

Allen Shawn

Piano Works



Allen Shawn, piano

- Tango • Reverie No. 2 • Valentine • Growl • Four Jazz Preludes •
- Letter To A Friend • Three Dance Portraits • Reverie No. 3 •
- Preludes No. 3, 4 and 5 •

ALLEN SHAWN

Allen Shawn (born 1948) grew up in New York City and started composing music at the age of ten. He studied the piano with Francis Dillon and Emilie Harris, received his B.A. from Harvard University, where he studied with Leon Kirchner and Earl Kim, spent two years in Paris studying composition with Nadia Boulanger, and received his M.A. in music from Columbia University, where he studied with Jack Beeson. Up until 1985 he continued living in New York and holding a variety of jobs including teaching at the Mannes College Preparatory Department and the Elizabeth Seeger School, working as a pianist in pit orchestras on Broadway and at the New York Shakespeare Festival, and writing incidental music for theater. Since 1985 he and his family have lived in Vermont, and he has been on the faculty of Bennington College, where he teaches composition.

The bulk of Shawn's output is chamber and piano music. He has also composed seven orchestral works, two operas to libretti by his brother, playwright Wallace Shawn, much incidental music for theater (including scores for the New York Shakespeare Festival, the La Jolla Playhouse, and Lincoln Center theater), and music for the film "My Dinner With Andre," as well as works for voice and chorus.

Other recorded works have included the Wind Quintet, the Sextet for Piano and Winds, the Suite for Cello Quartet, the Clarinet Trio, Winter Sketchbook for violin and piano, Eclogue for two pianos, the Piano Trio, Blues and Boogie for cello and piano, and Song of the Tango Bird.

in a way that is both original and idiomatic. In short, the *taste* that Shawn brings to his music-making is a subtle mixture of technical polish and aesthetic instinct, art and craft in perfect balance.

The works on this disc cover the past eighteen years, and run through a wide stylistic and expressive range. In some ways, the effect of listening is that of hearing a single, multi-movement, hour-plus piece that encompasses a vast world of experience, ranging from the light and occasional to the soulfully profound. Rather than presenting a work-by-work exegesis, I would like to point out some of the general features of Shawn's voice, aspects of his music which find concrete form in specific pieces. With such a global understanding of his style, the particulars of the separate works become easier to grasp in the actual listening.

Shawn's music shows four common underlying traits. The first is a natural feel for popular musical styles. Shawn says that he has never played jazz piano, and if that means he has not attempted to master the entire craft of jazz improvisation, we'll have to take him at his word. But this music shows a profound understanding of the language of jazz, of its lush harmonies, of the mercurial moment-to-moment morphing of ideas which defines its spontaneity. I can't emphasize this point enough: while many composers are exploring fields of non-classical music with varying degrees of success, the dangers of either sounding pandering or hypocritical are always great. Shawn avoids these pitfalls by the total honesty and lack of pretension in these works. The Four Jazz Preludes of 1980 show an uncanny ability to recreate through precise notation the delicious prolixity of classic jazz keyboard performance, whether in the

rewarded on multiple listenings.

Third, Shawn's music is written with exceptional understanding of the piano, its special capacities and colors. This results from the strength of the composer's performance technique. In this century, when so many composers now grow up either playing guitar in a rock band, or learning music purely from recordings, the great keyboard-virtuoso composer is a rarer thing. Bernstein, Foss, Bolcom come immediately to mind, and Shawn is in their company, as this recording will attest. Apart from the sheer power of the performances themselves, this virtuosity pays off in giving the composer a freedom of exploration and knowledge of resources that eludes many others. A few examples include: the wonderful silvery splintering of upper register cascades near the conclusion of the Reverie No. 2; the basing of large chunks of Growl on octave unison runs, and the even more daring use of a single, monophonic line for material at opening and close of the 1994 Prelude No. 3 (Shawn's telling sense of registration and voicing is evident in every piece, and his understanding of how tempo effects our perception of a musical gesture — what may seem simple on the page becomes richly complex at the proper speed — shows a profound study and understanding of the classic repertoire).

Finally, Shawn's music, despite all its familiarities, is truly personal and original. Of course, one can identify influences: I hear Prokofiev in the second Reverie and the third 1994 Prelude, Gershwin in the Jazz Preludes, Copland in Letter to a Friend, even Messiaen in the fourth 1994 Prelude. But those influences never sound like appropriations. Rather, they are part of a rich ancestral mix that Shawn has absorbed, judged, and synthesized into his own

Recorded February 3, 4 and 5, 1998 at Middlebury College Center for the Arts,
Middlebury, Vermont.

Producer: Su Lian Tan

Recording Engineer: Mark Christensen

Digital editing and CD mastering: Andor Toth/Affordable Arts

Booklet Notes: Robert Carl

Special Thanks to:

Cecille Shawn

Tom Corbin, Susan Stockton and Joanne Leggett of Middlebury College
Evan Bennett

Dedications

Tango for Philip and Anna Hamburger

Valentine for Jamaica

Growl for Amy Williams

Four Jazz Preludes for my father

Five Preludes for Elizabeth Wright

Three Dance Portraits for Joan Stein and Betty Rosenblum

Cover photo: © 1998 Cynthia Locklin

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