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# Harold MELTZER

## *Variations on a Summer Day & Piano Quartet*



### Recording Credits

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman  
Engineering and editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis  
Recorded at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York.

*Piano Quartet* recorded March 25, 2017, and  
*Variations on a Summer Day* recorded March 28-30, 2017.

Piano technicians for Steinway pianos: Li-Li Dong and Joel Bernache

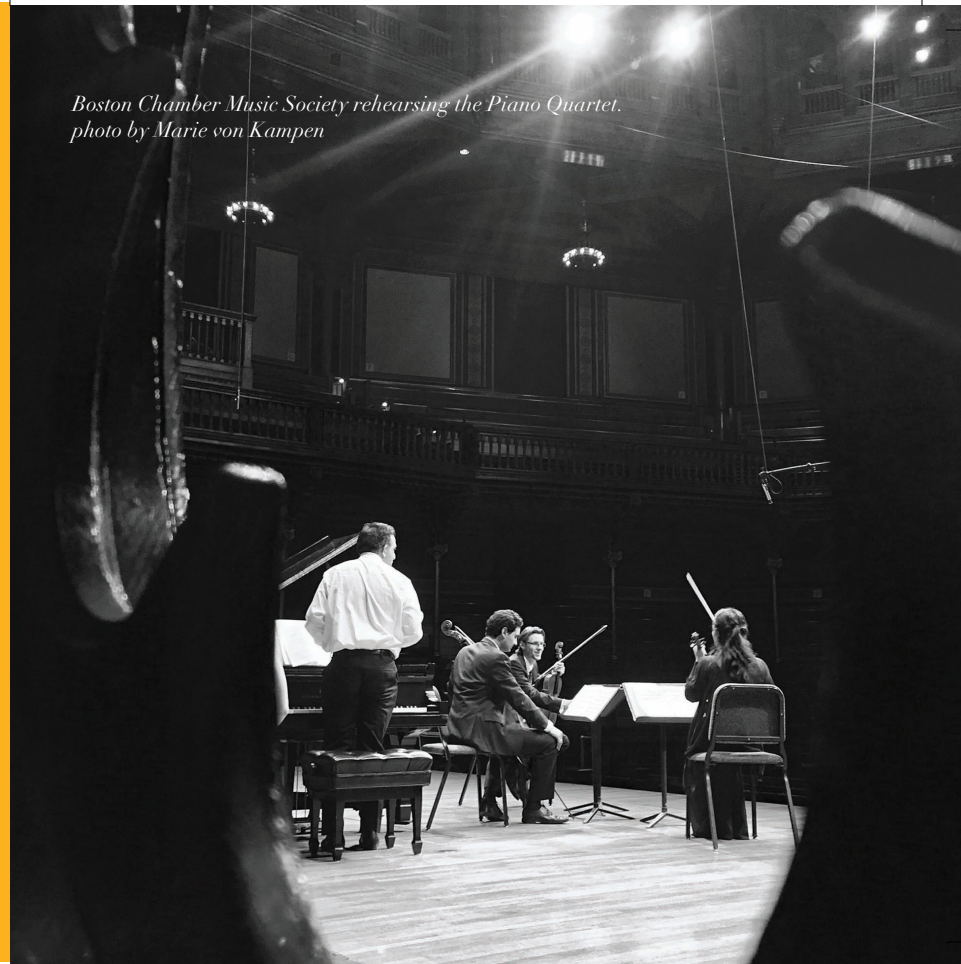
# Thank You

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*Cover and sparrow photos  
by Greg Hesselink*

*Boston Chamber Music Society rehearsing the Piano Quartet.  
photo by Marie von Kampen*



## Boston Chamber Music Society (BCMS).

Marcus A. Thompson, Artistic Director, is an ensemble of superb musicians who come together in different combinations to prepare and perform chamber music. Since its founding in 1982, BCMS has built a reputation for impassioned performances, ripened over time by the long personal and professional histories of its member musicians. BCMS invites guest artists, chosen for their particular affinity for the works they will play, to join its members, expanding the artistic possibilities to virtually all works in the chamber music repertoire. BCMS presents the longest-running chamber music series and is distinguished for its enduring performance standards in Boston's musically fertile region. In addition to its monthly concerts at Harvard University's Sanders Theatre, BCMS has performed in multiple neighborhood venues in the greater Boston area, toured nationally and internationally, and issued critically acclaimed recordings under its own label. Beyond the concert stage, its musicians offer open rehearsals and masterclasses to students from educational institutions at various levels, and coach participants of all ages in its annual chamber music workshop to deepen their enthusiasm for the genre.

**Sequitur**, directed by Sara Laimon and Harold Meltzer, in its fifteen years of New York concerts gave world or American premieres by more than fifty composers, among them Thomas Adès, Harrison Birtwistle, David Del Tredici, David Lang, Tania León, David Rakowski, Frederic Rzewski, Scott Wheeler, and Judith Weir. The group appeared at Lincoln Center to perform Elliott Carter's *Double Concerto for Piano, Harpsichord and Two Chamber Orchestras*, at Theatre 80 St. Marks to give the first staged performances of Morton Feldman's *Words and Music*, and at Joe's Pub and The Knitting Factory to present cabarets about power, sex, and money. *Sequitur* released eight previous discs, two for the Koeh International Classics label and six for Albany Records.

## Harold Meltzer

### *Variations on a Summer Day and Piano Quartet*

Notes by Andrew Waggoner

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

**Abigail Fischer**, known for her “serenely captivating” operatic presence “and disarming intimacy,” (*NY Times*), Abigail Fischer has made a vibrant career starring in contemporary operas such as Missy Mazzoli’s *Song from the Uproar*, Du Yun’s 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angel’s Bone*, and Toshio Hosakawa’s *The Raven*, as well as singing title roles in classic operas including *Carmen*, *Cenerentola*, and *The Rape of Lucretia*, with companies including Los Angeles Opera, Memphis Opera, Chautauqua Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Gotham Chamber Opera, and American Opera Projects. As a soloist with orchestra, Ms. Fischer has performed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Kansas City Symphony, Milwaukee Symphony, Columbus Symphony, Rhode Island Symphony and Virginia Symphony. As an early music performer, she has worked with the American Bach Soloists, Rebel Baroque, Early Music New York, Boston Baroque and Mercury Houston. Originally trained as a cellist, Ms. Fischer has worked often as a vocal chamber musician, from the Marlboro Music Festival and Chamber Music Northwest, to St. Luke’s Chamber Ensemble. She has premiered Nico Muhly’s *Mothersong*, Elliott Carter’s *Mad Regales* and Bernard Rands’ *Walcott Songs* at the Tanglewood Music Festival, and numerous John Zorn chamber works all over the world including at Lincoln Center. [abigailfischer.com](http://abigailfischer.com)

**Jayce Ogren** has been named recently the Artistic Director of Orchestra 2001 in Philadelphia. He was an Assistant Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra and Music Director of the Cleveland Youth Orchestra and has led the Cleveland Orchestra in regular season subscription concerts and at The Blossom Festival as well as the orchestras of Boston, Dallas, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New York, Pittsburgh, Toronto and Utah to name a few. As an opera conductor, Ogren led the world premiere of Jack Perla’s *Shalimar the Clown* with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis; the US premiere of Rufus Wainwright’s *Prima Donna*, Britten’s *Turn of the Screw*, Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, Bernstein’s *A Quiet Place*, and more. Ogren is a noted conductor of contemporary music, having led The Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris, projects with ICE (International Contemporary ensemble) at Lincoln Center, at the Wien Modern Festival; and concerts with the New York Philharmonic’s CONTACT! and BIENNIAL series. [colbertartists.com/jayce-ogren](http://colbertartists.com/jayce-ogren)



*Variations on A Summers Day recording session,  
photo by Cyrus Beroukhim*

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, sibilant 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

**Harold Meltzer** is inspired by a wide variety of stimuli, from architectural spaces to postmodern fairy tales and messages inscribed in fortune cookies. In *Fanfare Magazine*, Robert Carl commented that he "seems to write pieces of scrupulous craft and exceptional freshness, which makes each seem like an important contribution." The first recording devoted to his music, released in 2010 by Naxos on its American Classics label, was named one of the CDs of the year in *The New York Times*. Harold's work has been recognized with a Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and both an Academy Award and the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; in 2009 his sextet, *Brion*, commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for the Cygnus Ensemble, was a nominated Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

The two works on this disc continue two of his occupations: with vocal music and chamber music. Other recent vocal works include a pair of song cycles composed for the tenor Paul Appleby—*Beautiful Ohio*, settings of James Wright commissioned by ASCAP for the New York Festival of Song and premiered with pianist Steven Blier, and *Bride of the Island*, settings of Ted Hughes commissioned by the Minnesota Commissioning Club and premiered with pianist Natalia Katukova—as well as a new cycle commissioned by the Brooklyn Art Song Society for Abigail Fischer. Other recent chamber music includes *Kreisleriana*, a violin-piano duo commissioned by the Library of Congress for Miranda Cuckson and Blair McMillen; *Aqua*, a string quartet commissioned through the award of the Barlow Prize for the Avalon, Lydian, and Pacifica Quartets; *Casa Battló*, a violoncello-piano duo commissioned for Colin Carr and Thomas Sauer, and a clarinet quintet in progress for Chris Grymes. In other genres, Harold has recently composed *Vision Machine*, commissioned by NewMusicUSA for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and *Fortunes*, commissioned by the Shapiro Fund for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

He lives with his wife and children in the East Village of Manhattan, where he has been spending off hours blowing glass and coaching baseball. [haroldmeltzer.com](http://haroldmeltzer.com)



*Harold Meltzer, photo by Daniel Lin*

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.

## Wallace Stevens *Variations on a Summer Day*

I

Say of the gulls that they are flying  
In light blue air over dark blue sea.

II

A music more than a breath, but less  
Than the wind, sub-music like sub-speech,  
A repetition of unconscious things,  
Letters of rock and water, words  
Of the visible elements and of ours.

III

The rocks of the cliffs are the heads of dogs  
That turn into fishes and leap  
Into the sea.

IV

Star over Monhegan, Atlantic star,  
Lantern without a bearer, you drift,  
You, too, are drifting, in spite of your course;  
Unless in the darkness, brightly-crowned,  
You are the will, if there is a will,  
Or the portent of a will that was,  
One of the portents of the will that was.

V

The leaves of the sea are shaken and shaken.  
There was a tree that was a father,  
We sat beneath it and sang our songs.

VI

It is cold to be forever young,  
To come to tragic shores and flow,  
In sapphire, round the sun-bleached stones,  
Being, for old men, time of their time.

VII

One sparrow is worth a thousand gulls,  
When it sings. The gull sits on chimney-tops.  
He mocks the guinea, challenges  
The crow, inciting various modes.  
The sparrow requites one, without intent.

VIII

An exercise in viewing the world.  
On the motive! But one looks at the sea  
As one improvises, on the piano.

IX

This cloudy world, by aid of land and sea,  
Night and day, wind and quiet, produces  
More nights, more days, more clouds, more worlds.

X

To change nature, not merely to change ideas,  
To escape from the body, so to feel  
Those feelings that the body balks,  
The feelings of the natures round us here:  
As a boat feels when it cuts blue water.

XI

Now, the timothy at Pemaquid  
That rolled in heat is silver-tipped  
And cold. The moon follows the sun like a French  
Translation of a Russian poet.

XII

Everywhere the spruce trees bury soldiers:  
Hugh March, a sergeant, a redcoat, killed,  
With his men, beyond the barbican.  
Everywhere spruce trees bury spruce trees.

XIII

Cover the sea with the sand rose. Fill  
The sky with the radiantiana  
Of spray. Let all the salt be gone.

XIV

Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle  
Of mica, the dithering of grass,  
The Arachne integument of dead trees,  
Are the eye grown larger, more intense.

XV

The last island and its inhabitant,  
The two alike, distinguish blues,  
Until the difference between air  
And sea exists by grace alone,  
In objects, as white this, white that.

XVI

Round and round goes the bell of the water  
And round and round goes the water itself  
And that which is the pitch of its motion,  
The bell of its dome, the patron of sound.

XVII

Pass through the door and through the walls,  
Those bearing balsam, its field fragrance,  
Pine-figures bringing sleep to sleep.

XVIII

Low tide, flat water, sultry sun.  
One observes profoundest shadows rolling.  
Damariscotta da da doo.

XIX

One boy swims under a tub, one sits  
On top. Hurroo, the man-boat comes,  
In a man-makenesse, neater than Naples.

XX

You could almost see the brass  
on her gleaming,  
Not quite. The mist was to light what red  
Is to fire. And her mainmast tapered to nothing,  
Without teetering a millimeter's measure.  
The beads on her rails seemed to grasp at  
transparence.  
It was not yet the hour to be dauntlessly leaping.

*"Variations on a Summer Day"* from  
*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*  
by Wallace Stevens

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