

Allen



Piano Music Volume II

Allen Shawn, piano John Van Buskirk, piano

- Piano Sonata No. 2 ■ Messages ■ Piano Sonata No. 3 ■
- Nostalgic Pieces ■ Three Elegies



“To believe that one can judge a work of art upon first hearing is the strangest and most dangerous of delusions,” Claude Debussy stated. This CD of recent piano music by Allen Shawn provides the opportunity for repeated consideration of his very personal, confessional approach to the piano, as well as the sequel to musical topics more implicit than explicit in his first piano solo CD (Albany Records, TROY317).

Shawn’s music reveals a unique and complete musical universe, the result of perfect fusion of the musical sensibility of the composer and the intellectual image of the work. As Henri Bergson said: “Throughout the work of arranging and rearranging choices, which proceeds along an intellectual course, the musician moves upward toward a point situated beyond the plan of the work to seek after acceptance or refusal, direction, inspiration: At that point is situated an indivisible emotion that the intelligence no doubt helped to explain in music, but which was itself more than music and more than intelligence.”

Three Elegies (the final works on the CD) form the “secret goal” of the other works on this recording, which can thus be heard as an itinerary of emotions conveying a sense of loss, leading to memorialization. *Elegy #1*,

with its recognizable, though hauntingly nonliteral, quotation from Schumann’s *Fantasiestücke* Op. 12 #3 “Warum?” (Why?), is dedicated to the memory of Shawn’s Bennington colleague, pianist Marianne “Willie” Finckel. It sets the tone of serious interior response to exterior events that characterizes even the most abstract works on this recording and asks the question so many of us ask when confronted by the death of a loved one or friend: “Why?”

The second and third *Elegies* lack specific dedications, and were composed just over one week apart. The second *Elegy* is astringent, angry. The third *Elegy* is lyrical, even to the point of ending on a high, thinly spaced A-Flat triad whose root tone is not the lowest sounding tone. Such inversions lend a quality of levitation to their tonal anchoring function—here the chord suggests that eternal rest has been granted.

Both piano sonatas included here (nos. 2 and 3), while abstract, contain the hallmark of the “Shawn style”: a strong, accessible emotional narrative, achieved by careful attention to pianistic densities and dynamic arches. Though one could point to specific compositional devices such as motivic economy and development or incipient twelve-tone techniques, to do so would ignore or suppress the magic of the expressive achievement. Perhaps some of this is the result of Shawn’s early tutelage under composer Leon Kirchner (the dedicatee of *Piano Sonata No. 3*), who stressed the value of the composer taking his place in the “stream” of what has come before in music history, rather than throwing everything overboard in a search for

novelty. “Dreamlike but precise,” an interpretive indication in the first movement of the *Piano Sonata No. 3*, would be a good summation of many of Shawn’s musical moods.

The cycle of aphoristic *Messages* is dedicated to their interpreter (the only performer besides Shawn heard on this CD), John Van Buskirk. In these pieces we hear the clearest manifestation of influence (Shostakovich, Prokofiev) with no loss of Shawn’s original voice. The six pieces are unified by their reference to the note A, whether heard as a single note, a tonal center, or implied by one of its neighbors a half-step away on either side, or even by its absence. Is the “message” the initial letter of the composer’s first name?

Cushioned about two-thirds of the way through the works on the CD are the two *Nostalgic Pieces*, No. 1 *Waltz*, and No. 2 *Boogie-Woogie*, which is a second reworking of an earlier piece. Amid the serious memorial tone of the abstract works, these two pieces breathe the vernacular air those familiar with Shawn’s earlier piano recording will recognize. The tender *Waltz*, almost a modern take on Satie’s *Je te veux*, evokes a dream ballroom, while the *Boogie-Woogie*, dedicated to composer Tobias Picker, reinterprets the conventions of stride piano with numerous rhythmic dislocations. Instead of being “about” the loss of someone in particular, this music laments the loss of a musical past that threatens to be obscured either by sterile academicism or public neglect.

Allen Shawn’s rare gift is his ability to confide his innermost thoughts and feelings through music that is at once well-crafted, non-cliché and emotionally accessible. He shows us that the possibilities inherent in the twelve tones of the Western chromatic scale are far from exhausted.

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Pianist/musicologist **Frank Daykin**, an authority on Ravel and French music, has lectured and written on topics ranging from Bach through Schoenberg, Messiaen and Shostakovich. He is the author of *The Singer’s Encyclopedia of French Art Song* and is on the guest faculty of the Chamber Music Conference and Composers’ Forum of the East.

Composer **Allen Shawn** (born 1948) grew up in New York City and started composing at the age of ten. As a teenager he studied piano with Frances Dillon and Emilie Harris, who also encouraged his composing. Later his composition teachers included Francis Judd Cooke, Leon Kirchner, Earl Kim, Jack Beeson and Nadia Boulanger. He lives in Vermont, and has been on the music faculty of Bennington College since 1985. Shawn has written many orchestral works, including a Symphony and five Concerti; chamber and piano music; song cycles and choral music; two operas to libretti by his brother, playwright Wallace Shawn; a one act children’s chamber opera to a libretto by Penny Orloff, music for ballet; incidental music for theater (including six scores for the New York Shakespeare

Festival, and music for the La Jolla Playhouse, and Lincoln Center Theater); and music for film (*My Dinner With André*). He has received both a Goddard Lieberson Award and an Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his work as a composer.

In addition to his previous all-piano music CD (Allen Shawn: Piano Music TROY317), other music by Shawn available on Albany Records includes a chamber music collection (Allen Shawn: Chamber Music TROY683), his *Piano Concerto* performed by Ursula Oppens, with the Albany Symphony conducted by David Alan Miller (TROY441), a string quartet and wind quintet (TROY777), and *Three Nightscapes* performed by the Palisades Virtuosi (TROY1022). A recording of his opera *The Music Teacher*, to a libretto by Wallace Shawn, was released by Bridge Records in 2008. Other works by Shawn can be heard on Northeastern Records, Bay Cities, and Opus One recordings.

Allen Shawn is also the author of two books: *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey*, and *Wish I Could Be There*.

John Van Buskirk, a versatile pianist referred to by the *New York Times* as “sensitive and assertive,” has played from Wellington to Budapest and Prince Edward Island to the Netherland Antilles as a recitalist, chamber music player and recital partner to singers and instrumentalists. He graduated from the Eastman School of Music and holds a Master’s Degree from The Juilliard School; he completed post-graduate study at the Liszt



Academy in Budapest. His teachers include Irene Rosenburg Grau, Eugene List, Jeaneane Dowis, Adele Marcus, Josef Raieff, Brooks Smith, Solymos Peter and Mihaly Andras. While living in New York City he played in The Music Today Ensemble, The New York Chamber Symphony and the Mostly Mozart Orchestra of Lincoln Center. In New England, he taught at Westfield State College, Smith College and Bennington College. Mr. Van Buskirk

has made myriad recordings as a member of the New York Chamber Symphony and the Harmonie Ensemble, among others. His solo recordings include Music of Robert Schumann—Newport Classics; The Art of the Fortepiano—Lyrichord; as well as Songs of Robert Schumann, with Jane Bryden, soprano—Gasparo. Mr. Van Buskirk has played with the Mendelssohn Quartet, members of the Guarneri Quartet, the Jacques Thibaud String Trio, the Ciompi Quartet, the Ying Quartet and at music festivals throughout New England. He recently relocated to Dunedin, New Zealand, where he performs with violinist Tessa Petersen as the violin/piano duo La Belle Alliance.

Piano Sonata No. 2, Piano Sonata No. 3, Nostalgic Pieces, and Three Elegies recorded June 9, 10, and 11, 2008, in the Deane Carriage Barn, Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont, USA.
Recording Engineer: Reinhard Humburg

Messages recorded June 21, 2008, at Marama Hall, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
Recording Engineer: Robert Penty

CD Editor and Mastering Engineer: Da-Hong Seetoo
Producer: Allen Shawn

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Boogie-Woogie from *Nostalgic Pieces* is an expansion of *Boogie-Woogie* published in *Allen Shawn: A Dance Album*, published by Oxford University Press.

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Dedications:

Messages—for John Van Buskirk
Piano Sonata No. 3—for Leon Kirchner
Boogie Woogie from
Nostalgic Pieces—for Tobias Picker
Elegy No. 1—in memory of
Willie (Marianne “Willie” Finckel)

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