



Robert
ERICKSON

**Recent
Impressions**

**Two Songs
High Flyer
Summer Music**

**Continuum
Cheryl Seltzer
and Joel Sachs,
Directors**

A CONTINUUM PORTRAIT • 9



Robert
ERICKSON
(1917-1997)

Orchestral, Chamber and Vocal Music

1 Recent Impressions (1987) 16:22

Commissioned for Continuum by Betty Freeman

Cheryl Seltzer, Piano solo • Joel Sachs, Conductor, Piano
Chamber Orchestra

Marina Piccinini, Flute • Marsha Heller, Oboe
David Krakauer, Clarinet • Celeste Marie Roy, Bassoon
David Bilger, Trumpet • Cynthia Jersey, French horn
Jeremy Berkman, Trombone • Erik Charlston, Percussion
Mia Wu, Violin • Rachel Evans, Viola
Maria Kitsopoulos, Cello • Nico Abondolo, Double bass

Two Songs (1986) 10:51

2 Days and Nights 4:24

3 Seasonal 6:27

Ellen Lang, Mezzo-soprano • David Krakauer, Clarinet
Mia Wu, Viola • Joel Sachs, Piano

4 High Flyer (1969) 6:23

Jayn Rosenfeld, Flute

5 Summer Music (1974) 15:41

Mia Wu, Violin, with tape

Robert Erickson (1917-1997)

Orchestral, Chamber and Vocal Music

Over the past century California has been known as a particularly fertile center of musical creativity, a stature which was significantly enhanced in the later 1930s with the arrival of emigré European giants such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky. The impact of the Europeans was enormous, but at the same time a fierce strain of musical independence persevered, reinforcing an atmosphere in which composers felt free to explore new musical frontiers, and not automatically accept the powerful influences of Europe and East Coast America. That California spirit is part of a tradition dating back to the work of Henry Cowell, the “ultramodernist” pianist-composer of the 1920s and 1930s who also created the New Music Society of California, which produced most of the state’s earliest new-music concerts. Cowell also campaigned continually for recognition of the great non-Western musical languages. A second generation of West Coast master innovators comprises John Cage, Lou Harrison, and Harry Partch. Then after World War II, the circle of unusual California composers broadened tremendously, leading to a host of unique fusions of Western and Asian cultures, mixed media, electronic music, virtuoso “performance music”, and other lively activities.

Robert Erickson, although not a native Californian, was a formidable guiding spirit as composer and teacher, nurturing the distinctiveness of West Coast music and acting as a mentor for a whole generation of California-trained composers. Michigan-born (1917) Erickson’s education included composition studies with Ernst Krenek, after which he taught in St. Paul, Minnesota. In the early 1950s he moved to the San Francisco area, teaching at San Francisco State University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the San Francisco Conservatory, and working as Music Director of the innovative KPFA-FM radio station in Berkeley. In 1967 he accepted a professorship at the recently-formed music department of the University of California at San Diego, and became a crucial figure in its ascent to leadership in composition and new music performance. Among his

students from his various positions are Pauline Oliveros, Bun-Ching Lam, Terry Riley, and Loren Rush. Many of his ideas are found in his seminal book *The Structure of Music* (1955) and *Sound Structure in Music*, an exploration of the syntax of musical language (1975). In the 1980s, thanks to increased performances and recordings by leading ensembles, his national reputation began to grow, but many of his works are still seldom heard. Unfortunately, for many years Erickson battled chronic health problems, the seriousness of which made his continuing activities as a composer almost miraculous. He died in 1997.

Erickson’s music includes works for chamber ensembles, soloists, orchestra, chorus, voices, and tape. It passed through distinct phases, beginning with atonality and the use of serial methods, skills he developed in the 1930s, before most Americans even knew of twelve-tone music. During his influential years in the San Francisco Bay area, his compositions and aesthetic concepts formed a significant musical parallel to the strong movement of Abstract Expressionism in the visual arts. In the late 1950s he focused his attention upon the use of timbre as a primary component of music, and the organization of time into non-metric and extremely fluid structures. His works of the early 1960s superficially relate to the so-called “post-Webern” style then prominent, but differ in the way that his tiny moments of sound accumulate to form long melodies. He also began to incorporate some elements of improvisation into compositions that were otherwise fully written out, and, in 1964, began writing for tape with and without live performers. (This CD does not contain any works using improvisation, however.) Microtonal writing and his creation of instruments producing new sounds have also been conspicuous.

An increasing fascination with speech and speech sounds played a major part in two 1969 compositions for solo wind players. One of these is probably his most-performed work - *General Speech*, a hilarious display piece for a trombonist based on the overblown rhetoric of General Douglas MacArthur. The other is *High Flyer*, for

flute. In both pieces, the verbal component is not meant to be comprehended, although occasional words may emerge from the music. Instead, because the text causes the performer to constantly reshape the mouth and lips while playing, a palette of novel tone colors and percussive effects is created. Erickson wrote that nonsense syllables would have served equally well, but would have been more difficult for the player to remember. The effect is a bit as if the instrument were talking in its native tongue, incomprehensible to us but meaningful to itself. The text of *High Flyer* is a collection of disconnected pronouncements by a drunken airplane passenger.

After the period of experimentation, Erickson turned to a calm and meditative aesthetic, in which the impact of Asian culture, which plays such a strong role in West Coast music, can be felt powerfully. Predominant techniques are a spare, triadic harmonic vocabulary presented through drones (sustained tones that support florid melodies, as in the sound of bagpipes), hocketing (a medieval technique of passing the tones of a melody back and forth among different voices or instruments), carefully-controlled improvisation, extended performance techniques, amplification, and the use of pre-recorded tape. Some of his music presents special challenges because it was written in collaboration with musicians, especially his U.C. San Diego colleagues, who had developed their own unusual instrumental techniques.

One of the most spacious works of those years is *Summer Music* (1974), an extraordinary unification of Erickson's intense love of nature and an expressive simplicity that arises only from complete inner peace. Erickson created the tape part from the sound of tiny brooks in Sequoia National Park, recorded and then acoustically filtered to enhance drone pitches within the bubbling waters. He wrote, "The violin sounds emerge gradually from the tape background sounds, and its melodies sometimes separate from, and sometimes merge with the pre-recorded sounds... There is a profusion of notes, contrasted, at times, with long continuing single sounds. The composition has much to do with rhythm: the dancing rhythms of myriad sound particles; the way they coalesce into larger musical units; the rhythmic

implications of 'small sounds'; the superimposed phrase organizations of the violin... It is *Summer Music* because it hardly sounds like a winter piece – maybe a spring piece, not likely an autumn piece. It may not sound the way summer sounds, but to me it sounds like the way summer feels."

The two most recent compositions on this recording were composed for Continuum. Here Erickson returned to the most basic performance principles, eschewing improvisation, extended techniques, or electronics. Yet the rarefied simplicity of *Two Songs* and *Recent Impressions* is a natural outgrowth of compositions like *Summer Music*. *Two Songs*, setting Erickson's own poetry, was composed for Continuum's 1986 European tour. Traditional "word painting" ties this score to the tradition of art song, although the musical vocabulary is unmistakably that of Erickson. *Recent Impressions* was composed for Continuum's 1987 appearances at the contemporary music concerts of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Radio), Cologne, and was commissioned by Betty Freeman, a noted patron of the arts and long-time advocate of Robert Erickson. It is unusual in having both a solo piano and a second piano played by the conductor. The intense poetry of this work stems from the composer's sensitivity to the most fundamental musical components of single pitches and basic harmonic intervals – especially pure octaves, fourths, and fifths. There are no melodies in the traditional sense, but abundant playful musings on these unadorned elements, in a brilliant dialogue of instrumental colors. A sunset work, written as the composer suffered the progression of a debilitating condition, the work incredibly radiates a joyous, life-affirming spirit. Although very accessible to the general music-lover, its slowly evolving development demands tremendous concentration from both performer and listener. In fact, the extreme delicacy and transparency of *Recent Impressions* makes it one of the most difficult compositions Continuum has ever performed – proving that performance challenges are not the exclusive province of overtly complex music.

Continuum

New York-based Continuum, directed by Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs, has been performing new music and twentieth-century classics since its founding in 1966. Through its signature format, the Retrospective Concert, Continuum's annual New York concert series explores the full range of individual major composers or themes, and is acclaimed for introducing immensely gifted but little-known composers from around the world. *The New York Times* wrote: "Simply put, there is no musical organization in New York that produces more intellectually enticing or more viscerally satisfying programs than Continuum. Year after year, its explorations prove to be not only unusual and unexpected but also important and enduring... This ensemble has a long history of acting on behalf of composers whom others discover years or decades later." Extensive touring has brought the ensemble throughout the United States and to Europe, Asia, and Latin America, including festivals throughout Europe and in Azerbaijan, Brazil, Georgia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Korea, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela. Continuum events have been broadcast on many American and European radio and television stations. In addition to Naxos, Continuum recordings have appeared on Advance, Bridge, Capstone, CRI, Cambria, Musical Heritage Society, New Albion, Nonesuch, and TNC. Continuum is winner of the Siemens international prize for distinguished service to music and four ASCAP/Chamber Music America Awards for Adventuresome Programming.

David Krakauer

The clarinetist David Krakauer has an international career, both as one of the leading exponents of klezmer music and as a classical artist. Guest appearances include the Berlin Radio Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfónica de Barcelona, Brooklyn Philharmonic, and major ensembles and festivals world-wide. A former member of the Klezmatics, Krakauer tours and records with his own Klezmer Madness! ensemble; his compositions for the group incorporate jazz, rock, experimental classical, and funk. For a number of years he toured and recorded with Continuum, and can be heard on Naxos' Continuum Portraits of Henry Cowell, Roberto Sierra, and Virgil Thomson.

Ellen Lang

The mezzo-soprano Ellen Lang sings with New York's Metropolitan Opera. Her varied experience includes appearances with orchestras in the United States and Europe, extensive tours with Continuum, concerts of Scandinavian and American music and master classes in Iceland, and performing all the major women's roles in American musicals *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*, *Carousel*, and others. She is also active with her vocal quartet, presenting theme-based concerts. She appears on the Naxos Continuum Portraits of Henry Cowell, Roberto Sierra, and Virgil Thomson.

Jayn Rosenfeld

Jayn Rosenfeld, flutist, is executive director of the New York New Music Ensemble. She plays with the New York ISCM Ensemble, the Richardson Players at Princeton University, the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, and is first flutist of the Princeton Symphony Orchestra. She performs and coaches at the Manchester (Vermont) Music Festival, and teaches in Juilliard's Music Advancement Program, at Princeton University, and the Greenwich House Music School. Her numerous recordings include concerti by Cimarosa, Rand Steiger, Leo Kraft, and David Gilbert; the flute chamber music of Albert Roussel; and many contemporary chamber works.

Joel Sachs

Co-director, pianist, and conductor, Joel Sachs is on the faculty of The Juilliard School, where he conducts the New Juilliard Ensemble, a chamber orchestra for new music, and directs the annual Focus! festival of new music. He has also been Artistic Director of the Museum of Modern Art's Summergarden festival. His international appearances include orchestral concerts in Germany, Iceland, Mexico, Switzerland, Ukraine, and El Salvador, and residencies in Brazil, Israel, Poland, and Russia. He received Columbia University's Alice M. Ditsen Award to a conductor for service to American music. He is writing a biography of Henry Cowell, to be published by Oxford University Press.

Cheryl Seltzer

Co-director, pianist, and co-founder of Continuum, Cheryl Seltzer has been active in contemporary music since studying at Mills College with composers Darius Milhaud, Leon Kirchner, and Lawrence Moss. She made her professional debut with the San Francisco Symphony, and participated in the Marlboro and Tanglewood Festivals. Also an educator, she is on the faculty of the Lucy Moses School of Music and Dance (New York), where for ten years she directed the Young People's Division and introduced new-music projects. She is an officer of the Stefan Wolpe Society, which oversees the restoration, publication, and promotion of the composer's works.

Mia Wu

Violinist and violist, Mia Wu has toured widely with Continuum and appears on its Naxos portraits of Ruth Crawford Seeger, Henry Cowell, Roberto Sierra, and Virgil Thomson. She is a performer of wide interests, from solo, chamber, and orchestral to solo cabaret, Broadway, and film. She has recorded with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Patti Lupone. Strongly committed to teaching, she has been on the faculties of Princeton University, Bard College, the Lawrenceville School and Westminster Conservatory, in addition to maintaining a large private studio.

Two Songs (1986)

Texts by the composer

② I. Days and Nights

Dawn. Morning star
Warm sun rising,
sliding into blue
to noon, highest noon.
Hot zenith of the sun,
vast sun descending,
rolling down the sky
slowly, slowly downward,
down to horizon.

Dusk. Darkening night,
deep heaven.
Stars. North star.
Unwobbling pivot,
friend of travelers, counselor
companion of the dark night
be my guide.
Moon. High rider, fair traveler,
where is your home?
Where do you rest
at the edge of deep night?

③ II. Seasonal

Summer sky, bright wonder, green blue.
Billowing white towers
brilliance.
Flowering summer, drifting summer
soft easy summer.

Shock! Leaves race the wind
whispering, crackling, gossiping.
The wind is autumn's master.
Stripped trees, skeletons, dry brittle.
Are they dead?

Winter. Time of darkness
Everything waiting.
Silence. Waiting motionless
Frozen time. White as a gull's wing.
White, blinding white.
Has time stopped?

Spring! Melting watery spring.
Running, bubbling, brilliant watery spring.
Green yellow patchy in sun
Bright wonder.
Cloud towers ride the blue sky
And the warm sun tells of spring and summer.

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Continuum®



Playing
Time:
49:18

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|------------|----------------------------------|----------|--------------|
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| 2-3 | Two Songs (1986) | 2 | 10:51 |
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Chamber Orchestra

Ellen Lang, Mezzo-soprano

David Krakauer, Clarinet

Mia Wu, Violin

Jayn Rosenfeld, Flute

Cheryl Seltzer, Piano solo

Joel Sachs, Piano

A full track and artist list can be found on page 2 of the booklet.
Tracks 1 and 4 recorded in March 1988 at the American Academy - Institute of Arts and Letters, New York City; tracks 2 and 3 recorded in June 1989 at Merkin Concert Hall, New York City; track 5 recorded in June 1988 at the Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut

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Photograph of Robert Erickson courtesy of the Music Department, University of California at San Diego
American flag, folk artist, 1880s.



AMERICAN CLASSICS

Robert Erickson was a formidable guiding spirit as composer and teacher, acting as a mentor for a whole generation of California-trained composers. He utilized many different styles and techniques in his music, from microtonality to electronics and improvisation. *High Flyer*, written in 1969, requires the solo flutist to speak through the mouthpiece of the instrument while playing. In the 1970s, Erickson turned to a meditative, Asian-inspired aesthetic. The late works *Two Songs* and *Recent Impressions*, composed for Continuum as the composer was battling a progressive illness, are remarkable for their intense sensitivity to pure elements of sound and their joyous, life-affirming spirit.

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