

Gone For Foreign Cygnus Ensemble

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute · Robert Ingliss, oboe
Calvin Wiersma, violin · Susannah Chapman, cello
William Anderson, guitar/mandolin/banjo
Oren Fader, guitar/mandolin

David Claman (b. 1958)

gone for foreign (1999) (10:22)

for flute, oboe, violin, guitar, guitar/mandolin, cello

- 1** I gone for foreign (1:59)
- 2** II very less (1:48)
- 3** III english medicine (1:58)
- 4** IV one help (1:58)
- 5** V brokenless (2:39)

William Anderson (b. 1962)

6 A Giddy Thing (2000) (3:18)

for mandolin with electronic plucked sounds
William Anderson, mandolin

Akemi Naito (b. 1956)

Mindscape—Four Poetic Images (2002) (13:05)

for flute, oboe, two guitars, violin, cello

- 7** I Pilgrimage (2:17)
- 8** II Wind of Ruin (2:36)
- 9** III A Starlight Night (3:15)
- 10** IV Perception (4:57)

Rolv Yttrehus (b. 1926)

11 Plectrum Spectrum (2000) (19:14)

*for flute/piccolo/alto flute; oboe/English horn
guitar/mandolin; guitar/mandolin/banjo; violin, cello*

Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor

Milton Babbitt (b. 1916)

12 Swan Song No. 1 (2001-2003) (11:00)

for flute, oboe, guitar, mandolin, violin, cello
Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor

Claman: gone for foreign

gone for foreign is a flashy, exuberant example of hypothetical world music. Claman studied composition at Princeton, and it helps to keep in mind the work of Princeton professors Paul Lansky and Steve Mackey, both of whom work hard to keep concert music abreast of developments in rock and world music. Mackey's important work, *Indigenous Instruments* (1989), is perhaps the prototypical example of hypothetical world music. Like *gone for foreign*, *Indigenous Instruments* evokes an exotic vernacular music that never existed except in the mind of the composer.

The World Music movement has found and/or created virtually universal enthusiasm for music from discrete musical traditions, honoring the idea that cultures are discrete and can remain so. World Music capitalizes on the power of the idea of cultural impermeability, untranslatability. Nevertheless, world music does assimilate outside influences. Traditional Indian music now employs the guitar; there are collaborative projects between world musics from distant parts of the world, paradoxically showing that they can live together. And so Claman's and Mackey's hypothetical world musics are a crafty next step.

gone for foreign harkens back to the earlier, prewar French exoticism of Ravel and Debussy and the Symbolists, but the great difference is that it can appeal to young Americans who know nothing of Ravel & Baudelaire. Claman is writing for two audiences at once--for the world music audience and for the 20th century world stage that was defined, more than any other single individual, by Stravinsky, who was at one point an exotic himself.

Jonathan D. Spence's book, *The Question of Hu*, tells the story of an 18th Century Chinese Christian who experiences the most intense culture shock

when he accompanies a Jesuit missionary to France. Spence tells the story with admirable transparency, without offering an interpretation. *The Question of Hu* is an eloquent and persuasive treatment of the difficulty of cross-cultural understanding.

Likewise, there is no overt agenda in Claman's *gone for foreign*. One must interpret. Claman's work, puts forth the fuzziness of cross-cultural interactions as a positive musical value. Even more simply, Claman shows that it is fun to play around in the blurry areas of the non-universal. The five movements of *gone for foreign* are entitled *gone for foreign*; *very less*; *english medicine*; *one help*; *brokenless*. All but the first title are corrupted English expressions that are current in India today. Claman wrote the piece while studying in India on a grant from the American Institute of Indian Studies. I take these wonderfully odd titles as being highly evocative of the limits of Western values, and the limits of Western understanding. They are remnants of an attempt to assert "universal" Western values on foreign territory. In one movement, *brokenless*, the music seems to peer over an abyss. The fast and rhythmic movements make no secret of their use of rock idioms, even if they are inflected with a vaguely Indian flavor. It is the cosy quality of the familiar rock idioms that serves as a foil for the exotic, distancing music. In *brokenless*, the vaguely Indian-inflected rock idioms that prevail in the other movements are abandoned altogether for a sparse, disturbingly alien, vaguely exotic music from nowhere in particular. This quality of alienation has a strong connection to a generation of Americans who feel a strong disconnect from the past.

gone for foreign puts forth the alienation that attends culture shock as a positive aesthetic value. (This quality is also important in the surrealist movement.) It's a trip in the real psychedelic sense, a trip that we feel good about even

with the crash.

gone for foreign was commissioned by the American Composers Forum for Cygnus.

Anderson: A Giddy Thing

In this little work I set out to integrate the live mandolin sounds into a fabric of canned midi plucked sounds. Commercial orchestrators talk about how few instruments one needs to imbue a musical texture with some sense of human warmth, but my concern was the reverse. I feel that young people today can only relate to flattened electronic textures. Even their "unplugged" instruments are compressed to death.

This piece is a gesture to that electronic space inhabited by our young people. I do believe that they will come around eventually. Just 10 or 20 years ago the young people could only eat highly processed food, and now they are all going organic.

A Giddy Thing springs off of Benedict's comment at the end of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. My Emersonian/Stevensian "nothing" is looking back to its illustrious predecessor, Shakespeare's brilliant nihilism.

Naito: Mindscape—Four Poetic Images

In the last half of the 20th century Ysang Yun and Toru Takemitsu became world figures in music. Particularly in the case of Takemitsu, the world

stage appreciated the way the Japanese Takemitsu was able to project clearly something that people understood as "Japanese" through a musical language that had assimilated much from Western music. Takemitsu knew Japanese traditional music and drama thoroughly and he projected it, even while transforming it or translating it.

Does Naito's music sound Japanese? Does Takemitsu's? The Dutch critic Martin Kaaij feels that Naito learned much from Takemitsu, but that her music is "much clearer" (from Kaaij's book, *Not by Bach Alone*). Takemitsu lived in France during those years when the Japanese did not recognize his work. Ms. Naito also left Japan, choosing to emigrate to New York in 1991.

The four movements of *Mindscape—Four Poetic Images* are entitled *Pilgrimage*, followed by *Wind of Ruin*, *A Starlight Night*, and *Perception*. Ms. Naito thinks of a circular motion through these movements, where the perception paves the way for the process to begin anew with another pilgrimage. Perhaps we might think of this work as a musical mandala, or the Western equivalent, the circumambulation.

This four-stage progression is colored by the instrumental techniques employed in the work. An earlier guitar duo, *Winter Shadows*, is in two movements, the first in standard notation, the second in graphic notation and exploring extended techniques. *Mindscape* integrates the experimental with the conventional. It is a great challenge to find a meaningful context for the guitar, flute, and oboe multiphonics, not only because of their striking timbres, but also their microtonal inflections. There is a definite sense of stepping outside of the bounds of the equal-tempered 12-tone universe. In a different spirit than Claman's work, and through different means, alienation becomes an important element in Naito's *Mindscape*.

This work was commissioned for Cygnus by Chamber Music America. Funds for this commission have been provided by Chamber Music America's Commissioning Program, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Helen F. Whitaker Fund and the Chamber Music America Commissioning Endowment Fund.

Yttrehus: Plectrum Spectrum

There are two international musical forces in Yttrehus's musical background--his study with Nadia Boulanger and his Roger Sessions training at Princeton. Do we hear Boulanger's influence in this work, perhaps in some occasional hints of classical phraseology? I made a point of asking Mr. Yttrehus if he cares about his music sounding "European". He said he couldn't care less.

Who was it who said that every small town in American harbors a composer who studied with Boulanger? The neoclassicism that Boulanger taught originated with Stravinsky. Boulanger also espoused a kind of 12-tone music, salvaging Rameau's functional harmony by finding ways of relating one key to any of the 11 others through exotic figurations (i.e., the major II chord with raised and lower fifth). In his mature works Yttrehus adopted his own form of Schoenberg's, not Boulanger's 12-tone technique.

Yttrehus' *Plectrum Spectrum* seems short at 19 minutes, and this has to do with the way the piece builds with remarkable clarity towards a truly extraordinary event. This event is breathtakingly simple, a feature of the instrumentation that Yttrehus chose for this work. The two most potentially obnoxious instruments in this piece are oboe/English horn (one player) and the banjo, played by the second guitarist. The oboe and English horn are notoriously loud

and raw in their low registers. What to do with a banjo, that brazen monstrosity? The outer sections of *Plectrum Spectrum* progress inexorably toward the extraordinary doubling of the banjo with first the oboe, and then in the corresponding section, with the English horn, in both instances the note is a very raw low note. The result is an orchestrational enormity. The piece is certainly not about the banjo, but it does deal carefully with the problem of the banjo among more serious and acceptable instruments.

The slow inner section of *Plectrum Spectrum* is characterized by what I like to call an "orchestrational inversion", that is, the oboe/English horn and banjo do not appear at all in this quiet, lyrical inner movement--an inverse enormity.

Yttrehus, through such grand and simple organizational ideas, is able to take our mind off of pitch entirely. One who is not familiar with his pitch world may sit back and be drawn effortlessly into these extraordinary moments and simply enjoy the composition.

Babbitt: Swan Song No. 1

Babbitt's music is difficult because he is optimistic about communication. He likes to impart a great deal of information in short spans of time. It is lost on many listeners, yet, if one person understands, then communication has succeeded. His recent works have a remarkable new clarity and practicality that is proving to be a great inspiration to yet another generation of young listeners, musicians and composers. Babbitt succeeds in communicating.

I've cited Spence's book, *The Question of Hu*, as a clear example of a notorious failure of understanding; I'd like to balance that example by asserting

that Western music has flourished because composers have learned from each other. There are aspects of music that can be treated like engineering problems--structural issues that may be discussed objectively. There is very likely no person more adept at discussing these technical issues than Milton Babbitt, and he also maintains unstintingly the discipline of remaining silent about issues that do not lend themselves to verbal or other forms of explication. Communication can verge on being impossible. We communicate. Both statements are true.

I find three clear entries into this work. 1) A farewell to the trichords. (three-note chords) 2) A conspicuously recurring trichord harmony that I suggest has a Brahmsian, autumnal quality. 3) A last laugh in the cello, whose pitches connect it with the "autumnal" harmony.

Many trichords come to our attention in *Swan Song*. Listening carefully, we hear that the rhythms are calculated to land on these trichords in a way that makes them hard to miss. The garden variety C major triad in measure 12 appears in measure 18 in a stellar version, with the flute high in the firmament, but its elements quickly scatter to the winds. Before we forget the elements their contexts change. Aggregates instated and unseated will have this quality of building and unbuilding. How to take this as it is here applied so thoroughly to the trichords? At the very least it reminds us that it has been one of Babbitt's projects to integrate all the trichords, most of which have been neglected at the expense of tonal music's major and minor triads. This movement, through diverse trichords, gives the work a powerful drive, as the rhythmic and harmonic elements evolve in order to instate each trichord in turn. One should not think of an "equality" of trichords. Each trichord is shown to have its own unique energy. Some are more familiar than others. We arrive on some, but some are too dynamic for us to take as being "landed". It is a relatively new thing to

see Babbitt flirting with materials that are familiar, here, even *cosy*. In treating the familiar he is getting into the business of playing off of our habitual hearing.

Some trichords are more warm and familiar than others. The third through fifth notes of the piece (A,C#,G# in the guitar), are a harmonic element (a trichord) that becomes ever more important as the piece progresses. It is the hallmark of Brahms' autumnal sound, in tonal parlance--the major seventh chord. I'm not the first to associate this harmony with Brahms and particularly with Brahms' autumnal mood, his *Weltschmerz*. Because this tri-chord appears with a corresponding expansion of the rhythm, a gentle agogic accent (quarter note triplets), it is as if the energy of the whole piece pours into this *Weltschmerz* chord.

The *Swan Song* ends with staccato sixteenth notes in the cello, a descending minor 9th, G-flat-F. Does it come across as a laugh? The cello gesture is preceded by the same notes in the flute, which, in turn, is preceded by the same in the guitar.

Through these features that one cannot easily miss, G-flat and F emerge as two characters in this piece, and there is a mysterious connection, an identity, between the Brahmsian harmony and the final gesture in the cello. The striking final passage transforms the elements of the *Weltschmerz* harmony into something new, light, perhaps even a bit ribald.

Swan Song No. 1 (2001-2003), was composed for and dedicated to Cygnus, who gave the first performances at Sarah Lawrence College in the Spring of 2003, and weeks later at the City University of New York's Elebash Hall.

CYGNUS ENSEMBLE

Paul Griffiths, in the *New York Times*, describes **Cygnus** as an "enterprising and supple group, featuring guitars, strings and woodwinds in pairs, an instrumentation that has its precedent in the Elizabethan broken consort." Cygnus was founded in 1985 by guitarist William Anderson. Over the course of its 20 years, Cygnus has commissioned, performed and recorded a unique body of chamber music for combinations of instruments that are distinct from the ubiquitous 'Pierrot' formation that has so dominated the last century's chamber music. Cygnus performs this repertoire in an annual series of concerts at major halls in New York City. Last season the group was featured at the Guggenheim Museum, performing a full-length chamber opera, *Prometheus*, by Jonathan Dawe.

Cygnus has toured Europe, performing in Holland, Denmark, Russia, and Poland, and has made tours of the West Coast and Mexico.

Cygnus has been Ensemble in residence at the City University of New York's Graduate Center since 2000, and at Sarah Lawrence College since 2001. These relationships were expanded by a Chamber Music America residency award given to Cygnus in 2004.

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Jeffrey Milarsky is a leading conductor of contemporary music in New York City. In the United States and abroad, he has premiered and recorded works by contemporary composers, including Charles Wuorinen, Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Lasse Thoresen, Gerard Grisey, Jonathan Dawe, Tristan Murail, Ralph Shapey, Luigi Nono, Mario Davidovsky and Wolfgang Rihm. His wide ranging repertoire, which spans from Bach to Xenakis, has brought him to lead such accomplished groups as the Cygnus Ensemble, the American Composers Orchestra, the New York New Music Ensemble, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Columbia Sinfonietta, Speculum Musicae, The Fromm Players at Harvard University, The Composers' Ensemble at Princeton University, and the New York Philharmonic chamber music series. Most recently, he has joined the faculty of The Manhattan School of Music as Artistic Director and Conductor of the Percussion Ensemble.

A much-in-demand percussionist who has performed and recorded with the New York Philharmonic among many ensembles, Mr. Milarsky is Professor in Music at Columbia University, where he is the Music Director/Conductor of the Columbia University Orchestra. Mr. Milarsky is also the Music Director and Conductor of the Columbia Sinfonietta, which concentrates on 20th and 21st Century scores.



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Left to Right: Tara Helen O'Connor, Robert Ingliss, William Anderson
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