



Answering the “What Is American?” Question

That American composers should draw on their own country’s wealth of homegrown sources instead of emulating European music was a position most famously expressed by Antonin Dvořák back in the 1890s. Today, the very terms of the debate—Europe versus America—seem almost quaint. Instead of taking the obligatory trip to Leipzig or Paris, young 20th-century American composers—like Colin McPhee in the 1920s and Steve Reich in the 1970s—traveled as far afield as Indonesia and Africa to explore music that was not only non-European but non-Western. All the while, America’s jazz and experimental composers were expanding their influence on the nation’s collective ear. And in the past few decades, composers and performers from China, Latin America, Eastern Europe and South Asia have come to live in the U.S.—and have been melding their musics with our own. Music has become global, and American music is simply the music that American composers write.

All of this complex history is reflected in abundant performances of American chamber music now taking place as part of the National Endowment for the Arts’ AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC initiative. These presentations—as well as related masterclasses, lectures, and residencies—started during the 2008 summer festival season and will continue in 2009. (A second round of NEA-supported AMERICAN MASTERPIECES projects will be announced this spring.)

The current January–February calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on the opposite page. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.

On the following pages, we spotlight two of the many interesting programs and single works to be performed in the next two months as part of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC.

PRESENTER: Bargemusic, Brooklyn NY

PERFORMER: American String Quartet, ensemble-in-residence, Manhattan School of Music

PROGRAM: Louis Gruenberg, *Four Diversions for String Quartet* (op. 32, 1930); Tobias Picker, *String Quartet No.2*; Roger Sessions, *Canons (to the memory of Igor Stravinsky)*, 1972; George Whitefield Chadwick, *String Quartet No. 4 in E Minor*

AMCM PERFORMANCE: January 24, 2009

Though its name might suggest a specialization in works by United States composers, the American String Quartet has never restricted itself to any particular segment of the rich string quartet repertoire. That said, the foursome nonetheless has an abiding interest in music written on this side of the Atlantic and likes to search out and perform under-explored compositions. In 2007 the quartet was approached by Bargemusic, the remarkable floating venue moored off the north coast of Brooklyn, to collaborate in programming a uniquely American concert for the *American Masterpieces* initiative. The ASQ welcomed the opportunity and fashioned a broad program spanning music from the mid-nineteenth century through the jazz age and into the present.

Louis Gruenberg’s jazz-infused *Four Diversions for String Quartet* represents the kind of music “Gershwin should have written for string quartet,” says ASQ violist Daniel Avshalomov. Joel Smirnoff of the Juilliard Quartet recommended the Gruenberg piece to the ASQ about five years ago, and it “turned out,” says Avshalomov, to be “one of our happiest finds.” About ten minutes in duration, the four-movement work is one of three similar sets that Gruenberg produced.



Louis Gruenberg, in a 1920 painting by Heinrich Vogeler

“We chose to perform *Diversions*,” says Avshalomov, “because, of the three, the ending of its last movement is particularly strong. The work has a lot of his freedom and rhythmic curiosity, and there are licks in it that you’d imagine Charlie Parker playing.” (NOTE: A brand-new recording of *Diversions*, played by the Escher Quartet, can be heard on the newly released six-disc box, *Music@Menlo*.)

Gruenberg (1884–1964) was born in Brest-Litovsk (then in Poland, now Belarus) and was only two years old when he arrived in the U.S. with his family. He began his musical career as a pianist and spent most of his young adulthood in Europe, not returning to the U.S. until his mid-thirties, when he began to concentrate on composition. A follower of the avant-garde, he was probably best known for his 1933 opera, *The Emperor Jones* (based on the Eugene O’Neill play of the same name). Gruenberg also wrote three full-length string quartets and a range of symphonic works. A founder of the League of Composers, he advocated the incorporation of such indigenous American elements as jazz and spirituals into new music. Gruenberg eventually settled in California, reconnecting with Schoenberg, whom he had first met in Vienna before World War I. He composed copiously (including Oscar-winning film scores) and produced an American-themed violin concerto commissioned by Jascha Heifetz.

“Why aren’t more groups doing these pieces?” asks Frank J. Oteri, the American Music Center’s composer advocate. “The *Diversions* are totally delightful miniatures that have the wonderful brashness of Prokofiev, combined with a credible Jazz Age tinge that only someone based in America could have created. It’s no small wonder that despite Gruenberg’s maverick strain, his music still got Jascha Heifetz’s ear and a commission—one of the rare instances of Heifetz championing a contemporary composer.”

American Masterpieces Chamber Music

Performances in January and February

JANUARY 17 St. Cloud, MN (St. Cloud State University)

Chamber Music Society of Saint Cloud presents “The Only Moving Thing,” with eighth blackbird performing a work by Steve Reich and a co-composition by Bang on a Can’s David Lang, Michael Gordon & Julia Wolfe. Preceded by three days of eighth-blackbird residency activities at the local boys & girls club, an elementary school, a senior center, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud Public Library, and an open rehearsal for the city’s high school students. www.freewebs.com/stcloudchambermusicsociety

JANUARY 17 Kansas City, MO

Friends of Chamber Music Chanticleer and the Shanghai String Quartet perform Chen Yi’s *From the Path of Beauty* (2008), a song cycle for mixed choir and string quartet www.chambermusic.org

JANUARY 19–22 Lake Worth, Belle Glade, & Boca Raton, FL

Lynn University presents the Core Ensemble at three sites in “Ain’t I a Woman,” a program celebrating the life and times of Zora Neale Hurston, Sojourner Truth, Clementine Hunter, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Music includes Charles Mingus, “Roland Kirk’s Message,” “Canon,” and “Devil Woman”; Max Roach, “The Profit”; Thelonious Monk, “Crepuscule with Nellie,” “Sweet and Lovely”; Bessie Smith, “Careless Love”; Diane Monroe, “Blues for Miles,” “Groovin’ Roots,” “Spiritual,” “Fleetin’ Blues,” and “I Smell Trouble”; “Memphis Slim, “Blue and Disgusted”; John Coltrane, “Naima”; Duke Pearson, Christo Redentor; Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, “Perpetual Motion,” “Calvary Ostinato,” “Lamentation,” “Fugue”; Frederick Tillis, “Motherless Child” **PERFORMERS:** Tahirah Whittington, cello; Hugh Hinton, piano; Michael Parola, percussion; Taylore Mahogany Scott, singer/actor margot@core-ensemble.com

JANUARY 24 & 25 Brooklyn, NY

Bargemusic Louis Gruenberg (Four Diversions for String Quartet), Tobias Picker (String Quartet No.2), Roger Sessions (*Canons [to the memory of Igor Stravinsky]*); George Whitefield Chadwick (String Quartet No.4) performed by the American String Quartet www.bargemusic.org

JANUARY 31 Seattle, WA (Good Shepherd Center)

Music of Remembrance “The Seed of a Dream,” for cello, piano and baritone, MOR commission from Lori Laitman; “A Vanished World,” MOR commission for flute, viola and harp, by David Stock www.musicofremembrance.org

FEBRUARY Dallas, TX

Voices of Change In the third part of its four-part American Masterpieces project, Voices of Change will present its commission from Anne Strickland (working title, *Invisible Ink*) in two Dallas-area schools. www.voicesofchange.com

FEBRUARY Charleston, WV

University of Chicago Presents On four days in February, the project will present workshops by composer Darol Anger. The Montclair String Quartet will perform Anger’s *Street Stuff for String Quartet*; Aaron Jay Kernis’s *Musica Celestis*; Lev Zhurbin’s *Bagel on the Malecon*, and George Crumb’s *Black Angels*. www.wvsymphony.org

FEBRUARY 5 New York, NY

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presents “New Music in the Rose”—Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s Piano Trio; George Crumb’s Four Nocturnes (*Night Music II*), Pierre Jalbert’s Piano Trio, John Harbison’s Piano Quintet, and Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Slide Stride*, for Piano Quintet. **PERFORMERS:** Musicians of the Society—Gilbert Kalish, Gilles Vonsattel, pianos; Yoon Kwon, Susie Park, violins; Julie Albers, cello; Orion String Quartet (Daniel Phillips, Todd Phillips, violins; Steven Tenenbom, viola; Timothy Eddy, cello) www.chambermusicsociety.org

FEBRUARY 13 Brattleboro, VT

Western Wind Vocal Ensemble from *Vessels*, Philip Glass; *Batéy*, de León & M. Camilo; *Basket Rondo*, Monk; *Maternity Ward*, *Late Show*, Bolcom; *America the Beautiful*, S.A. Ward; “America,” Bernstein; Ellington, Gershwin and more www.westernwind.org

FEBRUARY 15 Brooklyn NY

Brooklyn Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra “Music Off the Shelves” (free public program at main branch of Brooklyn Public Library) *Five Folk Songs in Counterpoint*, by Florence Price, with readings from works by African American women writers. www.brooklynphilharmonic.org

FEBRUARY 19 Chicago, IL

The University of Chicago Presents “The Music of Stephen Hartke” (*The Horse with the Lavender Eye*, *Meanwhile...*, *Tituli*) performed by eighth blackbird and the Hilliard Ensemble. <http://chicagopresents.uchicago.edu>

FEBRUARY 21 Brooklyn NY (Long Island University’s Kumble Theater of the Performing Arts)

Brooklyn-Queens Conservatory of Music “An Evening with Cedar Walton & His Music”: *Bolivia*, *Firm Roots*, *Midnight Waltz*, et al., by Cedar Walton, performances by the Cedar Walton Trio and Cedar Walton 10-piece ensemble <http://bqcm.org/concerts.htm>

FEBRUARY 23 Sartell, MN

Cantus Daylong program at Sartell High School, including performances of vocal works by E. Whitacre, S. Paulus, Edie Hill, M. Bosch, D. Gawthrop, & songs arr. by Burleigh, Hatfield and M. Hogan www.cantus.org

FEBRUARY 24 New York, NY

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center World premieres of CMSLC commissions by William Bolcom and George Tsontakis www.chambermusicsociety.org/calendar



George Whitefield
Chadwick

Also on the Barge-music program is the fourth of five string quartets written by **George Whitefield Chadwick** (1854-1931). Known during his lifetime as the dean of American composers, Chadwick served as director of the New England Conservatory from 1897 to 1930. (“Like César Franck, Chadwick taught everybody whose music you love,” says Daniel Avshalomov.) With Amy Beach, Arthur Foote, Edward MacDowell, John Knowles Paine, and Horatio Parker, Chadwick was one of the so-called Boston Six and his influences on the next generation included Daniel Gregory Mason, Frederick Converse, and William Grant Still.

While Chadwick was a conservative composer who imitated European forms, he nonetheless drew on American themes and his music is usually described as being distinctively American. The 1896 String Quartet no. 4 contains allusions to American folk tunes, was written while Dvořák was in America, and was dedicated to the Boston Symphony’s Kneisel Quartet. The ASQ first performed the work at a bicentennial chamber music festival sponsored by the Juilliard School and Carnegie Hall. Says Avshalomov: “It is tuneful and well-crafted music to which we have returned with pleasure many times since 1976—and its idiom is undeniably American.”

Nineteen seventy-six was also the year that the American String Quartet first performed **Roger Sessions’s** *Canons (to the memory of Igor Stravinsky)*. One of several pieces commissioned soon after Stravinsky’s death, it is a tightly crafted two-minute work with, says ASQ cellist Wolfram Koessel, “a certain reverence and elegiac quality.” The piece’s spareness is reminiscent of Webern,

and its tonal language, while “flavored by postmodern harmonies,” evokes the sound world of the past.

Tobias Picker’s major efforts have been in opera; but “everybody needs to write a quartet once in a while, to cleanse the palate,” remarks Avshalomov. Picker’s String Quartet no. 2 was commissioned for the American String Quartet by the Manhattan School of Music as part of the school’s celebration of its 90th anniversary. Unlike the composer’s first quartet, which is dark and powerful, Quartet no. 2 has both manic and meditative movements. The five movements are played almost without pause. The American String Quartet worked with Tobias Picker while the quartet was being composed. (“He was flexible about some things and adamant about others,”—a combination Avshalomov thinks of as perfect.)

Tobias Picker



PRESENTER: Friends of Chamber Music (Kansas City, MO)

PERFORMERS: Chanticleer and the Shanghai String Quartet

PROGRAM: *From the Path of Beauty*, song cycle for mixed choir and string quartet (2008), by Chen Yi

AMCM PERFORMANCE: January 17, 2009

Chen Yi’s *From the Path of Beauty* is unusual not only for its string-quartet-and-vocal-ensemble scoring, but also for its commissioning genesis. Chen Yi had been independently approached by the Shanghai Quartet (which wanted to commission a piece from her for its 25th anniversary) and Chanticleer (which wanted to do the same thing for its 30th). It was the composer’s idea to combine the commission.



Chen Yi

The result is a seven-movement suite evoking various Chinese arts: bronzes, calligraphy, poems (by Li Qingzhao), clay figurines, opera, song, and the music of folk instruments. The first movement may be performed by either voices or string quartet, four movements are written for the combined ensemble, and two movements are for string quartet alone. “The relationship of the instrumental and vocal ensembles is not one of ‘soloist’ and ‘accompanist,’” reports Matthew Oltman, one of Chanticleer’s tenors and its music director. “This was a partnership for a group of sixteen; we are both leaderless ensembles, so it is true chamber music.”

Each movement has a unique character, but throughout no words are sung; the singers voice only nonsense syllables taken from various Chinese folksongs. “In the ‘Clay Figurines’ movement, exaggerated expressions and poses are evoked by a lot of disjunctive sevenths,” says Oltman. The “Opera” movement is written for the strings alone, and uses “a lot of gliss.” The joyous final movement, says Oltman, evokes “a village percussion-and-wind band, pleased with its homemade instruments and just clanging away.”

The combination of strings and voices works so well, says Oltman, because the two ensembles speak the same language. “We at Chanticleer often use the language of strings (“bow it this way”),” he explains, “and the Shanghai often talk about their playing in terms of singing.” In terms of such an unwieldy group getting along, “there wasn’t a difficult moment in the whole project,” says Oltman, “aside from learning the music itself.”

Since its March 2008 premiere in San Francisco, *From the Path of Beauty* has been performed by Chanticleer and the Shanghai Quartet at the Ravinia and Tanglewood festivals—and in May the combined ensemble will perform the work in China.