

- 1 Capriccio (Blown Apart)** (11:03) **Robert Black**  
(1950-1993)  
*Warsaw Philharmonic*  
*Jerzy Swoboda, conductor*
- 2 Foramen Habet!** (14:12) **Robert Black**  
*James Winn, piano*
- 3-5 Three Pieces for Violin and Piano** (12:27) **Robert Black**  
**I. Desire an Insufficient Compass** (3:06)  
**II. The Snowy Parodies** (6:24)  
**III. The Green World Freezes** (2:50)  
*Gregory Fulkerson, violin*  
*Charles Abramovic, piano*
- 6-8 Concerto in E-flat "Dumbarton Oaks"** (15:04) **Igor Stravinsky**  
**I. Tempo giusto** (4:54) (1882-1971)  
**II. Allegretto** (4:38)  
**III. Con moto** (5:27)  
*PRISM Orchestra*  
*Robert Black, conductor*  
(recorded in concert)

"Never underestimate an ambitious southern boy," said a southern boy in New York back in the mid-seventies, not long after Robert Black had made his way from Texas, via Oberlin, to Manhattan. By then, Black-- ambitious in many ways, and amazingly productive--had already begun to make an impact on the musical life of New York City. But while he has since been widely recorded as a performing musician, this disc presents an aspect of his musical achievements that had previously been known only to a few.

Robert Black had come to New York as a pianist; before long he gained recognition as a conductor through his work with the New York New Music Ensemble. Then in the early eighties, still best-known as a pianist and in the midst of a successful career, he found himself with performance-related injuries. It was at this time that he began devoting his energies increasingly to conducting. Within a few years, Black had developed a busy international career, regularly leading orchestras in Finland, New York, and California, and making guest appearances throughout eastern Europe. It was this concentration on conducting that seemed to rekindle his early interest in composition. In high school, where he'd played varsity football as well as piano, Black had apparently flirted with writing music: the violinist Gregory Fulkerson remembers hearing of a Dadaist piece entitled *Celestial Parsnips*. But as far as we know, during Black's first twenty years in New York, he'd written only words. However, if his work on this disc is any indication, in the three busy years he had from 1990 until the end of his life, some good portion of his energy was devoted to composing music.

As a solo pianist, as conductor of the New York New Music Ensemble, and as

pianist and conductor for Speculum Musicae, Black had always been a champion of the music of fledgling composers, while simultaneously presenting a distinctive selection of better established composers and twentieth century classics. In 1983 Black founded the PRISM Chamber Orchestra, gathering young professional players from the New York area to further these ends with orchestral means. His concert performance of Stravinsky's *Concerto in E-flat "Dumbarton Oaks"*, included on this recording, confirms one well-known musician's comment regarding Black's work:

"Bob's conducting, especially of the New York New Music Ensemble and Speculum Musicae, exemplified the best characteristics of a New York 'style'-- sharp-edged, rhythmically precise music-making--at once highly articulate, energetically placed and full of forward propulsion. Bob had an excellent ear (I remember him easily picking out wrong pitches in the jungle of *Le Marteau sans Maître*), but it was his superb control and musicality--his rock-like conviction and solidity--which was so defining."

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Robert Black's only composition for solo piano, *Foramen Habet!* was written during a time when he was intensely active as a conductor, flying virtually every week from one coast of the United States to the other, or to Finland and eastern Europe. Even on the road, between conducting engagements, he found himself sketching *Foramen Habet!*. As Black described it:

"Peter the Great exclaims these Latin words at the conclusion of an anecdote (recounted by Paul West in one of his novels -- you can look it up) that I first read in an airplane high over the Rockies. Sixty opening bars of piano music burst, flowed unaccountably into my head, Peter the Great's contribution ended by the return to sea level, however, and I increasingly had to rely on what I imagine to be more purely musical procedures.

*Foramen Habet!* is fashioned from three cells (one each: gestural, harmonic, melodic). Audibly and at times subliminally they inhabit a sequence of episodes; each episode in turn "triggers" its successor. The result describes a single movement fantasia.

The work, written (episodically) in 1992 in California, Poland, and Finland, is dedicated to my beloved friend and mentor, the great pianist Beveridge Webster."

In the performance recorded here, James Winn--pianist of the New York New Music Ensemble--vividly projects the turbulent, ecstatic fantasy by which Black found himself consumed.

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About the genesis of his last work, *Capriccio (Blown Apart)*, Robert Black wrote:

"*Capriccio (Blown Apart)* originated as a commission from the poet

(and former child-prodigy violinist) David Shapiro for a set of three pieces for violin and piano. *Capriccio*--most of which was written in Kuopio, Finland--recasts the materials of this earlier work into an orchestral fantasia of whimsical, irregular style. My title refers to and is meant to pay homage to Shapiro's quirky poetry collection *House (Blown Apart)*: both works were guided by free-wheeling, dream-centered intuition. The virtuosic *Capriccio* forms one long movement, clearly divided into the three subsections (fast-slow-fast) that were originally called, after Shapiro: I - Desire an Insufficient Compass; II - The Snowy Parodies; III - The Green World Freezes. *Capriccio (Blown Apart)* was written for the excellent musicians of the Kuopio City Orchestra in 1993, and is lovingly dedicated to Georgia Gaviotis."

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Robert Black and David Shapiro met around 1990, when Black conducted the premiere of Connie Beckley's opera *The Funeral of Jan Palach*, for which Shapiro had written the libretto. Shapiro and Black became fast friends. In Shapiro, Black found a reader for his poetry, and in each other, Black and Shapiro found their ideal chamber music partners -- virtuosi who no longer practiced their instruments regularly. According to Shapiro, their conversations ranged widely over such questions as "what art should be when the canon has broken up"-- long a concern of Black's, and one addressed repeatedly in Shapiro's poetry.

Early in their acquaintance, learning that Black had begun to write music as well

as words, Shapiro asked him for "a piece for a ruined violinist." Black's response was the *Three Pieces for Violin and Piano*, dated 1991/92.

Shapiro says that he was particularly struck by Black's "sense of requisite complexity", and his "rare refined sense of the linguistic." The two had together projected events in which Shapiro would read poetry in conjunction with musical performances. As Black wrote in his note, each of these pieces is inscribed with a quotation from Shapiro's collection entitled *House(Blown Apart)*. The contexts of each of these quotations -- in the first case, the entire poem, in the latter two, excerpts from longer poems--offer a listener yet more to wonder about:

I.

December

Your nearness approaches like needle-shaped guns  
desire an insufficient compass  
in mind in nebulae and mist we meet obscurely in a bottle  
Absent, distant, and ridiculous I go your way

II.

Which Word

Long live the snowflake!  
a savage and paradoxical remark,  
not as savage and paradoxical as  
long live death and yet --

Rain is on the window,  
almost in the window:  
Like the snowy parodies  
We are all abused copies, in a sense.

III.

A Lost Poem by Whitehead

"The red world seems gray but it never ends, anti-heroic  
"The green world freezes but is a map of other worlds, replete  
"The purple world connects to all others like a microchip's music from a lost  
key  
"And the orange world is not ours to be completed, not ours to be abandoned.  
The orange world is also in the orange."

Robert Black had planned to record *Capriccio (Blown Apart)* in 1994 with the Slovak Radio Orchestra. "Recasting," as Black put it, the *Three Pieces for Violin and Piano, Capriccio* certainly represents a radical form of orchestration: a translation for a vastly larger instrumental complement that explodes the original composition. Going well beyond the original, *Capriccio* adds new music while melding a work of three movements into one. Comparing the *Three Pieces* with their amplification and realization for orchestra in *Capriccio*, we can sense Black's astonishingly rapid development as a composer. As he orchestrates, he adds instrumental lines not just to accentuate material already present, but also to foreshadow and echo that material, and to complement and set off passages of the original. Such a transformation expands on the supple continuity of the chamber work, illuminating distinctions that were latent but, in that more intimate setting, not explicit.

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Robert Black was a musical colleague to be reckoned with. He was also a devoted member of a musical and personal society, who, while working to mold that society to his vision of what it might be, savored the social and aesthetic experiences he had. With these recordings, many more may now savor his gifts to us.

-- Stephen Dembski

**Robert Black** was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. He began piano studies at the age of five, and at age thirteen performed his first public recitals. He attended the Oberlin Conservatory and pursued his graduate studies at the Juilliard School where he studied piano with Beveridge Webster and composition with Roger Sessions and David Diamond. Black received his MMA and DMA from Juilliard and was awarded the Edward Steuermann Prize for extraordinary distinction in in piano performance.

Robert Black founded the New York New Music Ensemble in 1975, became a member of Speculum Musicae in 1978, and was a founding member of the Chamber Players of the League of Composers-ISCAM in 1983. In 1983 he also founded the PRISM Orchestra, and from 1986 to 1990 was the Music Director of the New Amsterdam Symphony Orchestra. Black was appointed Artistic Director and Principal Guest Conductor of the Kuopio Orchestra (Finland), and was also conductor of the orchestras at Stanford and Johns Hopkins Universities. Black was frequently engaged as a guest conductor for such ensembles as the American Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's "Green Umbrella" series, and the San Francisco Chamber Symphony. He recorded with numerous orchestras in Europe, including the Warsaw Philharmonic. Black was also a published poet, whose work has been translated into Polish, Finnish and Slovak. Robert Black died November 14, 1993, in Palo Alto, California.

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"Bower" by Robert Black, Finland, 1993

Bower

I

The dust. Rain-fragrant  
it kisses the breathless root.  
While mind  
is a minuet  
hand  
turns to stone,  
or nestles  
in stray swallow-lit  
inhuman time.  
Here in  
cicatrizing light,  
cicadas-upon-  
cicadas.  
Now the  
trowel  
is audible  
in your hand.

II

Dwell here.  
Tear my breath  
with shell-stiff  
fingers.  
You could endlessly  
bear me  
as son.

III

What thou art:  
  
the tears none ask after.  
Under the white pergola  
they drag with weight  
of treaties.

IV

Will you look up,  
afterwards?  
How you  
splinter through me,  
out there  
at the furthest--forever--pond!  
A silvery space settles  
over everything  
It's as if  
at last  
you hold my rose.