

# Shulamit Ran

(b. 1949)

*Performed by*

**Da Capo Chamber Players**

## **Concerto da Camera II** (17:35)

- 1 I con spirito, marcato (5:26)
- 2 II ♩ = 56 (6:39)
- 3 III stately, majestic (5:24)  
Laura Flax, clarinet; Sarah Rothenberg, piano;  
Eric Wyrick, Erica Kiesewetter, violins;  
Misha Amory, viola; André Emelianoff, cello

- 4 **East Wind** (5:11)  
Patricia Spencer, flute

## **Inscriptions** (11:55)

- 5 I (3:14)
- 6 II (3:42)
- 7 III (4:42)  
Eric Wyrick, violin

## 8 **Mirage** (10:21)

Patricia Spencer, flute; Laura Flax, clarinet;  
Sarah Rothenberg, piano; Eric Wyrick, violin;  
André Emelianoff, cello

## 9 **For an Actor: Monologue for Clarinet** (7:46)

Laura Flax, clarinet

## 10 **Private Game** (4:06)

Laura Flax, clarinet; André Emelianoff, cello

Total time: 57:28

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## Notes by Martha Feldman

The music presented on this CD by the Da Capo Chamber Players was composed over a fourteen-year span between 1977 and 1991, tracing a large arc in the trajectory of Ran's composing career. The works included are quite dazzling in the diversity of styles Ran brings to her composing craft. Yet as chamber and solo works they all develop in different ways what I think of as theatrical personae for the various soloists involved, testing their intellectual powers, their emotional resources, and their technical prowess.

**Concerto da Camera II** was commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in conjunction with Mount Holyoke College and composed in 1987. In a set of program notes Ran described its unusual scoring—clarinet, string quartet, and piano (chosen by its commissioning organizations)—as “the work's first challenge.” No one in the group can demand treatment as the dominant performing body to be pitted against the others. Clarinet and piano are the natural suspects, but even they are overtaken many times by the strings, collectively and separately, as the forces of domination continually shift throughout the work.

This soloistic surplus might be seen as the problematic precondition of Ran's three-movement concerto. At the very opening the players announce themselves as members of a kind of repertory ensemble, each of them joining with the taut theatricality of Kabuki performers in delivering “*marcato*” an oriental flourish amid the pianist's pedals and gongs. After this the clarinet takes center stage with a fanfare that pushes the others into a delicate background. Before long the violins appear with a rising whole-tone tetrachord that will become a recurrent figure in the emerging organism of the work as a whole; for now it seems to mark the momentary end of the reign of the clarinetist, who is forced to engage in a chamber polyphony with other solo voices, cello, then violin 1, viola, and violin 2. When the piano emerges in brilliant *passaggi* and showy crossed-hands work about midway through the movement, the clarinet resorts to fixating almost obsessively on a high “C”. Only after the clarinet

plunges to a mad trill on a low E-flat near the end does the piano become more subdued. “Mysteriously” it evokes the whole-tone figure, and the stage begins to calm until finally the piano retreats amid the strings' unison middle “C”.

In the second movement the clarinet returns as the protagonist, against the bell-like effects of the piano. It gives way in the middle to the broad, soulful romanticism of the cello, while returning intermittently to flexible, fantasy passages. This movement ends as it began in a sonorous wash of color. But in the third movement the piano emerges as the force to be reckoned with. Towering at the start with crashing homophony, the piano turns its powers of resonance toward the majestic introduction of what soon turns out to be a spirited rondo. Ran's rondo theme is no standard duple contredanse à la Haydn but an offbeat 5+4+3 pattern, more likely to be danced by an energetic gnome than an Austrian peasant. From here the group surges up in chromatic unisons for the bridge to another three-legged theme, fat and funny in a jig-like compound meter, in contrast to the main theme.

**East Wind** for solo flute was commissioned by the National Flute Association for its annual Young Artists Competition and composed in the same year as *Concerto da Camera II*, 1987. Like some of Ran's other recent works, *East Wind* invokes the exotic palette of Middle Eastern modal flavors, most memorably through a mordent-like figure that encircles a central pitch by an upper half and lower whole tone, A-B-flat-A-G-A. This quasi-Phrygian gesture sounds successively numerous times at the outset of the piece, mutating more and more at each occurrence. Each variation makes the motive increasingly unpredictable—pervasive but ever-changing in its pitch emphases—until the melodic world has gradually expanded into chromatic arpeggiations. Finally the flute droops down to recall the motive in a sighing *lento* on D before returning to the beginning. From this point, little more than a quarter of the way through, the flute lines twist and bend, plunging impulsively “like wind,” rising “aggressively,” and stuttering “insistently” on repeated notes in ferociously high registers. By the midsection of the piece the flutist's breath labors toward an ever more intense expressivity. Ultimately from this frenzy a calm and poignant melody sinks

into the low register and fades into nothingness.

*East Wind* is dedicated to the memory of Karen Monson (1945-1988).

Ran's **Inscriptions** for solo violin, composed in April 1991, was commissioned by and dedicated to Samuel Magad, Concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. *Inscriptions* divides into three movements, not titled but postscripted "...Possessed by the Devil," "...Rondino, mostly tongue-in-cheek," and "...Upsurge." Using these "informal subtitles" (as Ran has called them), the work avoids imposing expectations a priori on player or listener.

Each of the three movements stretches the normal boundaries of the violinistic persona. The first might be heard as a mad virtuoso revving up Paganini-esque—trying on various moods only to cast them off impetuously. As if consumed by external forces, control seems to slip from the performer's hand as he gets repeatedly thwarted, thrown off course, but bites his way through to the end. Revisited by the tormented opening figure midway through, the violinist tries anxiously to wrestle it down into the low register. Both times he finds release temporarily through a heroic arch gesture, but the "devil" returns to invade him. Ran makes one violin play a virtual duo . . . or is it one violinist split in two?

The second movement launches a dancing pizzicato. Switching abruptly from one motive to another, it turns the "duo" into a whole cast of ludic characters. The jig in Ran's ". . . Rondino" moves along in eccentric cross rhythms with zesty vigor—a vigor that epitomizes the multiple identities the piece evokes throughout.

In the final movement the virtuoso struggles to command higher and higher pitch planes. In the midst of this relentless "upsurging" an exquisite lyricism emerges to reveal a human persona driven to scale new heights.

**Mirage** was begun in the summer of 1990 and composed mainly during the following December. In one movement, the work features amplified alto flute (replaced in parts by C flute or piccolo), B-flat clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, thus drawing on

all five members of Da Capo, who commissioned the work for their twentieth anniversary.

Ran revealed in her notes on the work that in writing *Mirage* she had aimed for "a free flowing, yet intense, at times incantational style of delivery." The work's fantasy-like character might bring to mind the Latin "mirari," to wonder at, or, better yet, the Italian "mirare," to wonder or gaze at. Its evocative character bears an uncanny affinity with Webster's description of the natural phenomenon of a mirage—a description disarming in its poetic evocation of nature's magic:

an optical phenomenon that is often observed on still days over deserts or hot pavements, that has the mirrorlike appearance of a quiet lake or pool in which distant objects are seen inverted by reflection though usually distorted, and that is due to a layer of air which has been heated and therefore rarefied by contact with the ground and which has a density distribution such as to cause rays falling obliquely upon it to curve back upward.

The sense of something illusory, visionary, and unattainable commonly conjured up by this phenomenon lies at the heart of Ran's *Mirage*. Indeed in my mind the heated image of things melting into air, rising, and "curving back upward" resonates with what Ran went on to describe as an "asymmetrical, loosely structured five-part arch form."

When the piece begins we encounter it unexpectedly, as if by surprise—a brilliant burst of dissociated instrumental strands gesturing into the smoky timbre of the amplified alto flute. The alto flute intones its modal melody with a magical freedom. Similar to the motive of *East Wind*, this opening motive is the core idea that generates the flute's sultry meanderings, heard above the unearthly harmonics of the strings. At the same time the clarinet sustains a B-flat, lending the whole a spectral blend of motion and stasis. Finally after twenty-six measures the piano breaks this dreamy state, followed by the sensuous sound of bowed strings. Rhythmic and contrapuntal energy accumulates in the central part of the arch—by far the most metric

as well as the most chromatic—and culminates in the intense unison passage that Ran has called “emblematic of the entire composition.” In the last ten bars of the work the opening returns, now played an octave higher by the flute, and melts into thin air as it had begun. . . .

**For an Actor: Monologue for Clarinet** was commissioned for Da Capo by clarinetist Laura Flax in memory of Hazel Flax and composed in 1978. *For an Actor* is at once Ran’s essay in the amazing versatility and multivocality of the clarinet and her working script for the clarinetist; the score serves as both a definitive set of directions, as well as a mere point of departure, as signaled by the following performance note: “It is suggested that the piece be learned by carefully observing all notation—rhythmic and otherwise. Once learned, however, a considerable measure of freedom, temporal and gestural, may be introduced. The printed page then becomes a ‘scenario’ from which the individual performer may ‘act out,’ though by purely musical means.”

This “acting out” is the essence of the monologue, or what Ran’s accompanying notes in the score gloss as a “wordless ‘monodrama.’” Organizing this “monodrama” is an exposition (initiated twice, with vastly varied continuations), a longish developmental section that dissolves into a “cadenza,” and a coda-like reprise of the opening materials. The form, and especially the sense of exposition, is articulated principally by a four-note cell, E-A-B-flat-G-flat. Played slowly and steadily, the four-note cell consistently gives way first to various rhythmic alterations, pitch variations, and registral expansions and then to a more flexible lyricism. These quasi-thematic sections ground the expository sections; but they represent only a fraction of the clarinetist’s vast repertory of moods and gestures. High drama explodes in the long central section, which occupies nearly two-thirds of the monologue, with its spiky lines, flutter-tongued chromatic accelerandi, multiphonics, sudden shifts of pace and dynamics, huge registral displacements and timbral contrasts, jolting the listener between the clarinetist’s multiple, shifting states.

*For an Actor* is the earliest work recorded here and, along with **Private Game**, perhaps more indebted to modernist sensibilities than Ran’s more recent works. *Private Game*, for B-flat clarinet and cello, was written shortly after *For an Actor*, during the summer of 1979. Ran recounts that she created *Private Game* as a response to Da Capo’s invitation to write a short piece incorporating the group’s name into its format. Intrigued by “the idea of having *strict* repetition” without giving way to “arbitrary formalism,” Ran interpolated three brief da capo sections in a 1-2-1-3-2-3 sequence, with 1 and 2 forming structural pillars and 3 more “transitory, ornamental” passages.

The work begins with clarinet and cello darting upward, “Impassioned, as though in a great rush” (1), and almost as impulsively shifts to a melody aptly marked “gentle, Schubertian” (2). 2 is a kind of calm after the storm of 1—but the calm does not last. Clarinet and cello continually alternate between conflict and congruity, argument and harmony. Thus the lyricism of 2 breaks down in a spate of obsessive pitch repetitions and 1 returns as impetuously as it first appeared. While transient and internally more changeable than the other sections, 3 personifies much the same fluctuation between episodes of rhapsody and constant upheaval.

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Martha Feldman is currently an Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Chicago. Her upcoming book *City Culture and the Madrigal at Venice*, will be published by the University of California Press in 1995.

**Shulamit Ran** was born in Tel Aviv where she received her initial musical training. Ms. Ran came to the United States at the age of 14 on a piano scholarship, and shortly thereafter performed one of her own compositions with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Among her teachers in Israel and the United States were Norman Dello Joio, Paul Ben Haim, A.U. Boskovich and Ralph Shapey. Shulamit Ran's music has been performed widely by ensembles including the Chicago Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the American Composers Orchestra, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. In 1991, Ms. Ran's *Symphony*, a work commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in musical composition. Ms. Ran has been Composer-In-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1990, and in 1994 also became Composer-In-Residence with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Shulamit Ran is Professor of Composition at the University of Chicago, where she has taught since 1973.

Since their founding in New York in 1970 the **Da Capo Chamber Players** have been known for their virtuosity in music new and old. Winners of the prestigious Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1973, the group has also been honored with the first ASCAP/Chamber Music America Award for Adventuresome Programming, two Chamber Music America Commissioning Awards, and a major grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a special guest composer/symposium project. More than seventy chamber works have been written for the Da Capo Chamber Players, many of which have been recorded on Bridge, CRI, New World, and GM Recordings. Da Capo's last CD for Bridge Records—Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (performed twice—in German and in Andrew Porter's English version), was named a "Best of the Year" by *Fanfare Magazine*.

**Eric Wyrick** is concertmaster of the American Symphony Orchestra and is assistant concertmaster of the New York City Opera. Mr. Wyrick has appeared as soloist with the Danish Radio Orchestra, the Orchestre de Toulouse, the Aspen Philharmonia and the Hudson Valley Philharmonic.

**André Emelianoff** has been a cellist with the **Da Capo Chamber Players** since 1976. He is principal cellist of the New York Chamber Symphony, and is also a member of the Acolian Chamber Players. Mr. Emelianoff is currently on the faculties of City College of New York, and the Juilliard School.

**Patricia Spencer's** recital programs draw on a sizeable repertoire of works written especially for her, including music by Ge Gan-ru, Miriam Gideon, Thea Musgrave, Harvey Sollberger, Louise Talma, Stephen Jaffe, Joan Tower, and Yehudi Wyner. Ms. Spencer teaches flute and chamber music at Bard College.

**Laura Flax** has been a member of the Da Capo Chamber Players since 1976. Ms. Flax is currently assistant principal clarinetist with the New York City Opera Orchestra, and principal clarinetist of the Bard Festival Orchestra.

**Sarah Rothenberg** has, since graduating from the Curtis Institute of Music, established herself as a champion of new works of the present and neglected works of the past. In 1990, Ms. Rothenberg, with Leon Botstein, founded the Bard Music Festival and more recently was named Artistic Director of Da Camera of Houston, Texas.

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Mastering: Paul Zinman, David Starobin and Michael Calvert  
Recorded on December 20-22, 1993 at Bard College  
Executive Producer: Becky Starobin  
Production assistant: Robert J. Starobin  
Cover Art: Kevinn K Fung  
Typography: Leslie Schechter

Bridge Records gratefully acknowledges the assistance of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust.

All music published by Theodore Presser Company (ASCAP).



