

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES
CHAMBER
MUSIC

The Otherworldly Music of Elvis's Astrologer

Dane Rudhyar's music aimed for psychic revelation.

by Frank J. Oteri

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The January and February calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 14. 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.

Over the course of his long life, Dane Rudhyar (1895–1985) worked for Auguste Rodin, acted in silent movies directed by Cecil B. DeMille, was friends with Charles Ives, Edgard Varèse and Henry Miller and even did astrological charts for Elvis Presley. Astrology, in fact, proved to be the realm in which Rudhyar remained the most active—publishing some 35 books and more than a thousand articles—and where he had his greatest influence. Rudhyar's incorporation of elements from Jungian psychology and introduction of the notion of free will into astrology were pillars of modern astrological practice, and his ideas were harbingers of the New Age movement. But the French-born polymath was also an accomplished poet, novelist, and a painter. His earliest and perhaps deepest love, however, was musical composition. During his sporadic career as a composer, which consisted of several bursts of intense creativity separated by long hiatuses, he produced an extremely personal body of music, whose seeming complexity and erudition is mitigated by its almost transcendent otherworldliness.

In September 2010, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Rudhyar's death, Bay Area-based composer, impresario, and radio producer Charles Amirkhanian put together an entire evening of Rudhyar's music, presented in San Francisco and Portola Valley, in hopes of rekindling interest in the extremely unusual music of this largely forgotten American maverick.

According to Amirkhanian, who first met Rudhyar in the early 1970s and remained friends with him for the rest of his life, Rudhyar's musical compositions "are not meant to be nice little art music; they're meant to be revelations of the soul. He had this theory that if you had low tones on the piano that were crushed by the pianist, people would have a psychic revelation. This sounds almost corny today, but it has a kind of honesty that you don't have much anymore. Everyone's trying to make something no one's thought of before, with a Mac. Rudhyar was just there with his piano and his sheet music trying to get out to audience members something that will hit them."

Here's how the composer himself stated it: "The purpose of my music is to communicate states of consciousness and experiences of inner processes which, at least in some instances, transcend personal reactions."

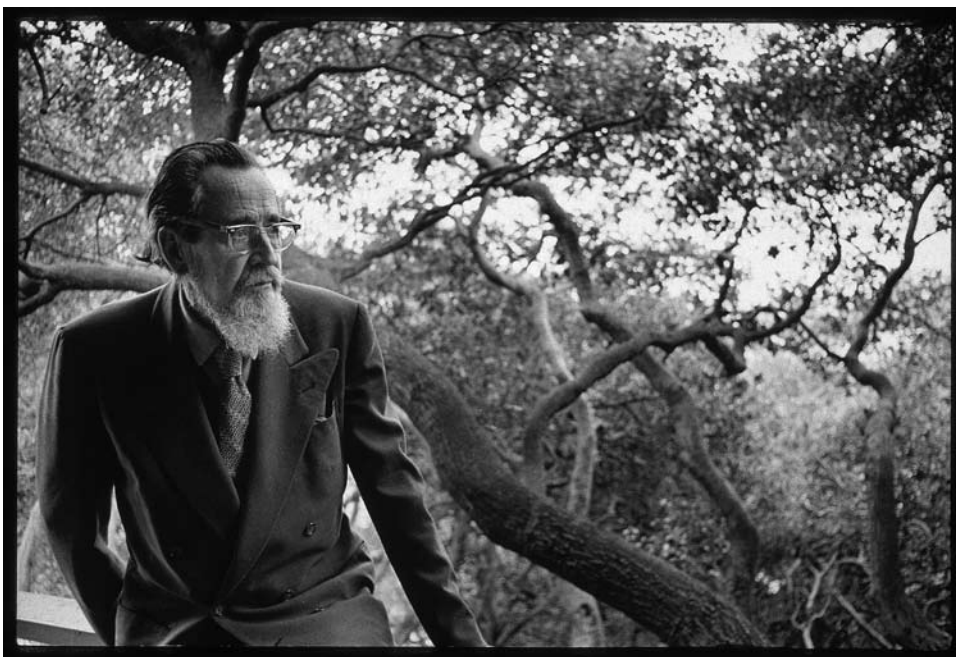
Rudhyar started playing the piano at the age of seven and was composing by the time he was twelve. While he was still in his teens, some of his solo piano pieces, as well as a

book he wrote about the music of Debussy, were published by Durand. In the audience for the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Rudhyar soon began creating his own highly chromatic works. Shortly thereafter, he emigrated to the United States, arriving in New York City to serve as the musical supervisor for a bizarre avant-garde event combining dance, poetry, color, and incense that took place at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1917. A composers' competition sponsored by the Los Angeles Philharmonic won him a \$1,000 prize when he was still in his 20s, although the orchestra subsequently refused to perform his piece. He continued to create uncompromising works, including a triple piano concerto, but by the mid-1930s, as almost all of his fellow ultramodernists embraced a more populist style, Rudhyar opted to stop composing rather than to write what he thought of as "easier" music.

Then, in the late 1940s, William Masselos and Maro Ajemian's championing of Rudhyar's remarkable solo piano pieces, which were published by Henry Cowell in his *New Music Edition*, prompted a second period of compositional activity. But Rudhyar's brand of intuitive modernism was a far cry from the systematic approaches to atonality that were gaining ground among contemporary music aficionados, so his comeback proved to be short-lived.

Then, in the 1970s, at which point he was in his ninth decade, Rudhyar found younger champions. Among them was Amirkhanian, who did several radio programs featuring Rudhyar on KPFA in Berkeley. As a result, Rudhyar once again returned

DANE RUDHYAR IN BERKELEY, CA, CIRCA 1970



to composing. Extremely active in this last phase, he penned numerous works, among which were a handful of idiosyncratic chamber music pieces for important ensembles—two string quartets that were recorded by the Kronos Quartet (then a fairly new ensemble and in residence at Mills College in nearby Oakland) and a mixed nonet for the Philadelphia-based ensemble *Relâche*.

Despite the huge gaps between his compositional periods, Rudhyar's output was remarkably consistent. "Anybody who starts composing again is not going to adopt a new style right away, and he didn't," explains Amirkhanian. "He was kind of cut off from music. People were moving toward more populist music; that became the dominant thing. But Rudhyar didn't want to do that, so he stopped and turned to other interests and pursuits. He was quite a Renaissance man."

Compared with his *oeuvre* for the orchestra and for solo piano (his own instrument, for which he composed prolifically), Rudhyar's corpus of chamber music is relatively small. In addition to the nonet and two string quartets from late in his life, there are early string quartet arrangements of his solo piano music, a quintet for piano and strings composed at the MacDowell Colony in the summer of 1950, plus a handful of songs for solo voice, some accompanied by piano, some with harp and others with violin and piano. Then, from the early 1920s, there's a violin sonata, as well as three *Poems* for violin and piano, the score for the first of which only recently resurfaced. Tracking down Rudhyar's works can be quite a challenge; many were never published and only exist in manuscript. But luckily most of the chamber scores are available through the American Composers Alliance (www.composers.com).

"Hearing David Abel and Julie Steinberg performing [Rudhyar's first] *Poem* for violin and piano, it struck me how radical that music was for the time," exclaims Amirkhanian. Like most of Rudhyar's music, it is characterized by extreme intensity. "A lot of his music is fortissimo. There's not a lot of relaxation."

ASCAP Award-winning composer and music journalist Frank J. Oteri is the Composer Advocate for the American Music Center and the founding editor of its web magazine, NewMusicBox (www.newmusicbox.org).

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AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES

CHAMBER
MUSIC

Performances in January & February

JANUARY 12 Boca Raton, FL

PRESENTER **Lynn University Conservatory of Music** PROGRAM
Masterclass; *Quintet for Brass Instruments*, Alvin Etlor
ARTISTS Marc Reese, trumpet; Kenneth Amis, tuba; Greg
Miller, French horn lynn.edu/academics/colleges/conservatory

JANUARY 19 Richmond, IN

PRESENTER/ARTISTS **Musical Arts Quintet** PROGRAM
Cage, *Music for Wind Instruments*; Fine, *Partita*;
Maslanka, *Quintet No. 4*; Rochberg, *To the Dark
Wood*; Still, *Miniatures*; Stucky, *Serenade* ARTISTS
Mihoko Watanabe, flute; Johanna Cox, oboe; Elizabeth
Crawford, clarinet; Gene Berger, horn; Keith Sweger,
bassoon bsu.edu/music/article/0,,21412-,00.html

JANUARY 21 & 23 New York, NY

PRESENTER **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**
PROGRAM *November 19, 1828*, for Piano Quartet, John
Harbison; new work for piano, four hands, Steven
Stucky; *Trout Variations*, Edgar Meyer ARTISTS Emanuel
Ax, Yoko Nozaki, pianos; Cho-Liang Lin, violin; Richard
O'Neill, viola; Efe Baltacigil, cello; Edgar Meyer, double
bass chambermusicsociety.org

JANUARY 22 Houston, TX

PRESENTER **Da Camera of Houston** ARTISTS vibraphonist
Stefon Harris and Blackout dacamera.com

JANUARY 25 Boca Raton, FL

PRESENTER **Lynn University Conservatory of Music** PROGRAM
Favorite American chamber works ARTISTS Elmar Oliveira,
Carol Cole, violins; David Cole, cello; Roberta Rust,
Lida Leonard, pianos; Marc Reese, trumpet and Jon
Manasse, clarinet lynn.edu/academics/colleges/conservatory

JANUARY 27 Boca Raton, FL

PRESENTER **Lynn University Conservatory of Music** PROGRAM
Masterclass with Gunther Schuller on his *Woodwind
Quintet*, *Misc for Brass Quintet* and the *Quartet for
Double Bass* lynn.edu/academics/colleges/conservatory

FEBRUARY 3 New York, NY

PRESENTER **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**
PROGRAM *Quartet No. 8*, Richard Wernick ARTISTS
Daedalus Quartet (Kyu-Young Kim, Min-Young Kim,
violins; Jessica Thompson, viola; Raman Ramakrishnan,
cello) chambermusicsociety.org

FEBRUARY 5 Houston, TX

PRESENTER **Da Camera of Houston** ARTISTS Lionel Loueke
Trio dacamera.com

FEBRUARY 9 Denton, TX

PRESENTER **University of North Texas**
PROGRAM *Survey of American Chamber Music, Part 2*
music.unt.edu

FEBRUARY 13 Providence, RI

PRESENTER **Community MusicWorks** PROGRAM *Different
Trains*, Steve Reich ARTISTS Providence String Quartet
(Jesse Holstein, Minna Choi, violins; Sebastian Ruth,
viola; and Sara Stalnaker, cello)
communitymusicworks.org

FEBRUARY 15 & 17

Wabash and Anderson, IN

PRESENTER/ARTISTS **Musical Arts Quintet** PROGRAM:
Cage, *Music for Wind Instruments*; Fine, *Partita*;
Maslanka, *Quintet No. 4*; Rochberg, *To the Dark
Wood*; Still, *Miniatures*; Stucky, *Serenade* ARTISTS
Mihoko Watanabe, flute; Johanna Cox, oboe; Elizabeth
Crawford, clarinet; Gene Berger, horn; Keith Sweger,
bassoon bsu.edu/music/article/0,,21412-,00.html

FEBRUARY 18 Brattleboro, VT

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Western Wind Vocal Ensemble**
PROGRAM *New England Anthems and Folk Hymns*;
Shaker Songs; *Southern Spirituals*; *19th-century Parlor
Songs*; new music pop and jazz arrangements
westernwind.org

FEBRUARY 19 New York, NY

PRESENTER **Charles Mingus Institute** PROGRAM *Works
by Charles Mingus* ARTISTS Mingus Orchestra, Gunther
Schuller, conductor mingusmingusmingus.com

FEBRUARY 24 Boca Raton, FL

PRESENTER **Lynn University Conservatory of Music** PROGRAM
Duo piano works of Bolcom, Corigliano, Barber,
Liebermann ARTISTS Lisa Leonard and Yang Shen
lynn.edu/academics/colleges/conservatory

FEBRUARY 25 Vienna, VA

PRESENTER **Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing
Arts** PROGRAM *Inspired by America*, Barber; Ives;
Higdon; Dan Coleman; Lees; *Benjamin Franklin, Native
American themes*, Griffes; Ruehr ARTISTS Cypress String
Quartet (Cecily Ward, Tom Stone, violins; Ethan Filner,
viola; Jennifer Kloetzel, cello) cypressquartet.com

FEBRUARY 28 San Francisco, CA

PRESENTER **San Francisco Contemporary Music
Players** PROGRAM *Vicissitudes No. 1*, Du Yun; *Horn Trio*,
Gyorgy Ligeti ARTISTS Members of the San Francisco
Contemporary Music Players sfcmp.org