



Milton  
**BABBITT**

**Soli e  
Duettini**

**Around the Horn  
Whirled Series**

**The Group for  
Contemporary  
Music**

## Milton Babbitt (b. 1916)

### Soli e Duettini

One prepossessing characteristic of Milton Babbitt's music is that its lines jump around a lot. However intrinsically appealing, this gains something from the fact that they also do not. The jumps sample streams of slower activity, communicate between them. This addition slows the frantic motion - better, changes our impression of it *without* slowing it: what is highly agitated is also carefully grounded, even gently regulated. Polyphony of movement defines Babbitt's sound: fast and slow, disjointed and regular, manic and glacial—dichotomies peculiarly unavailable even while suggested by singular multiplicity of motion.

The phenomenon may be clearest with slower action suspended, as at the beginning of *Around the Horn*. Three oddly spaced pitches are revisited, gradually brought into motion (the lower ones resist longer). Such “polyphonic” hearing is not pressed so obviously by the free, wide-ranging tunes that open *None But The Lonely Flute* or *Soli e Duettini*, but it is available there, too, retaining and connecting distinctive points in the fantastic contours. Babbitt typically makes every note figure in several melodies: at least the melody of its immediate predecessors and successors (possibly rather unlike it) and the slower melody of notes like it (possibly removed from it in time). These melodies often reflect one another across disparities of character and speed; but more fundamental than any resemblance is the simple fact that they are all there. The essence of Babbitt's sound is several things going on at a time—even with only one note.

Babbitt's writing may not change much for groups of instruments: combining their tunes into an ensemble tune need not differ in principle from combining tunes within one of their parts. The creation of a virtual polyphony in a single line, one of the oldest tricks in the book, gets an idiosyncratic reading in Babbitt's actual polyphony. Often the ensemble plays one melody, with the capacity occasionally to hold a note over into the next, or introduce a few notes at a time.

Babbitt's multilayered melodiousness can be assimilated to the one characteristic always attributed to his music, its being twelve-tone: the slower lines are the rows (roughly). But to view Babbitt's polyphony as a device for high-density transmission of the series is to choose a grimly functional interpretation over alternatives more engaging, and more apparent. Better to err in the other direction and imagine the series working, often behind the scenes, to keep skittishness from being sheer scatter. The result is distinctive motion: adroitly unnatural, with startlingly agile objects moving to more than one place at more than one speed, rearranging ordinary associations between effort and expression, mixing stress and lightness.

The most spectacular results may be in *Around the Horn* (1993), performed by William Purvis, for whom it was written. The title's pun predicts the piece's conduct: the horn has to be almost everywhere in a two-and-a-half-octave range almost all the time. Before hearing the piece, it is hard to imagine how horn music could move like this; upon hearing it, it is hard to imagine how Purvis achieves such facility without denaturing his sound, which is always highly charged, finely inflected, and utterly characteristic of the instrument. Besides mixing high and low, loud and soft, the music varies sharply in character, suddenly delicate or wild or heroic, perhaps following with a deflating aside. The horn's traditional associations play into a striking harmonic trait: “diatonic” figures, including plenty of major triads, against a distinctly nondiatonic background. One further association is with the virtuoso horn playing of Gunther Schuller; the piece is dedicated to the memory of his wife Marjorie.

In *None But The Lonely Flute* (1991), again the line moves constantly through a wide range; but since this requires no exceptional effort on the flute, the impression is different. An ordinary quality of the flute gets extraordinarily free play (one reviewer wrote of “pure fluting”); it speaks easily, in exceptionally long,

clear phrases, whose internal variety is voluble rather than dramatic. Gradually these phrases grow reluctant to end, potential endings undermined by the return of preceding details. There are no major changes, no marked sections—just a long, long tune.

The lines of *Melismata* (1982) attain their length in a different way. The title suggests their sense of floridly ornamentating something slow, a sense that must arise from the clearer presence of a beat, and a different mix of fast and slow. Very striking is the possibility of a long note at almost any moment. The registral movement is different, too: the entire range often seems to be in play even when parts of it are not actually sounding; passages of narrow range seem contracted.

*Play It Again, Sam* (1989) is the most mercurial solo. With an often bumptious registral discontinuity come frequent switches in playing technique, shifts in tempo, variation of harmonic flavour, and, most interestingly, almost incessant change in the *rate* of change in various dimensions. The possibilities even include outbreaks of continuity (often lyrical and high), tempering the potential jokiness. (The title's famously apocryphal quotation from *Casablanca* makes a technical allusion to Babbitt's *Arie da Capo*.)

Opportunities may be limited in Babbitt's study for snare drum, *Homily* (1987), but the score's afterword draws a promise of transcendence from St John Chrysostom: "And why, is it asked, are there so many snares? That we may not fly low, but seek the things that are above". Multilinearity is sought in the realm of dynamics, often underscored by use of two different beaters at once. Still this piece may be hard to hear as contrapuntal, since louder strokes so easily dominate softer ones. While *Homily's* durational construction is like that of most of the other pieces, it is simpler in effect, showing how contour, timbre, and pitch enliven Babbitt's rhythm under normal conditions.

Dynamic stratification is easy to hear on the marimba: in *Beaten Paths* (1988), counterpoint between sharply struck notes and ghostly ones is as vivid as that between high and low ones. This may be natural, given the equivocal registral effect of single marimba tones; the

same timbral peculiarity allows the piece's octaves not to stand out sharply (as in *Soli e Duettini* or *Whirled Series*). Registral counterpoint makes *Beaten Paths* a kind of duo, high and low; but its sectional contrasts come more from sonority than range: changes in the color of the bubbling. The local rhythms are delicate and tricky, inflected by dynamic crosscutting, contour, and timbre.

Babbitt's ideal of more than one thing happening at a time reaches a technical extreme *Soli e Duettini* (1989; the second of three pieces with this title). Not only is each instrument's part a self-sufficient polyphony that might suffice for a solo piece (that literally does in *None But The Lonely Flute*), but they do not quite share the same series. More immediately, they don't act much alike: the guitar part is amply polyphonic in itself, and the two parts often slide past each other rhythmically, not interlocking as simply or as often as in the other duos. Susan Palmano and David Starobin, who negotiate these rhythmic disengagements and reengagements with such grace, are the work's dedicatees.

The applicability of this work's title to the entire collection may be a fortuity, but its application to the work's form is direct: the instruments' comings and goings create clear sections. This is the only piece for which it would be easy to lay out a "form" — flute solo, duo (long, punctuated halfway by an abortive guitar solo), guitar solo, duo (short), flute, duo (short), guitar, duo (long, ending with a brief flute solo, even more quizzical for coming last). This is not terribly informative (comments on changes of pace would improve it), but it does identify the *solis* and *duettini* comprised in this *duetto*.

A similar list for *Whirled Series* (1987), this collection's *duettone*, would have to mention parts of the instruments' ranges — "top of saxophone, middle of piano," "bottom of saxophone, extremes of piano" — and would be very long. Better just to say that the piece traffics in contrasts of this kind; and that the sorting of registers is further inflected by differences between single and mixed ranges in each instrument, and between equal and unequal mixing. More than any plan of succession, the sheer variety of these combinations is easy to

appreciate, the escape they represent from any prefabricated notion of the sonorously balanced, and the fluent oddity of Babbitt's writing for saxophone (one of his instruments).

A particular pleasure is the unpredictability of coincidence between the partners. One twists through a complex lick, the other enters — bop! — to make a little chord out of one fast note, or to stop the figure in its tracks. They can meet any time, doing anything; whether by close coordination or happy accident, who is to say? Babbitt's ensembles always feature this; *Whirled Series* is a feast of it. The final passage of fast-and-slow motion, about 45 seconds of exuberant running in place, presents an epitome of Babbitt's tone, splitting the difference

between intensely inner-directed and relentlessly “on,” austere and daft.

It would be good for the appreciation of Babbitt to focus on qualities like daring, wit, and evasion of dichotomies, rather than the usual allegations of order, structure, and rationality. The received unwisdom must depend on the wider availability of words about Babbitt's music than of his music; the likeliest source of understanding, as of pleasure, remains the music, as presented in projects like this one and by performers like the Group for Contemporary Music, thoroughly impressive even one or two at a time.

**Joseph Dubiel**

## **Charles Abramovic**

Charles Abramovic has won critical acclaim for his international performances as a soloist, chamber musician, and collaborator with leading instrumentalists and singers. He made his solo orchestral debut at the age of fourteen with the Pittsburgh Symphony. Since then he has appeared as soloist with numerous orchestras, and has given solo recitals throughout the United States, France and Yugoslavia. He has also appeared at major international festivals in Berlin, Bermuda, Dubrovnik and Vancouver. With a wide range of acclaimed recordings to his name, he serves as a Professor of Keyboard Studies at Temple University's Boyer College of Music in Philadelphia. In 1997 he received the Career Development Grant from the Philadelphia Musical Fund Society, and in 2003 received the Creative Achievement Award from Temple University. He is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, and the Peabody Conservatory, and received his doctorate from Temple University.

## **Peter Jarvis**

As director of the highly acclaimed New Jersey Percussion Ensemble Peter Jarvis is active as a percussionist, conductor, educator, composer and administrator. He has played with or conducted many of the major new music groups in New York and New Jersey and has enjoyed an extensive touring career, appearing as a soloist for New Music Festivals including the Europe Asia Festival in Kazan Russia and as a guest of the ISCM League of Composers in New York. He has performed for Radio Denmark, PBS, Russian and Hong Kong television and WNYC in New York, and can be heard on many recordings. He is on the faculty of William Paterson University and Connecticut College, where he teaches percussion and conducts new music and percussion ensembles.

## **Tom Kolor**

Tom Kolor is active as a chamber, orchestral, and solo percussionist, and holds a Master's degree from the Juilliard School. He is a member of the Talujon Percussion Quartet, New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, Newband, Ensemble

Sospeso, and Ensemble 21, and is a frequent guest of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, New York New Music Ensemble, Continuum, Da Capo Chamber Players, Group for Contemporary Music, Mosaic, Speculum Musicae, and the Orchestra of St Luke's. As a soloist, he has given premières of works by Milton Babbitt, Wayne Peterson, John Zorn, Tania Leon, and Jerome Kitzke. He teaches at William Paterson University and SUNY Purchase.

## **Curtis Macomber**

Curtis Macomber is among the most versatile soloists/chamber musicians, equally at home in repertoire from Bach to Babbitt. As member of the New World String Quartet from 1982-93, he performed in virtually all the important concert series in the United States, as well as touring abroad. He is the violinist of Speculum Musicae and a founding member of the Apollo Trio, with a series of acclaimed recordings. He is a member of the chamber music faculty of the Juilliard School, where he studied with Joseph Fuchs. He is also on the violin faculty of the Manhattan School of Music, and has taught at the Tanglewood, Taos and Yellow Barn Music Festivals.

## **Lois Martin**

Lois Martin, a native of York, Pennsylvania, began her viola studies with Arthur Lewis at the Peabody Preparatory School. She completed her undergraduate work at the Eastman School of Music where she was a scholarship student of Francis Tursi. During this time, she was a member of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. She continued her graduate studies at the Juilliard School under the tutelage of Lillian Fuchs. She is a founding member of the Atlantic String Quartet, and is also Principal Violist for the Stamford Symphony, Solisti New York, OK Mozart Festival, Concordia and String Fever. She is also a member of the Orchestra of St Luke's, the Salon Chamber Players and the American Chamber Ensemble. She is on the faculty of the Composers Conference at Wellesley College and has taught at Princeton University.

## **Susan Palma-Nidel**

Susan Palma-Nidel is well-known for her performances and recordings of both traditional and contemporary music. She is the flautist of Speculum Musicae, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the American Composers Orchestra, and has performed as soloist and chamber musician throughout the world in works ranging from Mozart to Babbitt, with many premières of new compositions. Her recordings include the Mozart's flute concertos, praised by *The Gramophone* and listed as one of its best all-time recordings by Deutsche Grammophon. She is a faculty member of Columbia University and Montclair State University.

## **William Purvis**

William Purvis, who appeared as soloist with the Pittsburgh Symphony when he was eighteen years old, pursues a multifaceted career both in the United States and abroad as French horn soloist, chamber musician, conductor and educator. He is a member of the New York Woodwind Quintet, Orpheus, the Orchestra of St Luke's, the Yale Brass Trio and the Triton Horn Trio with pianist Mihae Lee and violinist Ani Kavafian. His extensive recordings span an unusually broad range from original instrument performance to standard solo and chamber music repertoire to

contemporary solo and chamber music works, and also include numerous recordings of contemporary music as conductor. He is currently a faculty member of the Yale School of Music, where he is also Coordinator of Winds and Brass, the Juilliard School, where he is also Coordinator for the New York Woodwind Quintet Wind Chamber Music Seminar and SUNY Stony Brook. He graduated from Haverford College with a degree in Philosophy.

## **Rachel Rudich**

Rachel Rudich has given premières of works by Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter, George Crumb, Mario Davidovsky, Robert Dick, David Felder, Karl Kohn, Eric Moe, Mel Powell, and Harvey Sollberger. She has appeared with the New Music Consort, The Group for Contemporary Music, Speculum Musicae, Parnassus, the Composers Conference Chamber Players, the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, the Fromm Players, and at the June in Buffalo Festival, the Composers Conference and Chamber Music Center at Wellesley College, the Lake Placid Institute, the Guggenheim Works and Process Series, the Ojai Festival, and the Fromm Contemporary Music Series at Harvard University. Her awards include the Kreauter Musical Foundation Award for Outstanding Achievement in Chamber Music, the Artists International Award, and appointment to the roster of Affiliate Artists. She currently performs as a solo recitalist throughout the United States.

## **David Starobin**

David Starobin has received worldwide acclaim as one of the leading guitar virtuosos of our time. His performances and recordings have pioneered both a new repertoire for the instrument and a re-evaluation of the guitar's nineteenth-century repertoire, especially as performed on period guitars. More than 300 compositions have been dedicated to Starobin by composers including Elliott Carter, George Crumb, Poul Ruders, Mario Davidovsky, Lukas Foss and Gunther Schuller, and his solo recordings have been widely acclaimed. Among his many honours are a Harvard University Fromm Grant, a Lincoln Center Avery Fisher Grant, and Peabody Conservatory's Distinguished Alumni Award. Between 1993 and 2004, Starobin was the chairman of the guitar department at the Manhattan School of Music, where he holds the school's Andrés Segovia Chair.

## **Marshall Taylor**

Marshall Taylor plays in recital, chamber music, ballet, orchestral, new music and modern dance settings, appearing in Europe, America and Japan, and recorded as both saxophonist and conductor for CRI, Experimental Intermedia Foundation, Hat Art, Innova, Koch International Classics, Mode, Opus One and Zoar. He studied at Wheaton College, Northwestern University and the Paris Conservatoire, the latter under a Fulbright grant, and his teachers and coaches include Marcel Mule, Frederick Hemke, Henry Schuman, Marcel Moyse and Ifor Jones. He plays with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Pennsylvania Ballet, Network for New Music, Orchestra 2001 and other Philadelphia groups, and has performed with the Baltimore Symphony, Delaware Symphony and in New York with League/ISCM Players, Parnassus and The Group for Contemporary Music. He has worked closely with leading contemporary composers, playing and recording their compositions, some of which were written for him. He teaches saxophone and coaches chamber music at Temple University's Esther Boyer College of Music in Philadelphia.

Playing  
Time:  
**75:17**

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Milton  
**BABBITT**  
(b. 1916)  
**Soli e Duettini**

**Around the Horn (1993)**

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|----------|---|--------------|
| <b>1</b> | Part I                                  | <b>4:42</b>  |
| <b>2</b> | Part II                                 | <b>4:51</b>  |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Whirled Series (1987)</b>            | <b>15:28</b> |
| <b>4</b> | <b>None But The Lonely Flute (1991)</b> | <b>6:12</b>  |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Homily (1987)</b>                    | <b>3:46</b>  |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Beaten Paths (1988)</b>              | <b>4:38</b>  |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Play It Again, Sam (1989)</b>        | <b>6:36</b>  |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Soli e Duettini (1989)</b>           | <b>10:19</b> |
| <b>9</b> | <b>Melismata (1982)</b>                 | <b>18:45</b> |

**The Group for Contemporary Music**

- 1-2** William Purvis, Horn  
**3** Marshall Taylor, Alto saxophone • Charles Abramovic, Piano  
**4** Rachel Rudich, Flute • **5** Peter Jarvis, Snare drum  
**6** Thomas Kolor, Marimba • **7** Lois Martin, Viola  
**8** Susan Palma-Nidel, Flute • David Starobin, Guitar  
**9** Curtis Macomber, Violin

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 Executive Producer: Howard Stokar  
 Cover photograph of Milton Babbitt © Kate Mount/Lebrecht  
 American flag, folk artist, 1880s.



AMERICAN CLASSICS

In 1982 Milton Babbitt received a lifetime Pulitzer Special Award in Composition for his “life’s work as a distinguished and seminal American composer”. The works on this disc show him at his most sparkling. Crystalline textures, sudden changes of direction and, above all, the celebration of phenomenal instrumental virtuosity, characterise this recording. Written over the space of eleven years, these chamber pieces demonstrate the same expressive power and richness that typify Babbitt’s larger-scale works.

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