waltz*, for solo piano, was composed October 23 – November 3, 1997 and is dedicated to Robert Helps. It was written for the C.F. Peters collection of *Waltzes by 25 Contemporary Composers* (comprising work by many of Wuorinen's colleagues and contemporaries including Babbitt, Cage, Glass, Harrison, and Sessions). Wuorinen's contribution to the collection begins in a waltz-like 3/4 time, but this metric feel quickly disintegrates as rhythms become more complex and registral shifts redefine the perceived downbeat. What remains consistent throughout the work is the recurrence of a small motive: accented pairs of repeated pitches, as heard originally in two C-sharps at the border between measures two and three. About one third of the way through the composition, this tiniest of motives is repeated three times in succession on different pitches (beginning in measure 27) before expanding to become a two-note chord, a three-note chord, and then finally a four-note chord that momentarily re-introduces the waltz rhythm before the piece takes off on yet another variation.

Album Leaf for Howard Klein is a short piano piece composed May 21–24, 1984. Klein, then of the Rockefeller Foundation, offered much valuable support to many composers, including Wuorinen. The work, lasting about two and a half minutes, is an arrangement for solo piano of a short excerpt from Wuorinen's *Mass for the Restoration of St. Luke in the Fields*, composed in 1982.

Commissioned by Max Polikoff with funds provided by Ellen Loeb, *Violin Variations* was composed February 26 – April 20, 1972. Polikoff was important to Wuorinen early in his career, offering him some important first performances on the Music of Our Time series at the 92nd Street YMCA. The technically demanding twelve-minute work is a fine example of idiomatic, virtuosic writing for solo violin, combining classic soloistic hallmarks with modern extended techniques. The music abounds with musical "puns" where segments of serially-derived music take on double-meanings as they playfully quote familiar classics.

Wuorinen composed the *Album Leaf* for violin and cello August 24 – September 17, 1976, as a gift for cellist Fred Sherry (a longtime friend and frequent collaborator) and his

then-wife Ayda. This work demonstrates Wuorinen's intimate knowledge of string writing, as both instruments interweave to create a colorful, almost orchestral sound.

Composed for Leonard Raver and dedicated to the memory of Lili Boulanger, Wuorinen wrote *Evolutio* May 30 – June 19, 1961. The handwritten score shows the same attention to instrumental detail that has ever since been a hallmark of Wuorinen's scores. In addition to clear specification of organ stops, contrapuntal lines are delineated with phrase markings and dotted lines that cross staves. The score is also replete with textural notes, some explanatory ("Cluster comprising all notes between B-natural and C-natural"), and some cautionary ("These rests must not be lengthened on account of the fermata!!"). Even in a work for organ, perhaps the most mechanical of all musical instruments, Wuorinen shows the kind of attention to idiomatic detail that reassures a performer that the composer knows exactly what he wants, and knows how to help the player achieve it.

Composed February 14 – April 9, 1966, for percussionist Raymond DesRoches, *Janissary Music* has found a permanent home in the solo percussion repertoire. Despite its daunting technical challenges and vast instrumentation, the work is extremely musical and nuanced. In addition to vibraphone, marimba, and a single timpano, the piece employs a set of twelve metal instruments (three triangles, three cowbells, three suspended cymbals, and three tam-tams) and a set of twelve drums (five bongos, snare drum without snares, small and medium tom-toms, tenor drum, field drum, and two bass drums).

Adapting to the Times, composed August 6, 1968 – February 16, 1969, is written for, and dedicated to, Joel Krosnick. This work is an example of Wuorinen's ability to integrate two instruments (each often executing multiple lines) into a unified whole, perfectly orchestrating a vast variety of musical iterations in a complex interplay of timbres. Over the course of the work's sixteen minutes, neither the cello nor the piano is heard solo for longer than a measure or two, and the ensemble writing is consistently intricate and precise. In this work, measures delineate small-scale musical sections of constantly varying duration, and time signatures alternate between traditional meter, fractional meter, uneven numbers of "tuplets" per bar, and—fiendishly—additive combinations of all the meter-types mentioned above(!). In addition to these tricky meter changes and the ubiquity of polyrhythms, metric modulations are employed throughout, often in combination with *accelerandi* and *ritardandi*. Paradoxically, this extreme specificity of rhythmic notation imparts an almost improvisational character to the piece as the two performers adapt to the multiple "times" that Wuorinen has cataloged in this remarkable work.

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