



**UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS**

Review

Reviewed Work(s): American Brass Quintet: Works by William Bolcom, Jacob Druckman, Ralph Shapey, Maurice Wright by ; New American Brass by

Review by: Elliott Schwartz

Source: *American Music*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 246-249

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3052575>

Accessed: 29-12-2016 15:18 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Music*

209–2; the first all-Torke disc), is a motivically driven piece. Its opening syncopated vamp has been compared to Van Halen's "Jump" (1984), though Torke claims the inspiration for the work as an obscure song by Jellybean, Madonna's one-time producer. Groups of instruments "wrench" the musical material through unexpected twists and turns, with a synthesizer adding a funky chromatic bass line at one point.

Green (1986) and *Bright Blue Music* (1985) are the opening and closing tracks on *Color Music* (Argo 433 071–2), the second all-Torke disc released by Argo. Both selections (and the entire *Color Music* album) are played by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra under David Zinman. Both works are based upon motivic development and transformation. The orchestration for both pieces is particularly effective. Torke utilizes the full orchestral palate in a seemingly infinite variety of combinations to create a fascinating array of timbral color. Both *Green* and *Bright Blue Music* are overtly exuberant in character, and both possess the intense energy now associated with Torke's music. *Bright Blue Music* is one of Torke's pieces which is strongly associated with dance: it ends James Kudelka's ballet *Terra Firma* (for the San Francisco Ballet) and is the basis for Mark Godden's *Bright Blue Music* (for Grands Ballet Canadiens). The work is a fitting final work on both the earlier *Color Music* and the more recent *Javelin* albums. Also featured on the *Javelin* album is the second movement of *Music on the Floor*, discussed above.

The quality of sound on both discs is excellent. Torke's intricate rhythmic counterpoint is clearly evident as is his fine use of timbre for both small and large ensembles. Both discs contain valuable liner notes. The notes for *Music on the Floor* are by Torke himself, and *Javelin* contains an insightful interview with Torke by Michelle Ryang.

Both discs are welcome additions to the recorded repertory of American music. *Javelin*, the sampler album, provides a solid introduction to Torke's music, and hopefully will entice its listeners to purchase the earlier recordings of Torke's music, including *Music on the Floor*. The popularity of *Javelin* (both the album and the piece) will certainly enhance the reputation and name recognition of one of the most exciting young composers in America today.

William A. Everett
University of Missouri-Kansas City

American Brass Quintet: Works by William Bolcom, Jacob Druckman, Ralph Shapey, Maurice Wright. William Bolcom. Quintet. Ralph Shapey. Quintet. Maurice Wright. Quintet. Jacob Druckman. *Other Voices*. American Brass Quintet (Raymond Mase and Chris Gekker, trumpets; David Wakefield, horn; Michael Powell, tenor trombone; Robert Biddlecome, bass trombone). Liner notes by Elaine Guregian. 1989. New World NW 377-2.

New American Brass. Eric Ewazen. *Colchester Fantasy*. David Sampson. *Morning Music*. Bruce Adolphe. *Triskelion*. Robert Dennis. *Blackbird Variations*. David Snow. *Dance Movements*. American Brass Quintet (Raymond Mase and Chris Gekker, trumpets; David Wakefield,

horn; Michael Powell, tenor trombone; Robert Biddlecome, bass trombone). Uncredited liner notes. 1992. Summit Records DCD 133.

One of the great musical success stories of the century is the rise of the brass quintet. This ensemble, once a rarity on the concert-hall stage, began to appear on programs with increasing frequency during the first decades after World War II, and is now regarded as a fully legitimate vehicle for chamber music. With an instrumentation of two trumpets, horn, trombone, and either bass trombone or tuba, the quintet medium seems uniquely American—tied to sounds and memories of jazz, swing, circus music, parades—and, with its great dynamic, timbral, and articulative range, uniquely appropriate for the stylistic concerns of the late twentieth century. Its rise to prominence after 1950 owes much to the pioneering efforts of a few courageous ensembles—particularly the New York Brass Quintet (with tuba as the bass instrument) and American Brass Quintet (using bass trombone in that role)—and associations with such composers as Gunther Schuller, Elliott Carter, Charles Whittenberg, Alvin Etler, and Ralph Shapey, who created a formidable body of midcentury “classics.” Two of the most recent CDs by the American Brass Quintet, one of those early pioneering groups, provide an excellent introduction not only to the medium, but also the stylistic range of works commissioned by the ABQ over the years.

One of these recordings, on the Summit label, is entitled *New American Brass*. In one sense all of the pieces are indeed “new,” at least to the degree that they bear recent dates of composition—ranging from 1981 to 1990. Yet none would be considered examples of “new music,” blazing trails in a spirit of radical, avant-garde experimentation. On the contrary, the four composers on the *New American Brass* CD all work in tried-and-true neoclassic idioms. Their works share many common traits: bright, attractive surfaces, stylistic integrity (with all events logically proceeding from opening premises), a high degree of discord within a generally tonal and/or polytonal context, crisp rhythmic patterns, and sudden contrasts of register and dynamics.

Apart from these similarities, each individual composition has its own profile. Eric Ewazen’s *Colchester Fantasy* is doggedly tonal in its musical language, although often with a decided bite. It is basically energetic and upbeat, with slightly schizoid alternations of tempo and mood—alternations that might be more effective if they weren’t so brief. Although more vivid contrasts are needed to offset each of the four movements from its neighbors, the overall surface is sparkling and highly attractive. *Morning Music* by David Sampson is a much more serious work, one of long arching lines and expressive breadth. A spacious contrapuntal unfolding and striking timbral contrasts (via the use of mutes and registral extremes) dominate the overall texture. The lower-register instruments are prominent, and Sampson handles them eloquently. *Triskelion* by Bruce Adolphe is a most engaging three-movement work, with a sense of tight cyclic integration as suggested by its title. The opening movement is assertive, fast-moving, built on intersecting ostinato figurations and rapidly shifting colors (like “ringing changes”). The middle movement—in the composer’s words, of “ghostly” affect—alternates pregnant silences and

quiet, held sonorities with great effectiveness; then the finale returns to the opening movement's fabric of shifting chords, registers, and colors.

In his *Blackbird Variations*, Robert Dennis acknowledges the inspiration of Wallace Stevens' provocative poem-cycle "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." His decision to set the poems as a series of quasi-programmatic instrumental vignettes, rather than songs with explicit text, is most interesting. In this reviewer's opinion, thirteen brief variations—while faithful to the original poetic "thirteen ways"—seems an overly large number. Seven or eight would have created a more tightly integrated work, and underscored the music's tangential (rather than literal) relationship to the Stevens poetry. But this is a minor quibble. Dennis has created some highly effective tone painting, often quite moving in its subtle use of mutes, imitative passages, and mysterious chord blocks. In addition, an organic sense of growth pervades the whole. There is a similar developmental quality in David Snow's *Dance Movements*. Despite its title, this work feels like a single continuous thread—a pathway that seems singleminded and directed, although replete with provocative byways and detours that often articulate new tempi. Two of the "digressions," one a collage of tonal and modal fragments filtered through a late twentieth-century prism, and the other a rapid section with prominent glissandi, were especially impressive.

It may be interesting to note that three of the four composers represented on the Summit disc were born in the 1950s. By contrast, the ABQ's recording for New World Records offers a selection of works by a senior generation of Americans; Ralph Shapey, the earliest-born, celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday last year. Yet this New World Records disc of music by a quartet of "old masters" sounds surprisingly fresh, super-charged, and youthful. Shapey's Quintet is a case in point. It bristles with modernist clashes of pitch, unsettling, jagged rhythms, and surprising crescendos and bursts of articulation. A gentle middle movement does little to soften the tough-minded, forceful impact of the whole. Although gritty and often fierce, Shapey's language appears perfectly and consistently "right" for the statements he chooses to make; the entire work is a model of unity and integrity, projecting an internally self-sufficient "universe" of relationships. On the surface, then, it may seem to differ profoundly from another work on this disc, William Bolcom's Quintet. Bolcom is deliberately eclectic in his approach, delighting in the juxtaposition of fleeting images and familiar-sounding fragments. His ABQ piece consists of six brief movements, connected without pause, each dedicated to one of his forebears, and each intended to evoke associations with that person's historical era. In twelve minutes of music, the composer has created a sensitive portrait of the Bolcom clan, in successive generations from the eighteenth century to his own father—perhaps a musical equivalent of *Roots*. This allows him to create historical allusions: to learned classical counterpoint, military band music à la Ives, and neo-Verdian operatic aria, all set in a modernist late-twentieth-century context. The snippets are interwoven with a sure hand; the result is highly expressive, nostalgic, shifting between transparent and opaque focus, never sentimental but always touching.

For both composers just cited, the compositional techniques and the affective results—means and ends—are fairly predictable to any listener familiar

with other works of theirs. In other words, the pieces are “vintage” Shapey and Bolcom, indisputedly brilliant but also unremarkable. By contrast, Jacob Druckman offers stunning surprises in his *Other Voices*. Certain aspects of his style are consistent with his other music, to be sure: as one might expect, for example, a sense of innovative texture dominates the narrative, with a wide range of instrumental colors continually fading in and out of the fabric. But Druckman’s exploration of mute effects, glissando, and flutter-tongue—all discreetly and artfully shaped—keeps the listener in a state of anticipation. Vivid contrasts are important, too—particularly contrasts of register (a wonderful bass trombone solo answered by quiet echoes from the high instruments) and of literal “near-far” relationships (including commanding off-stage fanfares that frame the entire work).

Maurice Wright, the fourth composer on this recording, holds his own very well in the midst of such distinguished company. His *Quintet* is most notable for its interplay of rhythmic blocks and massive polytonal collisions. Each instrument in the quintet is given an opportunity to shine, and an evocative trombone solo is particularly successful. As with all the works on both of these American Brass Quintet discs, a first-class level of virtuosity is evident at every turn: ensemble coordination, intonation, and brilliance of the individual players. The group’s massed sonorities, ranging from brash to ferocious to the delicately hushed, are impressive.

In brief, the Summit disc *New American Brass* is entertaining, hard-hitting, and entirely representative of the best in American mainstream chamber composition for brass. But the New World Records CD offers repertoire of a much more challenging and provocative nature—a body of work that will force the listener to sit up and pay attention. Both recordings are highly recommended.

Elliott Schwartz
Bowdoin College

Doriot Anthony Dwyer, Flute. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. Concerto for Flute and Orchestra. Walter Piston. Concerto for Flute and Orchestra. Leonard Bernstein. *Halil*. Doriot Anthony Dwyer, flute; London Symphony Orchestra; James Sedares, conductor. Liner notes by Rudy Ennis. 1992. Koch International Classics 3-7142-2HI.

Each of these American works for flute and orchestra is distinguished by an ease of communication and a sense of immediate accessibility. This is not to suggest that the pieces are either patronizing or unrelated to contemporary esthetic/compositional issues. On the contrary, these concertos are all definitely of this century, but linked to the experiences and expectations of many listeners. In addition, one must note that each of the concertos has been associated with the name of Doriot Anthony Dwyer, the distinguished former principal flutist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who performs them on this CD.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich has received many honors and distinctions. Two of these are frequently mentioned: that she was the first woman to receive the doctorate in composition from Juilliard, and that she was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in Music. (Interestingly, Doriot Anthony Dwyer has a