

CONTEMPORARY GROUP

PROGRAM NOTES

November 13, 1974

AARON COPLAND: AS IT FELL UPON A DAY (1923)

Copland wrote this song while in Paris, studying with Nadia Boulanger. He chose a text by Richard Barnefield (1574-1627), one of the English Madrigalist poets. The text observes that in the Spring, all the birds sing joyfully, save only the nightingale, whose melancholy song reminds the poet of his own sorrows. The bird imagery of the text is reflected by the composer's choice of the unusual accompaniment of flute and clarinet.

LUCIANO BERIO: CINQUE VARIAZIONI (1952-3; rev. 1966)

The "Five Variations", dedicated to Luigi Dallapiccola and akin to his *Quaderno Musicale di Annalibera*, belong to a period during which Berio used the strongest and most disciplined techniques of composition. Yet, their spontaneity, instinctive lyricism and subtle sound effects break through the rigid frame.

Berio still uses the variation form, but his very use of a traditional form proves how the craftsman within him has complete command over his material. This music is meant above all for the ear which can easily follow its overall design. Besides the structural function assigned to certain rhythmic cells, the most obvious feature of this score is the prominence of chromaticism, used, not in sequences or scales but in broken fragments separated by wide intervals such as sevenths and ninths.

LUDMILA ULEHLA: GARGOYLES (1970)

The composer of this song-cycle teaches theory and composition at the Manhattan School of Music in New York City. She is also the author of a book on contemporary harmony.

The texts are by Gregory Corso, and consist of three meditations on the gargoyles of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. The songs are written very much as chamber-music, with equal participation by the three performers. The sections of the cycle, performed without break, are:

- I. "-- outstretched gargy necks" (Adagio)
- II. "-- haunched pensivity" (Adagio; Allegretto)
- III. "-- like spies" (Scherzando)

WILLIAM O. SMITH: STRAWS

Straws was written during the summer of 1973 for Arthur Grossman and Felix Skowronek and this evening receives its first performance. As in many of my compositions of the last several years, I have been interested here in creating a composition which has the musicians going beyond their normal roles as instrumental performers. It seemed to me that the Roethke lines, written while he was teaching at the University of Washington, were especially appropriate for the two University of Washington faculty members.

Although the musical demands made upon them as instrumentalists is considerable, the most difficult thing is for them to step out of their musical roles and communicate with the audience directly through speech.

The six movements of the work alternate between lyric, dreamlike sections and rhythmic, jazz-influenced sections.

William O. Smith

EDGARD VARÈSE: DÉSERTS (1950-61)

Déserts was originally conceived as a multi-media work utilizing a film, which was to have been made after the musical score was complete. This film, which was never made, was to have revealed several aspects of the desert, or wilderness: the deserts of earth (sand, snow); the deserts of the sea; the deserts of outer space (galaxies, nebulae); and particularly *the deserts in the mind of man*.

The instrumental sections were begun in 1950 and completed in 1952. There are also three taped inserts of "organized sound" (*musique concrète* to anyone else, but Varèse intensely disliked labels), which cost Varèse much trouble. The first version was prepared in 1954, but was not technically up to the composer's standards, and revised versions were made in 1960, 1960-61, and 1961. It was perhaps the advent of tape recording technology following World War II that stirred Varèse from his long creative silence, begun after 1936. The techniques of tape manipulation offered him for the first time the opportunity of fulfilling his long-cherished vision of working directly with the raw material of sound itself.

Of the character of the work, Fernand Ouellette has written: "This music has its roots in the archetypes of the great terrors...that man has retained in the very heart of himself since those immemorial times when he lived in fear of the thunderbolt, the dark, volcanoes.... Varèse left to the organized sounds recorded on tape the task of expressing all those devastating, ruthless forces, the last nightmare of one already on the scaffold, the last panic terror of a man being thrust back in the water, the final shriek that death breaks off. In the instrumental sections, man was to advance, gradually, toward the sun...in order that tomorrow he may be, may hope, may love again; in order that through him Life may shine."