

# Milton Babbitt

**1** **Quatrains** (1993) (5:09)

*(soprano and two clarinets)*

Tony Arnold, soprano  
Charles Neidich and Ayako Oshima, clarinet

**2** **Manifold Music** (1995) (6:45)

*(organ solo)*

Gregory D'Agostino, organ

**3** - **5** **My Ends Are My Beginnings** (1978) (16:04)

*(clarinet in B-flat (bass clarinet) solo)*

**3** Section I (5:23)

**4** Section II (5:17)

**5** Section III (5:24)

Allen Blustine, clarinet and bass clarinet

**6** **Soli e Duettini** (1989) (11:39)

*(two guitars)*

William Anderson and Oren Fader, guitar

**7** **Swan Song No. 1** (2003) (11:00)

*(flute, oboe, mandolin, guitar, violin, 'cello)*

*Cygnus Ensemble*

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute

Robert Ingliss, oboe

William Anderson, mandolin

Oren Fader, guitar

Calvin Wiersma, violin

Susannah Chapman, cello

Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor

## The Music of Milton Babbitt

At this moment in history, there can be few listeners to Milton Babbitt's music unaware of the storms of controversy that rage around his name. And there can be few listeners as well who do not know by now that the portent of the name, and the music by the one who bears that name, have little in common.

None of that need concern a listener to this recording. Surely it would be better to descend straight through the eye of the hurricane to receive the music not buffeted by the howling winds. But on second thought, a good cup of tea is only the more pleasurable when sipped indoors contemplating foul weather on the other side of the glass. So if we can briefly divest ourselves of the cultural baggage that commonly overwhelms these debates, why not indulge the basic question that is, after all, at the heart of the debate: Does Babbitt's music induce the profound fusion of intellectual and emotional gratification that occurs when hearing "that other" music?—the kind we consider, within an acceptable level of inexactitude, tonality.

Your most likely response—for if you are reading this you have presumably already plunked down your money for the music in question—is, "Of course it does." If by chance you belong to that much greater mass of people who wouldn't dream (and I mean that only literally) of interrupting their day to listen to this music, you are more likely to answer, "No, it's impossible." Of course, you might well simply reply, "What an idiotic question!"

For while we can occasionally generalize about the nature of the artistic experience, surely we can only particularize about how we respond to individual composers. Does it make sense, for example, to consider Schubert's predilection for transforming a sequence of notes from the major to its same-key minor as a procedure extractable from his music? Aside from putting a gloomy face on what was a

good thing going, what does it convey on that intellectual-cum-emotional level? Is it a "meaningful" thing to do? (Clearly, for Schubert, it was: he did it often enough we can be sure of that much.)

And yet, like children trembling with anticipation for the part of the story they already know too well, we fall for it every time. For there is something profoundly and limitlessly gratifying about hearing a composer do no more and no less than reveal traits of his language—say, in this case, the modal nature of tonality. We revere Schubert for showing us what seems, in retrospect, to be obvious—yet which we might never have considered had he not placed it before us.

I suggest this is what Babbitt, too, has been doing for many years now. That some of us treasure him for it, and others blame him for far more than any one man could possibly have achieved (even were he so disposed), are just two divergent paths from the same phenomenon: a composer who presents the characteristics of his language without a trace of ambivalence. This would seem to be a small thing to ask of an artist, but in the realm of music of the past 50 years, it turns out to be an awfully big thing to have pulled off.

And what this particular collection of Babbitt's music reveals, stretching back as it does a quarter of a century, in compositions that sound at once ever more radical and ever more affirming of (can we say this?) Western classical music, is that the more time goes by—I suppose I mean, the older he gets—the ever more subtly, more gracefully, more economically and thus more convincingly he makes the point.

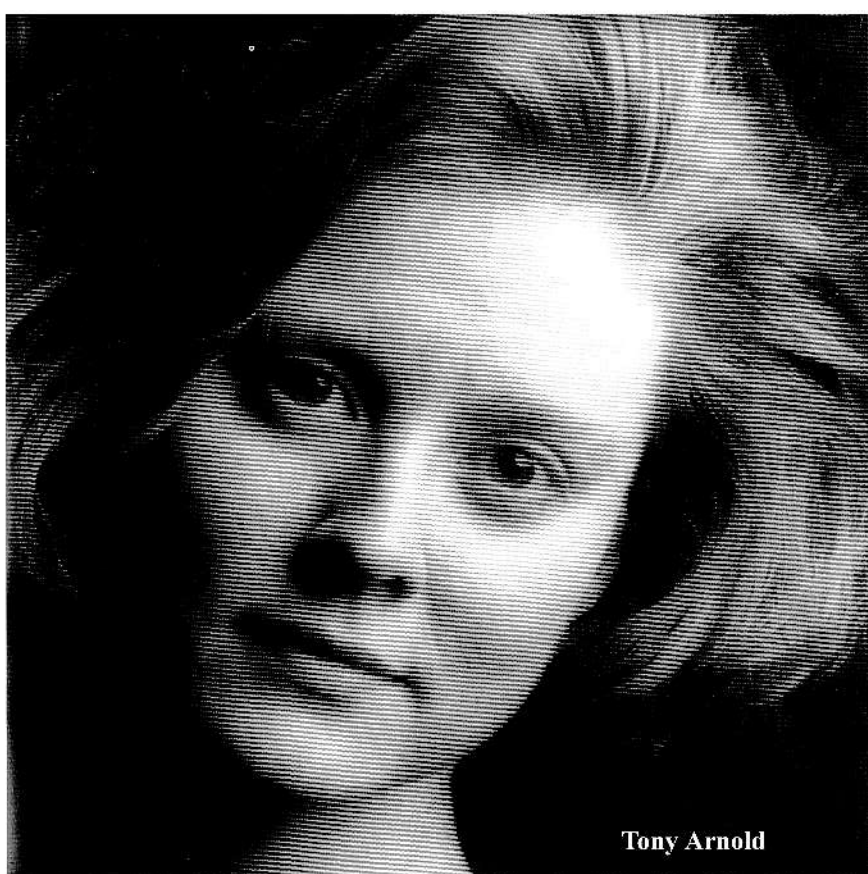
To accompany voice with two clarinets—and only two clarinets—is decidedly uncommon, even in an era in which no ensemble juxtaposition would likely ever raise eyebrows. After hearing *Quatrains*, you are likely to wonder why composers don't do this more often, so beguiling is the result. Ordinarily, whether piano, ensemble or orchestra accompanies a singer, the sense of just two

forces in play—voice and everyone else—remains invariable. But here, with “accompaniment” by two of the same instrument, a listener has the unmistakable and almost shocking impression of a party of three, of which the voice is but one. (It is a perception perhaps reinforced by the fact that a clarinet sometimes appears to mimic a human voice.) Through much of the piece the clarinets are heard individually, so that the distinction between one and two cannot be missed.

Having set up a context in which the voice seems vulnerable to being outnumbered, Babbitt then does what, for him at least, is inevitable: He establishes the inference of one direction, and then scores the opposite way. The piece is possessed of such delicacy and subtlety that, even factoring in Babbitt's constantly evolving practice, *Quatrains* represents a dramatic turn. Yet with such a poem, what other course would have been appropriate?

Night beside me, I turn from her toward day,  
Cloyed with the stillness of our common clay,  
    And twitted in the morning by the birds  
For not delighting in their brightened gray.

This dream was broken by my opening eyes:  
Flowers in pots...among them, butterflies  
    Tiny, and like the flowers in color, swarm  
Before resemblance in the daylight dies.



**Tony Arnold**

Twilight and meaning, darkness and rising hope

Stretched out across my path a twisted rope.

Last night, in simple truth, I fell asleep.

Today I trip over last evening's trope.

We scatter over caskets many trite

Cut flowers, lovely, variegated, bright.

And brief of life as we; and short poems, too,

Ever-enduring as eternal night.

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Early on, we are "twitted" awake; then "twilight stretched out ... a twisted rope"; "truth, trip, trope, trite"—in ordinary speech, we prefer to ignore such sonic proximities, for they usually compromise the transaction of our intentions. But in poetry such as this, the sound of the language takes no backseat to the content. (No wonder Babbitt feels such an affinity for Hollander's work!)

*Quatrains* was composed for Mary Wiegold and the Composers Ensemble.

It may be difficult, at first, to reconcile *Manifold Music* with our expectations of Babbitt's music. Certainly the organ could hardly be more dissimilar to the

other instruments on this recording. It doesn't turn on a dime; more significantly, although it's a keyboard instrument of defined pitch, its conveyance of pitch is not at all straightforward. Registrations are defined by adjusting the harmonic spectra: As partials of varying prominence are introduced to effect the timbres that define registrations, you can't always be sure exactly what notes you are "supposed" to be hearing.

I speculated above that we take extraordinary pleasure in witnessing composers define for us the nature of their chosen language. Perhaps it is in accord with the more general satisfaction we find at observing someone successfully play out the hand that is dealt. Thus when we hear Milton Babbitt repeating notes, chords, fragments, throughout *Manifold Music*, we are likely to smile at the thought that the master himself resorted to the same tricks any of us might have employed to get our message across the organ medium.

But playing the hand you are dealt I suspect is a lot more profound an endeavor than it might at first seem. And Babbitt is not merely good at this; he has developed it into an art form that manifests itself in more dimensions than we might have considered even conjecturable. For a composer whose stock-in-trade is pitch-interval relationships to cast his lot (albeit only for the duration of this piece) with such an instrument is to throw open the door to an entirely different form of playing off perceptual boundaries, the exploration of which has long characterized Babbitt's music. This is not to suggest that he lets the instrument, or the performer, off the hook: The organist's hands are splayed to capacity, and we hear some pretty fancy footwork going on as well.

*Manifold Music* was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists for its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in New York City, in July, 1996. It is dedicated to David Shuler and Gregory D'Agostino.

Composed for Allen Blustine, *My Ends Are My Beginnings* invokes, of course

Allen Blustine



Machaut's famous rondo *Ma fin est mon commencement*, to playfully suggest a hoary link to a venerable serial tradition. Perhaps it's more than that, too, for Babbitt was, once upon a time, a clarinet man. Who knows if he was thinking this way back then, but as it happens, no instrument is better suited to Babbitt's syntax than the clarinet. The dynamic spectrum, sustainable throughout virtually the entire range of the instrument, is not merely broad, but delivers the very soul of a dynamic. *fffs* intimidate, *ppps* leave us wondering whether we only imagined the sound, and the levels in between (and beyond) can be parsed indefinitely. All of which is true, but affectively different, for every note on the instrument. And that's before we factor in the limitless perceptual differences induced by note durations and prevailing rhythms.

What are we to make of this? In a few moments we come to realize that quantifying one instrument's dynamics and their impact is effectively impossible. And yet this is one of the easier perceptual notions to get a grip on. If we now introduce the other basic elements of composition—what in the old days (the '70s) were lovingly called "parameters"—and begin to contemplate how modifying one element alters the way we hear another, and then we layer on top of that other variables of tone production, we might throw up our hands and long for the days when fortes were fortes, pianos were pianos, and so on. (There was such a time, wasn't there?)

But Babbitt's work is so characterized by his delight in taking virtually nothing a priori that, "for best results", we must bring that sensibility to our listening. And yet, with such a title, can we really just dismiss the past? Indeed, is it reasonable to expect to hear any work for a single-voice instrument completely unmindful of J.S. Bach's solo cello and violin works? We might allow that the past, too, is but another dimension that adds to the splendor of the mix. But the experience of Bach must compel us at least to consider whether we should not hear the flow of the clarinet line as sometimes harmonic (that is, a harmonic event that is necessarily linearized), and sometimes truly a line—something that gets you from point A to point B.

If it's not tonal music, what's really the difference? For one thing, it's a question of how we perceive time passing. In a Bach solo, as soon as we hear a series of notes that comprise a triad, say, we no longer hear sequence as much as we hear the delineation of a harmony. Something like that happens in "My Ends"—but far more ambiguously. Here's the opening measure and a half:



Do we hear the first three notes as a kind of rolled chord? Isn't that almost inevitable, given their speed, and isolation from what follows? The notes surely resonate in our mind as a collective entity, notwithstanding that they were presented one at a time.

Two things about the two three-note fragments that follow. (Don't worry, we are not morphing into an analysis class.) Hearing the G and A-flat repeated—notes are identified as written, not as heard—can only reinforce our sense of the first three notes, and now the second three notes, as entities—so that the way we hear time flow from one to the next is quite different from how we hear time flow within each one. Secondly, the sequence of A-flat – B-flat in fragment two, to A-natural – B-flat in fragment three, rivets our attention on the B-flats. Is this a suggestion of leading-tone functionality? No, but three hundred years of Western music cannot be so easily dismissed, either. And repetition, in an environment in which nothing may be taken for granted, becomes a force to be reckoned with. The situation is deliberately irreconcilable. We have several contexts operating at once to define the moment. We also have the beat, a subdivision of the beat, and a subdivision of the subdivision. The overall effect on our sense of time passing is, therefore, rather multifarious.

Following this piece—and it being a solo only reinforces the point—is like following someone's life: It turns out to be somewhat improvised, somewhat determined, somewhat inevitable. This is more or less characteristic of any abstract (non-

## Milton Babbitt and Gregory D'Agostino



tonal) piece, of course, but what Babbitt does is to set up a balance of expectations in more dimensions than you ever imagined possible, and to then play them off one another in a way that leaves you unable to pin anything down definitively, yet convinced of the supreme rightness of it all.

One of Babbitt's enduring fascinations appears to be to contrast one instrument with a pair of the same (or similar). It is a recurring theme on this disc, as we have seen. Nowhere is it played out more starkly than in *Soli e Duettini*, for the guitar is surely the most intimate of instruments, and so the difference between one and two becomes high drama.

We tend to lean in close when listening to guitar. It's a good position to assume anyway for this piece, because so much happens so fast. (It might remind you of those 17<sup>th</sup> century Indian paintings which are comprised of such extraordinary detail that not even a magnifying glass seems able to reveal it all.) In dizzying succession one hears delicate filagree, brusque attacks, barely perceptible lingering tones, both players articulating a pronounced meter, fragments suggesting Flamenco tradition (or do I just imagine that?), one player in the foreground while the other recedes, both colliding, one falling silent—things happening so fast that before your ear categorizes the event, it's on to something else. Periodically tremolos burst in as if to dissipate the mounting tension. Don't be surprised if you find yourself listening so intently that the very breathing of the performers becomes a not inconsiderable reminder of the real world.

*Soli e Duettini* is dedicated to William Anderson and Oren Fader.

When a composer in his mid-80s entitles a work *Swan Song* we might get a little uneasy. But wait, it's *Swan Song #1*, of course—another in a growing tradition of paradoxical, tongue-in-cheek titles (not to mention, it is dedicated to the Cygnus Ensemble.) Some consideration seems to have been given to what we might regard as the highly dysfunctional sound world of the ensemble. The instru-

ments enter one by one, deployed to preserve a continuity of timbre: Guitar, mandolin, pizzicato cello, pizzicato violin, flute (delicately) and finally oboe imitating, as best it can, the flute. Having made these introductions, Babbitt now methodically moves to a less unified timbral world, as the instruments exercise their individual capacities of expression. The strings play arco, registral and dynamic boundaries are explored, leading to constantly varying ensemble textures. The overall ensemble keeps shifting among the myriad possible combinations of instruments; not until the last eight measures do all six instruments resound at once.

But all that's the easy stuff. Much harder to describe is the manifest grace of a piece that takes another dramatic step along the path established in *Quatrains*. We have now traveled 25 years since *My Ends are My Beginnings*. The explicit meters, punctuated by unison or octave doublings that sharply arrest the sense of motion established by such defined pulse, are a far cry from the nearly impossible-to-nail-down metric patterns that characterized Babbitt's music for so long. Dynamics traverse a relatively narrow range—indeed, entire phrases are cast in but one! Stepwise motion abounds!

The experience of hearing Milton Babbitt, who for so long played off the boundaries of musical dimensions against one another, now reign in the extremes so dramatically as to focus the ear on the centered drama of calm voices interacting, is certainly extraordinary. But should we really be surprised? After all, there is a long, rich history of composers who, having definitively proven their ability to wrest music in an entirely new direction, turned their attention inward, ever inward, to contemplate that place, in the words of W.B. Yeats, "where all the ladders start".

~ Notes by Matthias Kriesberg

*Matthias Kriesberg* studied composition with Milton Babbitt at the Juilliard School, and premiered Babbitt's piano composition, 'Tableaux'. He is currently composer-in-residence at the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts at the University of California, San Diego.

The compositional and intellectual wisdom of **Milton Babbitt** has influenced a wide range of musicians. His distinguished musical achievements and writings have greatly enriched contemporary musical life and provided challenging models for contemplation and pleasure. Milton Babbitt was born in 1916 in Philadelphia and studied composition privately with Roger Sessions. He earned degrees from New York University and Princeton University and has been awarded honorary degrees from institutions in both the USA and Europe. Milton Babbitt has taught at Princeton and the Juilliard School. His music has received numerous awards including a MacArthur Fellowship and a Pulitzer Prize citation for his "life's work as a distinguished and seminal American composer". Milton Babbitt is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

**Tony Arnold** has gained international recognition for her interpretation of the contemporary vocal repertoire. In 2001, Ms. Arnold became the first singer to be awarded first prize in the Gaudeamus International Interpreters Competition (Holland). Later that year, she claimed the top prize in the Louise D. McMahon International Music Competition (USA). Ms. Arnold has received accolades for her performances with MusicNOW, New York New Music Ensemble, eighth blackbird, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Fulcrum Point, Contemporary Chamber Players and the June in Buffalo Festival. She is a Professor of Voice at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

**Charles Neidich** has appeared as soloist with the St. Louis Symphony, Minneapolis Symphony, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the Juilliard and Guarneri String Quartets. Recent performances include the Carter Clarinet Concerto with the Deutsches Sinfonie Orchestra in Berlin, and the Mozart Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic at the BBC Proms. He is a member of the New York Woodwind Quintet, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the period instrument ensemble, Mozzafiato. Charles Neidich is on the faculties of the Juilliard School, Queens College, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Mannes College of Music.

**Ayako Oshima** is the winner of international competitions including the 55th Japan Music Competition in Tokyo, and the 17<sup>th</sup> International Jeunesses Musicales Competition in Belgrade. A popular soloist in Japan, Ms. Oshima has made recital and concerto appearances in Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe, Tanuma, at the Casals Hall, Keoi Hall, and Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo, and with the Hiroshima and Osaka Symphony Orchestras. Ms. Oshima is a member of the faculties of the Juilliard School and the State University of New York at Purchase.

**Gregory D'Agostino** performed his debut concerts with the Moscow Chamber Orchestra in St. Petersburg and with the Hong Kong Philharmonic at St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Mr. D'Agostino has an unusually large repertoire and his interest in new music has led to collaborations with composers Milton

Babbitt, Robert Baksa, George Crumb, Stephen Dembski, David Diamond, Pia Gilbert, Dan Locklair, Stephen Paulus, and Ned Rorem. He earned the DMA degree from the Juilliard School where he also won the Handel Organ Concerto Competition. Mr. D'Agostino has recorded the Locklair Organ Concerto with the Slovak Radio Orchestra for Albany Records, and has also recorded for Centaur. For Bridge Records Gregory D'Agostino has recorded George Crumb's *Pastoral Drone* (BRIDGE 9127).

**Allen Blustine** is a member of the New York Chamber Soloists, the Festival Winds, and the award-winning new music ensemble Speculum Musicae, which he serves as president and executive director. An active proponent of new music for the clarinet, he has premiered many works including those by Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Donald Martino and Wayne Peterson. Mr. Blustine has been the principal clarinetist of the Japan Philharmonic, and has performed with nearly all of New York City's musical organizations, including the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet Orchestra, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Mr. Blustine is currently on the faculty of Columbia University.

**The Anderson/Fader Duo** has performed at festivals and given master classes in Holland, Denmark, Russia, Mexico and throughout the United States. The duo has been the dedicatees of numerous works, including music by Milton Babbitt, Chester Biscardi, Jonathan Dawe, Akemi Naito, Robert Pollock and Robert Morris and has recorded for the CRI, Soundspells and Bridge labels. Also active as a composer and arranger, William Anderson works can be heard on the CRI and Furious Artisans labels. Mr. Anderson teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and Mr. Fader teaches at the Manhattan School of Music.

**Cygnus Ensemble** features guitars, strings and woodwinds in pairs—an instrumentation that had its precedent in the Elizabethan "broken consort". Cygnus presents an annual series of concerts in New York City, and has toured extensively in the USA, Europe and Latin America. In 2001 Cygnus became Ensemble in Residence at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, and in 2002 added another residency at Sarah Lawrence College.

**Jeffrey Milarsky** is active as both conductor and percussionist. His current positions include Music Director/Conductor of the Columbia University Orchestra, Music Director/Conductor of the Manhattan School of Music Percussion Ensemble, Director of the Composition Forum at the Juilliard School where he also conducts the orchestra in 20<sup>th</sup> century repertoire and guest conducts the Juilliard Ballet. Mr. Milarsky has led the American Composers Orchestra, New York New Music Ensemble, Speculum Musicae, Ensemble 21, DaCapo Chamber Players and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. As percussionist he performs regularly with the New York Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.



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Photograph of Tony Arnold by Jennifer Girard

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