



The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors
July/August 2003 Volume 26, Number 6

CHASALOW, *Left To His Own Devices*, NEW WORLD 80601-2

This is a genuine find. Milton Babbitt probably has more distinguished students than anyone since Nadia Boulanger and working in as many different styles as her many famous pupils. Eric Chasalow (b. 1955) more than most, it seems to me, has taken and extended the older composer's aesthetic. Ned Rorem once said you simply had to listen to Babbitt's music as if it were tonal, and that is good advice for Chasalow. That Chasalow is capable of great musical seriousness is immediately obvious in his second piano trio, *Yes, I Really Did*—the title a reference to his adopting structural devices from Beethoven into an entirely 20th-century context. His long association with jazz permeates the other entirely acoustic work here; the wildly silly, utterly wonderful, *In the Works* evokes a demented three-song set for an oddly constructed small combo complete with drum kit.

The rest of the pieces all have an electronic component *And it Flew Upside Down*, *Crossing Boundaries*, and *Left to His Own Devices* are all for tape alone. *Left to His Own Devices* is an eightieth-birthday tribute to Milton Babbitt, and features his voice discussing what it means to be an unreconstructed serialist in a world that considers it to be old hat. The electronic sound collage that surrounds the layering of Babbitt's voice is a conscious tribute to the sounds generated by the famous RCA synthesizer at the Columbia-Princeton Center for Electronic Music that is the source of so many of Babbitt's works: in the electronic medium. The other two tape works deal with collages of voices of what Chasalow calls his electronic music family and the music that has meant the most to him over his career. The sound cottages could be said to evoke some of the same world as the famous works by Stockhausen, such as *Telemusik*, except for the pervasive sense of humor and wit that permeates the American's music, a quality notably lacking in the German's work.

The two solo works with electronics. *In a Manner of Speaking* (bass clarinet) and *Out of Joint* (trumpet) set up jazzy, witty instrumental lines within the electronic sound field. *Suspicious Motives*, for chamber ensemble and tape, is more overtly serious. The integration of the electronic sounds and distorted voices within the instrumental context is nothing short of masterly. The masterpiece is, I think, *Dream Songs* for tape and orchestra. It must be an odd experience to hear live simply because the soloist is invisible, being recorded on tape, but on disc it works splendidly. The voice, tenor William Hite singing, poems by John Berryman, is recorded on tape, and the vocal line is both, manipulated at times and surrounded by an electronic field of voices and sounds that comments on the poetry. The orchestra provides what amounts to a more or less traditional accompaniment to their unconventional soloist. It is one of the most remarkable vocal works I have heard in quite a while, and would be worth the price of admission here even if the rest of the music were not so strong. Which it is.

The performances, most of which have the participation of the composer if not being created entirely by him in the studio, seem splendid, and the recordings balance the elements of live and electronic sound with great sensitivity. This is one of the most exciting discoveries of my tenure at *Fanfare* and one I recommend enthusiastically.

John Story