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MULTITUDE SOLITUDE
ERIC NATHAN

Momenta Quartet Peggy Pearson, OBOE Hugo Moreno, TRUMPET
Joseph Alessi, TROMBONE Samuel Rhodes, VIOLA Mei Rui, PIANO

TROY1586

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ALBANY RECORDS U.S.
915 BROADWAY, ALBANY, NY 12207
TEL: 518.436.8814 FAX: 518.436.0643
ALBANY RECORDS U.K.
BOX 137, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA8 0XD
TEL: 01539 824008
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Eric Nathan, a 2013 Rome Prize Fellow and 2014 Guggenheim Fellow, has garnered acclaim internationally through performances at the New York Philharmonic's 2014 Biennial, Carnegie Hall, Aldeburgh Music Festival, Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, MATA Festival, Aspen Music Festival, Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, Ravinia Festival Steans Institute, Louvre Museum, Yellow Barn, and the 2012 and 2013 World Music Days. His music has been featured by the Berlin Philharmonic's Scharoun Ensemble, Boston Symphony Orchestra Chamber Players, Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, A Far Cry, JACK Quartet, American Composers Orchestra, Omaha Symphony Chamber Orchestra, and the Charleston Symphony Orchestra.

Recent projects include commissions from the New York Philharmonic for its CONTACT! series at its inaugural 2014 Biennial, Boston Symphony Orchestra for its Chamber Players, Tanglewood Music Center, violinist Jennifer Koh, Yale Symphony Orchestra for its 50th anniversary, and soprano Lucy Shelton. Nathan has additionally been honored with ASCAP's Rudolf Nissim Prize, four ASCAP Morton Gould Awards, BMI's William Schuman Prize, Aspen Music Festival's Jacob Druckman Prize, American Academy of Arts and Letters' Charles Ives Scholarship, and the Tanglewood Music Center's Leonard Bernstein Fellowship.

Nathan served as Composer-in-Residence at the 2013 Chelsea Music Festival (New York) and 2013 Chamber Music Campania (Italy) and has been featured at composer portrait concerts at Tenri Cultural Institute (New York) and at the American Academy in Rome. He received his doctorate from Cornell and holds degrees from Yale (B.A.) and Indiana University (M.M.) and attended Juilliard Pre-College. His principal teachers were Steven Stucky, Roberto Sierra, Claude Baker, Sven-David Sandström, and Kathryn Alexander. Nathan served as Visiting Assistant Professor at Williams College and is currently Assistant Professor of Music at Brown University.

THE MUSIC

Eric Nathan's music, upon first encounter, conveys a compelling and infectious *energy*: virtuosity in the service of defining musical drama and character. In the seven works in this collection—three solo and four small-ensemble pieces—there's often a thrilling hint of vicarious danger: it's like watching an escape by a hair's breadth, a daredevil feat. This music requires of its performers both the willingness and the ability to overcome its challenges in order to immerse the listener in its rich, multifaceted world. Writing about his Quartet for Oboe and Strings, Nathan tells us, "I treat the oboe and string trio as characters in a drama, engaging them in a series of dialogues and conversations that follow an emotional arc and narrative trajectory." These comments could just as well describe any of the works here; moreover, they relate to larger compositional and aesthetic concerns.

The idea of treating instruments as characters in a play (or an opera) is an established one; for example, it's readily acknowledged that the prototype work for the ensemble of oboe and string trio, Mozart's K.370, places the oboe in the role of operatic protagonist. (There are plenty of similar precedents.) In terms of a composer's individual voice, it's the particulars that matter, different for every piece but sharing certain details of influence and imaginative flight. Nathan's musical imagination is in large part the product of his own experience as a performer. Growing up in Larchmont, a suburb of New York City, he started playing trumpet at an early age and progressed to a high level. He immersed himself in study of composition, attending Yale, Indiana, and Cornell universities, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood Music Center, and the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme at the Aldeburgh Festival. Recognition of his work has come through commissions from the New York Philharmonic (the solo trombone piece *As Above, So Below* for New York Philharmonic principal trombone Joseph Alessi) and the Boston Symphony Orchestra (*Why Old Places Matter* for oboe, horn, and piano for the Boston Symphony Chamber Players); he has been awarded four Morton Gould Young Composer Awards, including those for his Tanglewood Music Center commission *Timbered Bells* and his solo piano piece *Three by Three*. For the 2013-2014 season, Nathan was in residence at the American Academy in Rome as recipient of the Rome Prize.

Much has gone into the making of Nathan's distinctive compositional voice. The tactile experience of performing, which involves the resolution of conflicts between notated and improvised music, between technique and expression, is the most direct source of this music's vitality. The role of the dedicated performer in amplifying and potentially transforming a composed work factors significantly into his approach; with the demands of the music comes a willingness to trust a player to infuse a score with individuality. (This is particularly true of the two solo brass pieces here.) Nathan also draws on personal, and cultural, experience, including visual art, for his inspiration. As part of his writing process he has recourse to arrays of photographs to catalyze new ideas—not in the sense of illustration, but as a way of focusing creative energy. The Italian sojourn during his Rome Prize year yielded musical responses to the ruins at Paestum, Rome's multi-leveled archaeology, and other phenomena. The artistically satisfying weight of Nathan's work comes from these complementary stimuli realized through compositional craft. It wouldn't be outlandish, in fact, to suggest that in his well-balanced forms and clear, direct musical gestures, Eric Nathan is ultimately a classicist composer with such composers as Stravinsky and Schumann his ancestors.

Both composed for the Momenta Quartet, the two works for string quartet that bookend this collection demonstrate the unique challenges of balancing individual and group personality in a work of music, a concern already suggested in their titles, *Four to One* and *Multitude, Solitude*. *Four to One* was "inspired by the blazing colors and raw intensity of an autumnal sunset," an image almost physically present in the barely contained vibrating textures of the opening. Nathan—almost like a painter—creates different densities of texture using combinations of the four instruments, and opposes line (melody) with ground (gestural figures defining harmony). The flow of the piece hinges on a harmonic progression expanding and growing in complexity from single chords. The cello's melody, initially very constrained, adds pitches as it rises; this process happens in turn with the violin-cello melodic duo of the second big phrase and again in ensuing sections; the idea of rising expansion applies, too, to the entire piece. A passage in unison shading toward ponticello (the thin, wiry sound of playing near the bridge, at about the 2:20 mark in this recording) foreshadows the long coda-like ending of the piece with its sustained transparency, like a sunset as the colors begin to fade.

The title *Multitude, Solitude* comes from a prose-poem by Baudelaire describing city life; Nathan was able to apply it to his own life in New York City as well as to an experience walking alone along the shore at Aldeburgh, on England's east coast. The title suggests both the possibility of being alone in a crowd as well as the experience, when alone, of communicating with the myriad elements of one's environment. The varieties of musical time in *Multitude, Solitude* work to suggest the shifting emotional states, meditative to active, one encounters in such circumstances, but outside details are also sketched in—the mournful cries of seagulls, the power and vastness of the North Sea. The piece opens with glassy sounds of string harmonics, a melodic fragment over glissandi; the viola's non-harmonic statement of the same fragment is intrusive and insistent, the cello's introverted and thoughtful. The opening, suspended in time, expands towards extremes of register, growing more intense, leading to an agitated passage, imitative melodic ideas rising over sharp, pulsed figures. Time comes to a standstill again as the pair of violins wheel in duet.

One of fascinations of the piece is its expressive variety in the face of the remarkably unified musical details. The second half essentially balances the first, slow-fast: but while it's based on much the same musical material, changes in its articulation and register transform it from an abstract, observed point of view to one somehow internalized and humanized. The still ending of the piece grows more and more gossamer, ascending and dissipating into the ether.

As mentioned above, the Quartet for Oboe and Strings, composed for oboist Peggy Pearson's Winsor Music series, suggests a musical drama with the oboist as protagonist. The string trio is both a single-minded collective and a group of individuals able to interact one-on-one with the oboe. The piece begins with a rapid, rising figure in the strings that seems to propel the oboe into the spotlight, a figure that recurs as signpost. In the first part, the oboe sings a long lyric line over the jumpy, agitated body of strings; gradually each of the strings develops its own personality and independence. Viola, then violin, emerge with lyric passages in conversation with the oboe, and a passages of imitative counterpoint suggests solidarity among equals. The oboe takes a cadenza-like soliloquy in the middle of the piece; the sympathetic violist's response is over strummed chords in the violin and cello. The fast passage that develops from here re-establishes the oboe/strings balanced opposition; the closing coda is introspective.

The two solo brass pieces on this disc, *Toying*, for trumpet, and *As Above, So Below*, for trombone, clearly demonstrate how far Nathan is willing to go to define his music's character. Both require adjustments to the solo instrument that push it beyond its designed capabilities: *Toying* in the service of sonic mimicry and novelty, and *As Above* in the service of dramatic character. "As Above, So Below," the composer tells us, is a maxim of Hermetic philosophy pertaining to "underlying unity between two seemingly separate worlds." The conceit is manifest in Nathan's piece, which he calls a "duet for solo performer," which the composer gives physical dimension by temporarily altering the trombone's design. Joseph Alessi, for whom the piece was written, plays a "trigger trombone," a tenor trombone that uses a thumb valve to change between two lengths of tubing (changing the fundamental key of the trombone from B-flat to F, similar to a double French horn). By removing a tuning slide and triggering the valve, the player can literally project the instrument's sound backward—albeit a thinner, less present sound than that delivered via the wide bell on the front of the trombone. The result is predictably quirky, as though the player is arguing with himself; but it's also serious and, at times, poignant. The transition is often entirely seamless, with Alessi triggering the soft/backward phrases after fading to pianissimo with the "normal" horn. Nathan wrote the piece while in Rome; its two outer sections describe a fantasy of flight over the city, and its central part imagines landing and walking quietly among the umbrella pines of the Villa Doria Pamphili—a classic ABA structure plus a final quiet close.

The three-movement *Toying* for solo trumpet naturally stems from the composer's own awareness of the instrument's potential, which, like *As Above*, takes the horn out of its "classical" comfort zone. Commissioned for the stylistically unconstrained trumpeter Hugo Moreno by the New York collective Le Train Bleu, *Toying* relies on its composer's familiarity with the mechanical makeup of the trumpet as well as with its expressive and technical range. The three movements each treat a different aspect of toys. In the first, "Wind-Up," the player is instructed to partly unscrew the trumpet's first valve so it makes a sharp metallic click when released. The wind-up sound we hear in the movement is created through this effect; this can also be heard in conjunction with sounded notes, rendered thin and distant via a practice mute (a type of mute designed to keep neighbors happy, but rarely used in performance). The movement illustrates the unpredictable movements of a wind-up toy as it totters, stops or falls, and is started again. The rising and falling scale fragments, though,

suggest a little personality behind the mechanism. In the second movement, the first valve is now properly seated but lacks its tuning slide, so any note played with that key depressed is thin and ghostly, a little similar to the soft/reverse trombone sound in *As Above*. This "Elegy for a Toy Soldier" alternates between the full and ghost sounds of the trumpet, remarking on both the heroism and tragedy of the toy's fate. The final movement, "Ventriloquizing," employs a plunger mute for its distinctive "wah" effect, as well as a variety of other vocal mimicry sounds, including partly depressed valves for a "laughing" effect, a "hrmpf" sound, and other Vaudevillian exaggerations. All three movements require a transcendent grasp, by both performer and composer, of the trumpet's idiom.

Composed for the Shanghai-born American pianist Mei Rui, *Three By Three* is three, three-minute movements of contrasting character; each can be performed separately. The breathless first, "Moto perpetuo, Presto," begins with right and left hands in fast unison three octaves apart; accents and dropped notes in both hands create a kind of aural illusion and syncopation. Nathan makes much of register separation to clarify the often-minute differences between the parts in unison passages; when more radical separation occurs, the contrast is greatly magnified. The movement tends downward in big sweeps, leaping back upward to begin another descent. The contemplative second movement, here called "Lontano," was originally composed for pianist Adam Kent (with the title "Meditation"). Two kinds of time are juxtaposed: the unfixed sustained notes of the falling chromatic figures in the right hand, and the more directional, rising arpeggios of the left, seeming to float entirely free from one another. The movement is "a meditation on Arthur Ganson's kinetic sculpture, *Machine with Artichoke Petal*, a complex assemblage of metal parts topped off by the organic shape of an artichoke section positioned to 'walk' along the circumference of a very slowly turning, massive metal disc." (A video of the sculpture can readily be found on the internet.) "Vivace, Molto Robusto" is an off-kilter, rustic dance, Prokofiev-like, with windows of twinkling delicacy.

Omaggio a Gesualdo for string quintet (a version for quartet also exists) is, on the surface, a little bit anomalous in the present context, being based on pre-existing music. Commissioned by the Chelsea Music Festival, the piece is a gloss on Carlo Gesualdo's short five-voice, five-line madrigal "Ahi, disperata vita" ("Ah, desperate life," 1595), representative of the composer's text-painting and innovative use of dissonance. Elements of the piece make explicit appearances, but more subtly, Nathan layers another, more extended but no

less reflective, interpretation of the (unheard) text atop the fragmented original: thus the sharp dissonance of the opening chord superimposes Gesualdo's opening harmonies as well as illustrating the text's "desperate life"; Nathan's flitting string figures illustrate the "fleeing" of the second line as well as providing textural interest, and his use of idiomatic string articulations (such as the ponticello tremolos toward the end of the piece) creates a macaronic dialog between the 16th and 21st centuries.

The text of the madrigal is this: Ahi, disperata vita/Che fuggendo il mio bene, Miseramente cade in mille pene! Deh, torna alla tua luce alma e gradita/Che ti vuol da raita! (Ah, desperate life/Which, whilst fleeing from my loved one/fallst miserably into a thousand torments!/Oh, turn to your sweet and gracious light/which wants to give you comfort.)

Maybe *Omaggio* is, after all, not so anomalous here; the existence (not to say "presence") of a text merely serves to emphasize Eric Nathan's overall approach to musical invention. Each of these works is, in some sense, a response to a narrative idea, though it's a "text" that resonates from within the composer's observations and experiences—sensitive, imaginative, and, above all, pointedly musical responses to life itself.

—ROBERT KIRZINGER

COMPOSER; BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM PUBLICATIONS, EDITORIAL

THE PERFORMERS

Praised by the *Washington Post* for "an extraordinary musical experience" and by the *New York Times* for its "diligence, curiosity and excellence," the **Momenta Quartet** is celebrated for its innovative programming, juxtaposing contemporary works from widely divergent aesthetics with great music from the past. Momenta has premiered over 100 works and collaborated with over 120 living composers while maintaining a deep commitment to the

classical canon. In the words of *The New Yorker's* Alex Ross, "few American players assume Haydn's idiom with such ease." Momenta has appeared at such prestigious venues as the Library of Congress, National Gallery of Art, the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery, Rubin Museum, Miller Theatre at Columbia University, Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, and internationally at festivals including Cervantino, MATA, Chelsea, Yellow Barn and the Avaloch Farm Music Institute.

Peggy Pearson is a winner of the Pope Foundation Award for Outstanding Accomplishment in Music and has served as a Fellow of the Radcliffe Institute in contemporary music. Ms. Pearson gave her New York debut with soprano Dawn Upshaw in 1995, a program featuring the premiere of John Harbison's *Chorale Cantata*, which was written specifically for them. She has performed solo, chamber and orchestral music throughout the United States and abroad. A member of the Bach Aria Group, Ms. Pearson is also solo oboist with the Emmanuel Chamber Orchestra and Director of Winsor Music, Inc., has toured internationally and recorded extensively with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and has appeared with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra as principal oboist, as well as with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Music from Marlboro.

Born and raised in Sunland Park, New Mexico, now living in Brooklyn, New York, **Hugo Moreno** enjoys freelancing with some of New York City's prized ensembles. Recently featured as a soloist with the Chelsea Symphony and Yale Philharmonia performing the trumpet concerti of Hummel and Tomasi, and a former member of the El Paso and Las Cruces Symphony Orchestras, Hugo has performed at Marlboro and Spoleto USA and is a member of the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas. Further downtown, Hugo plays with Cumbiagra, Jarana Beat and The Gregorio Uribe Big Band. He has also performed at the Bang on a Can marathon, with acclaimed gospel musicians at the Emmanuel Baptist Church, with artist Rachel Mason and as Principal Trumpet of the Daejeon Philharmonic Orchestra under Shinik Hahm.

Joseph Alessi was appointed Principal Trombone of the New York Philharmonic, The Gurnee F. and Marjorie L. Hart Chair, in the spring of 1985. Mr. Alessi is an active soloist, recitalist, and chamber musician. In April 1990 he made his New York Philharmonic solo debut, performing Creston's Fantasy for Trombone, and in 1992 premiered Christopher Rouse's Pulitzer Prize-winning Trombone Concerto with the Philharmonic, which commissioned the work for its 150th anniversary celebration. Mr. Alessi's discography includes many releases and his recording of George Crumb's *Starchild* on the Bridge record label, featuring Mr. Alessi as soloist, won a Grammy Award for 1999–2000. Mr. Alessi is currently on the faculty of the Juilliard School.

Samuel Rhodes is a consummate artist, well known as a recitalist, orchestra soloist, recording artist, composer and teacher. The *New York Times* has called him "a remarkably sensitive violist" and the *Washington Post* has described him as a "master of the viola fit to stand with the instrument's greatest." As a member of the Juilliard String Quartet for 44 seasons, Mr. Rhodes recorded an extensive catalogue of the string quartet literature on the CBS Masterworks, Sony Classical, Wergo, and CRI labels and has won three Grammy Awards for the Debussy and Ravel Quartets, the complete Schoenberg Quartets, and the complete Beethoven Quartets. Mr. Rhodes serves as chair of viola at the Juilliard School and on the faculty of the Tanglewood Music Center, and has been a participant at the Marlboro Music Festival since 1960.

Lauded by the *Boston Globe* as a "riveting" virtuoso, and by *Boston Musical Intelligencer* as a concert artist with "deeply felt and intense musicality," pianist **Mei Rui** has performed to critical acclaim in the United States and abroad. As a soloist, she has played with the Beijing Radio Symphony, Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Manhattan School of Music Philharmonic, and Yale Symphony Orchestra. Equally active as a chamber musician, Dr. Rui has appeared at the Ravinia Festival, Louvre Museum, Yellow Barn, Perlman Festival, Taos, Music Academy of the West, Norfolk, and Van Cliburn Piano Institute. She has collaborated with such eminent musicians as Itzhak Perlman, George Manahan, Shinik Hahm, Paul Katz, Roger Tapping, and Peter Frankl. Dr. Rui graduated magna cum laude graduate from Yale, and holds duo-degrees in Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry (B.A.) and Music (M.M., A.D. D.M.A.).

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Four to One and Quartet for Oboe and Strings recorded September 20, 2014;
As Above, So Below recorded February 1, 2015; *Three by Three* recorded June 9, 2014; and
Toying recorded October 26, 2014, at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York.
Omaggio a Gesualdo and *Multitude, Solitude* recorded September 21, 2014 in the Recital Hall of the Performing Arts Center, SUNY Purchase, New York.

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Liner Notes: Robert Kirzinger

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Omaggio a Gesualdo is dedicated to the memory of my late aunt Tera Younger. This album is dedicated with love and gratitude to my parents Carl and Amy Nathan for nurturing my love of music and being unwavering supporters.

—ERIC NATHAN