

CHARLES COMPO: SEVEN ABSTRACTIONS FOR FLUTE.

These flute quartets are unique. Jazz improvisations based on visual stimulations and grounded in serious, classical training mixed with ethnic, contemporary exposure from early youth, they are the culmination of all the elements they betray. As you listen to them, you are aware of the sounds, not of the instruments. You are conscious of the force behind the sounds, and not of the performer. They call up images of things never experienced; they remind the listeners of other, more primitive times lived in past existences not recalled or remembered, but felt in the bones and along the outer reaches of the skin. They are the product of a unique musical mind.

Take for example #2, an homage, perhaps, to Hector Villa-Lobos. It brings us into the jungles of the Amazon better than reading Hudson's classic novel of that region, "Green Mansions" which, when filmed, had Villa-Lobos music as underscore. There is something frightening in Compo's piece: a sensory fear of the unknown. Something, wild and unreachable, flies overhead. Something, closer to hand, near us, answers its call. And we are there, holding our own, breathing with the abstract rhythms, listening intently for the unexpected approach of other creatures we cannot name. Musically, we are taken on a journey and we don't know our destination.

Certainly without contemporary recording techniques and contemporary views of the instrument, these seven works would not now exist. But they do, and they must be listened to, for they are part of our growing musical heritage. If America is contributing anything to the world of music it must be, in part, abstract and formless but well-constructed for all that.

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The starting place: Ossining, New York; Sing-Sing Prison somewhere in the neighborhood; musicians in the house: father, Peter Compo, a Jazz Bass player, also a violinist; mother, Faith Compo, a singer: music in the house.

The starting place: piano, bass, violin, guitar, clarinet, flute, voice: all learned at home, all explored by the teen years; thrown out of the high school band for improvising, an early indication of the shape of things to come; switching to the Saxophone for rock performance: music in the soul. ac 0

The starting place: "Early Abstractions," then later "Fragments of a Faith Forgotten", short, silent films by artist Harry Smith; an accidental meeting of minds and bodies, visions in sound, music to the eyes, explorations in collaboration. Improvising to the films, leading to...-what? Performances with the films at the Anthology Film Archives, ~~on a program with works by Ron Rice and Andy Warhol~~, leading to...what? the promise of more performances and recordings...leading to what? Time lost in months and years, waiting, searching, feeling out the collaboration, losing touch, finding each other: music on tape, on disk.

Life shuffles art in much the way the classic black actor, Stepin-Fechit used to shuffle his way through roles now regarded as demeaning to the race. One step at a time, each one supporting the one after as well as the one before, not a single moment ever independent of its surroundings. A certain shuffle of beginnings leading to an unaccountable artistic triumph. When Charles Compo first played his flute abstractions alongside the films of Harry Smith and the timings were perfect, though

unplanned, a dream was conceived, an accident was born, a work of art was realized.

Since that day, Charles Compo has moved forward, further away from these seven improvisations. He has written songs for his wife, Susan Smith Compo (she is not related, except by accidental last name, to Harry Smith) as well as other works. He is currently writing octets for eight flutes. Similar in style to these quartets, they will be played, as these are, by one solo player.

Earlier I said that without contemporary recording techniques, these pieces could not have come into being. Played by one performer, in this case the composer, and improvised from sketchy charts, these quartets took approximately two hours apiece to compose. They were written, flute in hand, tape deck at the ready; the octets will be notated more fully prior to their mating, one line with another, in a performance tape. Perhaps environment has something to do with form and technique; the quartets were composed in Compo's loft and the octets are being written in his apartment.

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NOTES ON THE MUSIC

#1. It makes an opening statement. Themes which don't behave as themes should do in subsequent sections are heard briefly in the first and second flute parts. They are short, abrupt, cleanly separated from one another and prepare our ears for what's to come.

#2. As stated earlier, a Brazilian--triumph in Jazz. The most haunting of the selections, it brings an erotic beauty to the sound of flutes pretending to be forms of life which need no manipulation by mankind. Here, only occasionally, can we find any signs of the previous material, and then it seems to be an accidental intrusion, but being brief, we never dwell on it.

#3. The darker side of the flute is exhibited here with ^cpunctuations in silent voicings. The themes from #1 only make their entrances and exits in the semi-silences. What we hear is the rhythm of life-forces explained in punctuation marks: key-strokes, commas, fermatas.

#4. Shimmering, glassy lakes in the sun. Loons overhead, heat waving off the highway blacktop. You can see and feel these things here. But when you reach for the images, they leave you. Then a spark of theme, then tunnels separating the listener from the idea. An extraordinary use of the instrument for eery, cosy effects, and my personal favorite among the seven.

#5. An urban setting. The flutes become horns, boasting and blaring, forcing their way into the streets of our ^cconsciousness. Sounds we hear in one place become more real in another a moment later. A peek at the second theme from the first abstraction flashes through the brain, but it's so brief, we can't hold on to it.

#6. English horns contrast with pizzicato and wavering strings here, and still it's the flute. Echoed to within an inch of their lives, the sounds we've heard no longer make any sense to us. The record jacket says "flute quartets" but our ears assure us that other instruments have appeared, even if only for a moment, striking up the familiar, elusive first theme. As we grab for it, a string-bass is plucked in our other ear, sometimes with force and sometimes with a delicacy we cannot believe in. Where are the four flutes now?

#7. Modern trickery here. Recorded at two different speeds, the flutes are paired and split and what comes underneath is a dense sound, an oboe-like tonality which is clearly not an oboe, but is equally clearly not a flute. In a way, what we have here is a spiritual and technical wrap-up of all that has gone before. The themes are there, the sounds and mysteries all reappear. The tempo is brighter in many places. Animals compete with steam locomotives and trucks call us from the other side of that tunnel. No matter what we know of the music; no matter what we've read about the individual parts; no matter the visual stimuli provided by Smith's "Fragments..."; with the eyes closed, this final section appeals to our senses and makes us dream our own dreams of unreality.

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What Charles Compo has achieved in this work is a freeing-up of the imagination within the ear of the listener. He has imparted, through four contrasted flutes, all played and manipulated by the work's creator, a universe of sensations not bounded by the oceans and rivers of our own place, but only those of his own. He paints landscapes with his music and we know the places even though we've never seen them before.

It is his remarkable set of beginnings, starting places. So much has gone in and so much has come out. He has managed to explore a wide variety of musical doorways and his music echoes his own words, "There's a spirit of music that's the same...it just takes different forms, takes different directions."

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J. Peter Bergman