

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES

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MacPhail on the Mysteries of Charles Mingus

by John McDonough

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's

*AMERICAN MASTERPIECES:
CHAMBER MUSIC initiative*

The November and December calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 12.

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.

Charles Mingus and the jazz scene of the late '50s were a restless pair. They took brief pride in their innovations only to become quickly bored with them and move on in search of some farther frontier. Jazz was evolving into a cultish and lonely art music then, in fearless flight from the commercial oversight that had made it so massively popular in the '30s and '40s.

Mingus began where the American frontier had ended, at the shores of the Pacific in California, where he was raised in the Watts section of Los Angeles and where he made his first recordings as bassist and composer in 1945. Already bebop, a fully accomplished fact with little to be added, was arriving from the East. In the first decade of his career, Mingus was an offspring of its impact. By the mid-50s he was an honored virtuoso of virtuoso music, but not a ground-breaker.

He was part of the young generation that first confronted some of the logical conclusions of jazz's manifest destiny as defined by tonality and chord progressions. He had two choices: march west into the sea, metaphorically speaking, into an abyss of abstraction; or head back east, metaphorically and literally, into the sources of the music's history. In choosing the second, Mingus became a one-man avant-garde who found his frontier in the music's own tradition—gospel, New Orleans, Ellington, and Charlie Parker—and proceeded to deconstruct, redefine and rebuild it in ways no one could have imagined and some first found uncomfortable. In 1959 *New York Times* critic John S. Wilson called his music “shock-implemented chaos.”

That was then. This year the NEA announced \$2 million in support for 72 chamber music programs, and among the grants three will be devoted entirely to the work of Mingus. This is a formidable gesture to a composer whose compositions have perhaps been more honored than performed—more on that in moment. It would seem that the most wide ranging of the NEA-sponsored events will be a four-concert series in Antonello Hall at the MacPhail Center for Music, Minneapolis, MN, between October and March, 2010-11. Organized by MacPhail's jazz coordinator, Adam Linz, himself a bass player, each concert will offer a different aspect of the vast and malleable world of Mingusology.

Born in 1975, Linz was only four when Mingus died at the age of 56. He came to the electric bass in the late '80s with a skull full of Jaco and Van Halen. “It was my uncle [bassist Tom Hubbard] who brought me to jazz,” he says, “and he took me to the JVC

Jazz Festivals and I raided his record collection and discovered Miles and Mingus.” Mingus became a primary focus of Linz, first as a musician than as a composer. This tracks the long arc of Mingus’s reputation as well, from Charlie Mingus, bassist, to Charles Mingus composer.

For a musician who thought of himself as a composer, Mingus left little behind in the way of cataloged musical texts or orchestrations—mostly scraps of lead sheets and a recorded legacy of performances. His notion of “composition” challenged the formality and weight of the word. “If you like Beethoven, Bach or Brahms, that’s ok,” he wrote in a 1972 album note. “They were all pencil composers. I always wanted to be a spontaneous composer.” In pursuit of spontaneity, Mingus promoted his musicians from the rank of interpreters to collaborators. (Among the surviving veterans of those prime Mingus sessions are Benny Golson, John Handy, Eddie Bert, Ted Curson, and Jack Walrath.) He instructed, explained, exhorted, demanded, bullied, often intimidated, then let go. His collective approach to composing connected the earliest New Orleans jazz bands with a nascent avant-garde speckled with a jarring cacophony, though little was put to paper in the process. It made for some tumultuous performances, but often left more questions than answers for those who came later looking for more than the tune—for the “composition.” Yet, says Linz, “the structures Mingus brought to the work were well defined when he brought them to his players. Anything that got added was icing on the cake from the musicians.”

Still, performing Mingus today is not like doing the settled scores of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington or Gil Evans. This may be why relatively few Mingus titles have become standards. You will find only a handful of recordings of most of the thirty or so pieces Linz is considering for the MacPhail concert series. There are only about 21 recordings of “Pithecanthropus Erectus,” nine of “Weird Nightmare,” and four of “Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon” from *Epitaph*. The most-performed Mingus piece is “Goodbye Porkpie Hat” from the 1959 *Mingus Ah Um* album on Columbia at 162 recordings. But by comparison with contemporaries, Miles Davis’s “Milestones” has logged an estimated 257 recordings; John Coltrane’s “Naima,” 377; Dizzy Gillespie’s “A Night in Tunisia,” 752; and Thelonious Monk’s “Round Midnight,” nearly 1,400, making it one of the 10 most performed titles in jazz history. One could argue that these are songs, and not comparable to the larger visions Mingus had in mind. But what he had in mind was often a product of the moment and not easily re-creatable.

The present coherence of Mingus’s body of work is largely a posthumous legacy, built by his widow and primary advocate, Sue Graham Mingus, and by musicians and musicologists such as Andrew Homzy, Gunther Schuller, Don Sickler, and the men of

the Mingus Big Band and the smaller Mingus Dynasty. They have transcribed from records and orchestrated according to their sense of what Mingus might have done. Homzy gathered and collated the scraps that comprise Mingus’s two- to two-and-a-half-hour magnum opus, *Epitaph*. Schuller conducted it in 1989, and Sickler gathered 55 other compositions into *Charles Mingus: More Than a Fake Book* in 1991. Together they have helped his music become a presence in high school and college jazz programs.

Using Sickler’s work as an anchor, Linz plans to explore Mingus in four configurations: a trio concert in October, a quintet in November, a nonet in February, and a septet in March. But the larger question is, How does one grab the elusive Mingus genie when Mingus is not there to lead the search? The answer, according to Linz, is to go for the spirit, not the letter, of the music. “Adagio Ma Non Troppo,” for example, was recorded with a huge

CHARLES MINGUS,
NEW YORK CITY, 1976



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orchestra in 1971. But Linz has it on his short list for the trio concert. Counter-intuitive? Perhaps. "But the key elements are always going to be there in his music," says Linz. Moreover, the orchestral version originated in 1963 as a piano solo ("Myself When I Am Real"), later transcribed by a fan and orchestrated. "We could present the recordings," Linz says. "But we don't want to lose that spirit of the band sound and the adventurousness that comes from playing the music. It's the ability to find spontaneity in music that's fifty years old [and to] take it to somewhere it hasn't been. That's the spirit of Mingus... hopefully going with the vibe of Mingus, sort of teaching each other the parts and taking the time to really learn it."

After suggesting that "going for a vibe" sounded like a colorful euphemism for guesswork, I asked if Mingus perhaps represented something of a redefinition of the idea of composing.

"Totally," Linz responded. "You have a band that rehearses without charts and adds to the performance. Mingus used his band as a composing tool....When you play Mingus, you listen to the records and take in the mood and the actions that the guys took when they played with Mingus. Nobody's going to be [bass clarinetist Eric] Dolphy. But that's why we study this stuff and play it seriously. We want to keep that spirit that it all may fall apart. We're fine with that. We're not afraid of risk."

John McDonough is a contributing editor to Down Beat Magazine, writes on music for the Wall Street Journal, and received a Deems Taylor ASCAP award for music journalism in 2006.

Performances in November & December

NOVEMBER 1 Gary, IN
Emerson School for the Visual &
Performing Arts

NOVEMBER 2 Valparaiso, IN
Valparaiso University

NOVEMBER 7 Muncie, IN
Ball State University

NOVEMBER 15 Evansville, IN
University of Evansville

PRESENTER **Ball State University/Musical Arts Quintet**
PROGRAM *Adolphe, Night Journey; Barber, Summer Music; Beach, Pastorale; Brandon, Five Frogs; Higdon, Autumn Music* ARTISTS Mihoko Watanabe, flute; Johanna Cox, oboe; Elizabeth Crawford, clarinet; Gene Berger, horn; Keith Sweger, bassoon. ecrawford@bsu.edu
www.bsu.edu/music

NOVEMBER 3 Denton, TX
PRESENTER **University of North Texas** PROGRAM Lecture/performance series: *A 300-year Survey of American Chamber Music*, part 1 of 3. Works by Raynor Taylor, Giovanni Gualdo, George Crumb, Irving Fine, Daniel Mason, and Chick Corea ARTISTS To be confirmed. Panelists Jake Heggie, Mark McKnight, et al. to be confirmed. <http://music.unt.edu>

NOVEMBER 8 San Francisco, CA
PRESENTER/PERFORMERS **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players** PROGRAM *Cage, Seven* www.sfcmp.org

NOVEMBER 9 New York, NY
PRESENTER/PERFORMERS **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** PROGRAM *Bright Sheng Northern Lights* for Cello and Piano ARTISTS Alisa Weilerstein, cello; Inon Barnaton, piano www.chambermusicsociety.org

NOVEMBER 8-12 New York, NY
PRESENTER **Lincoln Center Institute** PROGRAM *American Art Song*, performance repertory for teachers and students in the 2010/2011 program year. American songs by Stephen Foster, Francis Hopkinson, Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, Ellen Mandel, et al. TEACHING ARTISTS Beata Moon and Steven Herring Not open to the public; the program repertory will then tour to several public school and higher education institutions. www.lcilearn.lcinstitute.org

NOVEMBER 14 Boca Raton, FL
PRESENTER **Lynn University Conservatory of Music**
PROGRAM *A Celebration of American Masterworks Spotlight: American Chamber Music* top student projects of the fall semester. Works by George Crumb, John Cage, Aaron Copland, Amy Beach and Leon Kirchner
www.lynn.edu/academics/colleges/conservatory

NOVEMBER 17 & 19 New York, NY
PRESENTER/PERFORMERS **Western Wind Vocal Ensemble**
PROGRAM *The Happy Journey: American vocal music*, including New England anthems and folk hymns, Shaker songs. Southern spirituals, 19th-century parlor songs, new music and pop and jazz arrangements
www.westernwind.org

DECEMBER 2 New York, NY
PRESENTER/PERFORMERS **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** *Road Movies* for Violin and Piano by John Adams; *Mercury Soul* for Clarinet and Piano by Mason Bates; *Cello Sonata* by Pierre Jalbert; *Micro Concerto* for Solo Percussion, Flute, Clarinet, Violin, Cello, and Piano by John Mackey
www.chambermusicsociety.org

DECEMBER 4 Houston, TX
PRESENTER **Da Camera of Houston** PROGRAM *Tribute to Benny Goodman* ARTISTS Anat Cohen Quartet
Clarinetworks www.dacamera.com

DECEMBER 11 & 12 Providence, RI
PRESENTER **Community MusicWorks** PROGRAM: *A Century of American String Quartets; Barber, String Quartet* (with original final movement) ARTISTS Providence String Quartet (Jesse Holstein and Minna Choi, violins; Sebastian Ruth, viola; Sara Stalnak, cello)
www.communitymusicworks.org