

Harold Meltzer
CD notes by Andrew Waggoner
Variations on a Summer Day and
Piano Quartet

The two works on this CD describe beautifully the arc of Harold Meltzer's growth as a composer over the last ten years. Blossoming out of the masterful conjunction of Donatoni and late Stravinsky that defines his *Brion* of 2007-08, the recent *Piano Quartet* and *Variations on a Summer Day* reveal a composer who has come fully into a mature, personal voice that, while carrying traces of its sources, renders them irrelevant. *Brion* still animates everything here, but now on the level of archetype, of a kind of psychic circuit board through which a newer, more expansive, more culturally grounded kind of material energy passes. This material has found its spiritual center in a seemingly unlikely but powerful and, as it happens, endlessly renewable place: the early, "American" music of Carter; the Copland of the *Piano Variations* (and his own piano quartet); the syncopated octaves and almost spectral opening-out of diatonic harmony evident in a whole generation of New York-born American pastoralists from the 30's and 40's. This is, it turns out, natural territory for Meltzer, and he moves comfortably through it, transforming it as he goes into a familiar, yet entirely new and unprecedented place. There's weirdness here, to be sure, but it's the integral weirdness of a creative personality that knows its mind and refuses to be domesticated. This is music that pleases, dazzles, moves, and confounds, almost in equal measure; it is made for the long haul, for a durable and mutable relationship. The only hint of the post-modern here is in lightness of touch, the apparent insouciance of the gestures and the seemingly fragmented ways in which they relate over time. The music has a sense of humor, but it's also dead serious: harmonically varied and rich, contrapuntally sophisticated, virtuosic in its scoring and almost exhaustingly imaginative in timbre and texture; it has no issues rubbing shoulders with masterpieces. It fairly assumes that it will have a place at the table.

Both of the works on this disc are made of stanzas, both with words and without. The first of the two, the *Piano Quartet*, was commissioned by the Boston Chamber Music Society Commissioning Club for a 2016 premiere. While not composed to a text, it shares with *Summer Day* a form made of discrete conversations that live in the shared context they create over time, which are nonetheless powerfully set off from each other, in both affect and effect—that is, in the distinctive sets of timbral/textural worlds each group of phrases describes. Meltzer has always loved this kind of aggregate form, a shape made of gradually accruing fragments, acquiring the possibility of meaning over the whole experience of a work. But where before the spans were recognizably based in models such as *Agon* or the *Symphonies of Winds* of Stravinsky, with short, pungent cells bumping up against and crosscutting with each other, these more recent works project whole, independent, miniature worlds that co-exist in ways both fresh and off-putting. Crosscutting is now largely absent, as the materials project a confidence in their own integral selves that allows them to stand alone in the onrushing of the discourse. There are motivic connections between sections, of course, a *real presence* at the heart of the material that allows us to sense, albeit pre-consciously, the relatedness of the whole, but Meltzer rarely makes an issue of them. One important exception is the rapid, picaresque chromatic figure that we hear first in the piano, just a few measures into the piano quartet. That gesture, or something like it, forms a kind of ritornello; it has a strong enough sense of recall to it that it allows us to locate

ourselves within a formal process that has no name and very little precedent. The best we might do is to describe the work as an *imaginary medley*, in that the elements being juxtaposed have an expressive character sufficient to render them recognizable in and of themselves, and yet at the same time, given that they are newly composed and not found objects, they are completely *unrecognizable*, at least until we've heard the piece several times. And even then, the experience remains locked within the piece itself, referring out only into the external circumstances in which we've heard it.

Two things keep us afloat and listening forward here: the singular beauty and boundlessly imaginative recombinations of texture; and the deeply affecting emotional tone of the slower music that comes with the work's second episode. There are layers of legacy here, as a deeply heard elegy sings itself slowly into being. The subject has many faces, has lived many overlapping, concentric lives, but at its heart is the aforementioned embrace of a kind of American pastoral voice that is heard on every level of the texture: in the lyrical but still rhythmically oscillating melody; in the planed triple suspension chords in the right hand of the piano; and in the resonant parallel fifths in the lowest register of the left hand. This character has been increasingly assertive in Meltzer's music at least since the James Wright cycle *Beautiful Ohio*, but it has never been more powerful than it is here. The nexus of influences is manifold, but after Copland and his own masterful but sometimes-maligned piano quartet, another significant presence is that of Steven Stucky, to whose memory the work is dedicated. Aside from a brief homage to Stucky's early orchestral collage *Dreamwaltzes*, there is no explicit nod to his music in Meltzer's quartet. The expressive gravity of the slow unfolding in the quartet's second section, however, has much the same affective character as many of Stucky's most profound *cortège* passages, and so effects a tribute worthy of its subject, an artist and friend we all lost much too soon. The specifics of the vocabulary and their resonance in the whole sweep of American music notwithstanding, the miracle here is that the *Piano Quartet* in no way *sounds* like Stucky, nor does it sound like Copland, or William Schuman, or anyone else for that matter, even though one can find echoes of all three if one listens for them. The materials are there but the manner, the syntax, the shapes, the *voice*, are all uniquely Meltzer. At this point in the short, peculiar history of classical music in our young country that alone stands as an extraordinary accomplishment. That the music is also beautiful and arresting makes it all the more so.

Variations on a Summer Day is a setting of the great, sybilline poem of the same name by Wallace Stevens. Cast in twenty stanzas of varying length, the poem itself is an extended rumination/cerebration on the major themes in Stevens' work, in particular the subsumption of the divine in the imagination, and the power of words to make the divine subject to sensory experience, all in the form of a lyrical meditation on the waters off the coast of Maine. Setting it provides the composer with both creative opportunities and booby-traps galore. What to do, for example, about the rapid shifts in tone from one stanza to the next, with attendant leaps in prosody and sudden shifts from pastoral nostalgia into a kind of secular theology? Does one attempt to follow this progress musically, with concurrent juxtapositions of texture and/or harmonic density, or does one establish a sort of neutral zone within which the text can sing freely, unencumbered by the weight of the musical discourse? Meltzer wisely chooses option #2, channeling the wild wind-and-wave energy of the poem to create a musical jostling of molecules that works as well in the first stanza (*Say of the gulls that they are flying/In light blue air over dark blue sea.*) as it does in the tenth (*To change nature, not merely to change ideas,/To escape*

from the body, so to feel/Those feelings that the body balks...). What ties both of these musical atmospheres to the words they surround are the textural specifics in each: in the first rapid patterns of 32nd notes create a heterophony of varied shades of musical “blue” (Meltzer does not go as far here as Messiaen in mapping his synesthesia for us, but the implication of varied intensities of the same color is clear enough), while in the second the mezzo-soprano and the instruments are bound to each other in rhythmic patterns that, while they swirl and repeat, generate a strong sense of gravity through sharp unison attacks and a shared melodic profile; the instruments form a strong and resistant “body” requiring no little time and effort to escape. The work also has passages of rhythmic calm, strategically and beautifully placed. Meltzer does not yield, for example, to the most obvious temptation posed by stanza fourteen, in which *Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle/Of mica, the dithering of grass*. The work’s sound-world has been nothing but dazzling from the start, and so the restraint here, the focus instead on the *integument of dead trees and the eye grown larger, more intense* is admirable; it gives us room to hear what is most moving in this, perhaps the most remarkable stanza in this utterly remarkable poem. *Variations on a Summer Day* was composed in increments, with the first set appearing in 2012 on commission from the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard University for the Maverick Concerts and Sequitur, with Mary Nessinger singing and Alexander Platt conducting. Successive groups of stanzas were premiered in the years following, at both the National Opera Center and Symphony Space in New York, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Illinois, and at Tanglewood, with the complete set first performed at National Sawdust, in Brooklyn, on March 26th, 2017.