

CHARLES WUORINEN was born in New York City on June 9, 1938. His more than 200 compositions are marked by dazzling virtuosity, innovative formal design, and an outward exuberance which belies a controlled internal rigor. As critic Michael Steinberg has noted, Wuorinen's music fuses Stravinskian physicality and punch with Schoenbergian structural principles; it reconciles and extends the great traditions of these two early twentieth century masters.

Wuorinen began composing at age five, even before starting piano lessons (at age 6). By his twelfth year, he was sure of his career path as a composer, and honed his musical skills throughout his years of education. He attended the Trinity School in Manhattan; upon graduation, he enrolled in Columbia University where he completed a B. A. degree in 1961, and an M. A. in 1963. In his teens, Wuorinen attracted early attention, winning a New York Philharmonic Young Composers' Award in 1954. As an undergraduate, he was the recipient of three Joseph H. Bearns Prize Awards and four Broadcast Music Inc. Student Composer Awards, a feat no student composer in America before or after Wuorinen has matched.

Already a brilliant pianist and formidable conductor, Wuorinen co-founded the Group for Contemporary Music, while still a graduate student, in 1962. With his colleagues, Harvey Sollberger and Nicolas Roussakis, Wuorinen presided over an organization which quickly established a new standard for the performance of the most challenging music of its time.

Late Stravinsky and Schoenberg were paramount influences; Varèse, Wolpe, Carter, and Babbitt were crucial figures as well. Eastern influences—Indian ragas, the gamelan, the shakuhachi flute, and Chinese and Arabic music, also have been prominent sources of inspiration.

Wuorinen garnered widespread acclaim for his first large-scale professional works, among them a series of Chamber Concertos, one each for cello, violin, flute and oboe. In these pieces, Wuorinen's dramatic, yet highly fluid idiom becomes fully focused. The *Chamber Concerto for Cello and Ten Players* (1963) is the most traditionally conceived of the group, casting the soloist in a familiar virtuoso role. Throughout its five movements, the cellist projects sharply-etched ideas, negotiating daring leaps that span registral extremes. As a virtual mirror image, the *Chamber Concerto for Flute and Ten Players* (1964) casts the flute in a subdued and lyric role amid a shimmering array of exotic accompanying instruments, including guitar, celeste, harpsichord, harp, and a battery of percussion.

For form and novelty of timbre, this work is among the most striking of the composer's early efforts.

In the late 1960's, Wuorinen began to reconsider the premises of Babbitt's time-point system, an ingenious way of linking the intervals of a twelve-tone series with points along a musical time continuum. Wuorinen reasoned that if this linkage could influence musical time in a local way, it might be able to do so in a more global fashion: small intervals could imply short musical sections within a work's formal plan; large ones could imply longer musical stretches. Once a broad compositional framework had been established, it could be subdivided, then subdivided again, until one arrived at the "surface level" of composing. Thus, a background structure, not unlike those hypothesized for tonal music by Schenkerian theorists, could be created, and would be linked inextricably to the row from which the work's principal pitch ideas had been derived.

Wuorinen applied these ideas, with varying degrees of rigor, to most of his subsequent works. With broad interest in such concepts during the late 1960's and early 70's, the composer lectured on them extensively, and they became, in 1979, the basis of his important compositional treatise, *Simple Composition*.

Awards during these years included an American Academy of Arts and Letters Citation (1967), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1968), the Brandeis Creative Arts Award (1970), and finally, the Pulitzer Prize in Music (1970) for his thirty-two minute electronic work, *Time's Encomium*. Begun in 1968, this last work—his major electronic work to date—was realized using the RCA Mark II Synthesizer at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center.

The 1970's marked the beginning of an intense period of creativity for Wuorinen, and brought growing recognition in the form of commissions and performances from the nation's leading orchestras, as well as a second Guggenheim Fellowship (1972). In 1974, Wuorinen was uniquely honored with an invitation from Stravinsky's widow, Vera, to compose a work based on her husband's last sketches; this inspired the beautiful *Reliquary for Igor Stravinsky* (1975), premiered at the Ojai Festival in California in 1975.

Simultaneously, Wuorinen continued to add to his growing catalogue of chamber works, with commissions from such premier New York groups as Speculum Musicæ (an ensemble for which the composer provided much

early encouragement), Parnassus, the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, the Da Capo Chamber Players, and the New York New Music Ensemble, to name a few.

There is a heightened emotional power to the music from 1970–75, from the brash exuberance of the *Concerto for Amplified Violin and Orchestra* (1972), to the slow, stately accumulation of melodies in *Speculum Speculi* (1972); from the haunting lament for solo violin at the center of the *Reliquary*, to the light-hearted and whimsical theme jaunting to the fore at the culmination of *Arabia Felix* (1973). Added to Wuorinen's ideas on background structure is one more conceptual innovation, that of pitch centrality—the heightening in importance of one note above all others within a passage or throughout an entire work. Where early serialists had been reluctant to acknowledge the usefulness of creating pitch hierarchies in atonal contexts, Wuorinen saw an opportunity to “bring back an aspect of tonality that perhaps had been discarded unnecessarily.” Moreover, pitch centers could ably accentuate crucial background structure.

Color is yet another important element in Wuorinen's music throughout this period. Often it is projected through an expansion of the traditional role of percussion, such as in the *Violin Concerto*. In the *Chamber Concerto for Tuba* (1970), it is the searing juxtaposition of three choirs of distinctive sound—four flutes, four horns, and two oboes with two bassons, pitted against one another—which produces an uncommon and remarkable effect.

The crowning achievement of these years is Wuorinen's opera, *The W. of Babylon* (1975), based on a libretto by Renaud Charles Bruce. A full-length comic opera, invoking the spirit of Mozart, the music represents the composer at his most fluent and ebullient. The lean orchestration supports a libretto chronicling the romantic escapades of its eight (fictional) characters, all ensconced in a chateau in the south of France in the year 1685.

In the latter part of the 70's, one notices a simplification of the surface of Wuorinen's music. There is less overt counterpoint, but added playfulness and wit. In the *Second Piano Sonata* (1976) and *Fast Fantasy* (1977), large strings of melodic ideas are spun continually and mellifluously; they sometimes pause abruptly, and often turn back upon each other in unexpected ways. Simple motives often draw attention dramatically in the music of this period—the declamatory E \flat 's framing the brilliant, ricochet-

ing passagework of *The Winds* (1977), the F Major triads gradually shaping the misty, slowly evolving lines of the opening of *Fortune* (1979), and the dance-like motifs of *The Blue Bamboula* (1980). While writing these works, Wuorinen became fascinated by the subject of fractal geometry, and in particular, by the work of the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot, whose observations, in non-musical realms, seemed to confirm the composer's own intuitions about musical deep structure and form.

With the onset of the 1980's, Wuorinen's music began to take on a decidedly more direct rhythmic character, though gaining back some of its former contrapuntal complexity. There is a wide-ranging freedom and breadth in works such as the masterly *New York Notes* (1981), written for the New York New Music Ensemble, the *Third Piano Concerto* (1983), the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1988), commissioned by the Library of Congress, the *String Sextet* (1989), written for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and *A Winter's Tale* (1991), composed for soprano Phyllis Bryn-Julson, this last work based on the epic poem of Dylan Thomas.

The year 1985 was a pivotal one for Wuorinen, marking his appointment as composer-in-residence with the San Francisco Symphony, the bestowal of a MacArthur Foundation Award, and his induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Preceding the San Francisco residency, Wuorinen had received a permanent academic appointment as Professor of Music at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Thus, his tenure in San Francisco was accomplished by a four-year coast-to-coast commute. Nonetheless, with a supportive conductor in Herbert Blomstedt, and a top-notch, enthusiastic orchestra, Wuorinen wrote four major works for the San Francisco Symphony: *Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra*, *The Golden Dance*, *Machault Mon Chou*, and *Genesis*. Additionally, he organized and conducted a series of concerts entitled New and Unusual music presenting works by such disparate composers as Carter, Harrison, Perle, Reich, and Feldman.

The monumental oratorio, *Genesis* (1989), is the culminating work of Wuorinen's association with the San Francisco Symphony. In an exuberant retelling of the story of the Creation for chorus and orchestra, there are jubilant hymns of praise in the outer movements, meditative interior orchestral interludes, and a lush central movement in which the Biblical tale movingly unfolds. God's own words, sung exclusively by female

voices, are starkly projected above the narration. There is a sense of awe throughout. Stately imitative counterpoint recalls Masses of past eras, the Latin text sets a reverent tone, and the first movement intertwines melodies from all seven of the original Gregorian Chant Masses that refer to the Creation.

In 1987, Wuorinen was invited by the dancer and choreographer Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux to compose a work for the New York City Ballet. The result was the cello concerto, *FIVE*, written for the redoubtable Fred Sherry, a long-time friend and stalwart champion. The score attracted the attention of Peter Martins, the Ballet's director, who immediately commissioned a second ballet, *Delight of the Muses* (1991), and ultimately a series of three ballets to be performed over the course of a single evening. This latest request inspired Wuorinen's *Dante Trilogy*, consisting of *The Mission of Virgil* (1994), *The Great Procession* (1995), and *The River of Light*, (1996), based on episodes from the *Divine Comedy*.

A spate of recordings of Wuorinen's music has emerged in the 1980's and 90's. Eight CD's of orchestral and chamber works have been issued by Koch International. Seven others have been released on the Music and Arts label; these include a three volume retrospective of works from the 1960's and 70's. Other selections are available on the Deutsche Grammophon, Nonesuch, New World, Bridge, and CRI labels.

Wuorinen's large corpus of significant work, and his willingness to explore in a profound way every important genre of Western music, makes his achievement a powerful compendium of late twentieth century musical thought. A self-described "maximalist," there is nevertheless a leanness to his music, a sense that not a single detail is superfluous. An innovator professing to care more about "the evolutionary, rather than revolutionary" character of musical progress, his most important contribution may lie in the adapting of the highly sophisticated language of the twentieth century to the grand musical visions of those centuries preceding.

This article is based on Louis Karchin's entry on Charles Wuorinen, written for the forthcoming edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.