

Fast Colours

Psappha



METIER

Anthony Powers

At a time when composing has never been more popular, but as a creative ideal has never seemed more neglected, Anthony Powers upholds the verities of composition by enacting them from bar to bar in his music. Perhaps nothing less should be expected from a pupil of the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), whose students included Aaron Copland, Lennox Berkeley, and Nicholas Maw. For all its diversity, the work of these composers displays neither surplus talent with little to say, nor high aspiration unsupported by sufficient technical capability. The same holds true for Powers. Critics have consistently praised his oeuvre for its independence of thought and fastidious craft, products of a style where respect for counterpoint, the fountainhead of the art, reflects the core values of the Boulanger aesthetic. This does not mean that he likes writing canons and fugues especially, or that his music sports a Gallic complexion. But it does imply that concerns of line meet those of interval and timbre in everything he writes, lending both craft and character to his distinctive *écriture*.

Powers is indeed a composer who knows his own language, and who works from piece to piece towards its extension and refinement. Such is the dominant impression of this collection of his chamber music, the contents of which are presented in reverse order so that listening to this disc is a voyage back through time to *Another Part of the Island*, one of his earliest published scores. Throughout the journey, chords, sonorities, proportions and gestures recur as aspects of a style that unfashionably embraces the challenge of absolute music; not that his art exists in a vacuum, remote from the world, for landscapes, seasons, and the emotional correlatives of poetry are also important affective influences. But its foundations are always architectonic. He is a composer with things to say, not only through, but also in music.

FAST COLOURS

The showpiece *Fast Colours* neatly connects these contrasting aspects of his creative persona. Composed in 1997 for the kind of mixed ensemble (flute, clarinet, violin, 'cello and piano) that frequently figures in Powers' chamber scores, this seven-minute divertimento is a kaleidoscope of rapidly shifting timbres brilliantly conceived in terms of the slender forces at his disposal. The composer had intended the work to be a necessary relaxation after completing his First Symphony, written between 1994 and 1996; but this proved impossible, no doubt as the punning title's full measure - colour not just visual, but also of timbre, harmony, performing style and range of contrast - possessed him. True, *joie de vivre* does break out from the very first bars, with their steely-bright texture that echoes the pellucid scoring of the classic French school. Yet of no less interest is the passage that follows: a sustained paragraph, marked 'hesitant but building', of ever-growing tension and dancing duets entwined in motivic hocketing counterpoint - a Powers fingerprint. Through slow and fast episodes the piece accelerates to a striking conclusion. A diversity of materials is strongly controlled throughout, and the steely-bright texture both tops and tails the work with its bracing energy.

DOUBLE SONATA

If *Fast Colours* was intended to be a relaxation from symphonic writing (though subsequently orchestrated by the composer), then the *Double Sonata* of 1993, in its concentration on sonata form, was by its nature something of a preparation. Scored for the line-up of *Fast Colours* minus flute, the piece is an intense one-movement exploration of the inherent dualism of the time-honoured sonata structure, rooted in the dialectical resolution of contrasted statements and teleological argument. In the case of the *Double Sonata* the goal is an uplifting coda defining an enriched tonality of D major. It is reached by a path traversing both spectral and pastoral vistas amongst others, grounded in a form that raises the sonata principle by the power of two. Thus there are four subjects rather than the pair more often found in the sonata pattern, and each is conceived of as a particular instrumental duet, set in tempi one twice the speed of the other so that ideas may be superimposed. A repeated exposition gives scope for variations of theme and colour, and cross-cutting of material

continues even after the introduction of a new subject, a bluesy 'cello song, in the development. The recapitulation builds energy again through a reordering of the subjects, and through the return of the introduction before the confident assertion of D major. Yet the ending is not final. The brief envoi the clarinet offers casts doubt upon preceding certainties. As the composer himself suggests, this is perhaps the final 'double'.

IN SUNLIGHT

Completed in the same year, the violin-and-piano duo *In Sunlight* shows Powers responding to the extra-musical inspiration of sunlight, both in its dazzling brightness and hazy languor, but transformed through the chemistry of the idea of 'doubles'. This idea proved influential, not only in the use of a double variation structure, but also through 'doubles' in its older sense of variations building tension through ever-more florid decorations of a tune.

The composer conceived both his themes as if from inside the violin's technique. The first is a vigorous statement in which double stopping and the alternation of stopped and open strings (*bariolage*) lay the ground for later toccata passages. The arpeggiated figures of the second exploit the violin's natural harmonic series. In subsequent variations the ear perceives them as a matrix, the source both of agile episodes and of the tranquil melody through which the music finally dissolves into silence.

QUINTET

A decade earlier, Powers had chosen the forces of flute, clarinet, violin, viola and 'cello for perhaps the most impressive of his earlier essays in abstract musical form. From the delicate web of line arising from its opening alto flute and clarinet duet, the *Quintet* of 1983 announces a sensibility of refinement and originality. This is expressed in terms of a formal logic reflecting the composer's desire to return to absolute music after working on an opera and a large-scale piece of music-theatre.

Each of the *Quintet's* three movements bears ample evidence of a mature artist confidently handling an idiom drawn from an innately selected blueprint of gesture and proportion. The ease with which a quotation from William Walton's *Viola Concerto* arises naturally within the first movement, without in the least

drawing attention to itself, is evidence of this. So too is the sense in which the composer's ear for sonority is the same ear that judges his finely-turned chromaticism, which shares little in common with the overtly rotational usage of so many of his contemporaries. The barcarolle comprising the first-movement's middle section is a fine example. Tremolando strings and alto flute envelope the viola's solo line in nebulous clouds of tone, where functions of timbre and choice of pitch are inseparably bonded. Here, as in the woodwind arabesques of the ensuing scherzo, Ligeti might appear to be a father figure, except that Powers, in contrast to the older composer, writes in musical prose ordered by the tread of metre. Besides, in the strict repetitions of the concluding passacaglia, the cyclical force of architectonic patterning reasserts itself. From the 'cello, the passacaglia theme migrates several times through bass clarinet and viola, until releasing a torrent of energy for the final sprint to the finishing line.

ANOTHER PART OF THE ISLAND

Composed in 1980, *Another Part of the Island* is among the earliest acknowledged works to appear in the Powers catalogue, and among the most richly evocative in its delicacy of scoring, deft harmonic vocabulary and resonant extra-musical associations. No doubt the composer's involvement in music theatre at the time had a part to play in determining its background. Even so, the choice of *The Tempest* as a source from which to build a substantial three-movement score lay as much in the play's examination of order arising from chaos, and unity from conflict. These, after all, are perennial concerns for any composer interested not just in making music, but with wanting also to know how it relates to everything we feel and do.

Though the island 'setting' is the imaginary location for the play, perhaps the Mediterranean, the work's profusion of instrumental solos bears no direct reference to Shakespeare's scenario. And if in this abstract instrumental commentary the flute recalls Ariel, the clarinet Caliban, the violin Miranda, and the 'cello Prospero, then the listener may enjoy the association by analogy, without prejudice to the musical argument of the three linked movements, conducted as a large-scale sonata form. A prelude first movement exposes

the basic material which is developed in the second as a musical 'storm'. Finally, after a climactic corporate cadenza, the third movement restores order, lulling the piece to its atmospheric ending *a niente* as, with the visitors departed and empty again of humankind, the island resumes its deep, mysterious sleep.

© 2000, Nicholas Williams

The leading contemporary music and music-theatre ensemble in the North of England, Psappha was formed in 1991 by its Artistic Director, Tim Williams, and has built up a repertoire of over 100 works and a reputation for outstanding technical and interpretational ability.

Psappha has promoted an annual concert series in its home city of Manchester since 1991, and in Liverpool since 1998, and has also been invited to perform at many leading UK music festivals, notably Cheltenham, Huddersfield, Bath, Buxton, Oxford, St. Magnus Festival, Orkney, the ISCM World Music Days in Manchester and the Henze Festival at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on London's South Bank. Psappha also gave the first ever public performance at Stormont Castle in Belfast. In addition to attracting consistently growing audiences and glowing press reviews for their work, Psappha's achievements include the release of four CDs, regular broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and an award-winning education programme and concert series.

Psappha is as sought after abroad as in the UK, touring regularly to Australia, America and Europe. As artists in residence at the Barossa Festival in Australia in October 2000 they provided a varied programme of concert work and music-theatre, including staged performances of Maxwell Davies' 'Miss Donithorne's Maggot' with soprano Jane Manning and 'Eight Songs for a Mad King' with baritone Kelvin Thomas. A highly successful tour of America in November 2000 featured Caltabiano's 'Marrying the Hangman' in New York, San Francisco and Sacramento. Following the acclaimed première in June 2000 of a new music-theatre work, 'Mr. Emmet Takes a Walk', specially written by Peter Maxwell Davies with direction and libretto by David Pountney, given in collaboration with Muziektheater Transparant, Psappha was invited to tour the work to France, Belgium and Holland in 2001.

Since its inception Psappha has commissioned works by leading composers including Peter Maxwell Davies, Anthony Gilbert, Simon Parkin, Gordon McPherson, Paul Max Edlin, Paul Newland and Camden Reeves. Psappha has also given the first UK performances and premières of works by composers such as Steven Mackey, Karen Tanaka, Wang Sue-Ya, Ronald Caltabiano, Rebecca Saunders, George Perle, David Froom, Theo Verbey, Cornelius de Bondt, Piers Hellawell, Marc Yeats and Scott Kennedy.

Education projects are an important part of Psappha's schedule – the ensemble has worked with a varied age range from secondary school to university post-graduate students. In 1995 Psappha was awarded the Swatch City Life Award for the Best Concert Series and Education Work of the year. July 2000 saw the successful conclusion of a project based on Maxwell Davies' 'Mr Emmet Takes a Walk', which culminated in a public performance at The Lowry in Salford by 120 children from all over the North West of England.

DIVINE ART RECORDINGS GROUP



Over 500 titles, with full track details, reviews, artist profiles and audio samples, can be browsed on our website. Available at any good dealer or direct from our online store in CD, 24-bit HD, FLAC and MP3 digital download formats.

UK: Divine Art Ltd.
email: uksales@divineartrecords.com

USA: Diversions LLC
email: sales@divineartrecords.com
www.divineartrecords.com

find us on facebook, youtube and twitter

WARNING: Copyright subsists in all recordings issued under this label. Any unauthorised broadcasting, public performance, copying or re-recording thereof in any manner whatsoever will constitute an infringement of such copyright. In the United Kingdom, licences for the use of recordings for public performance may be obtained from Phonographic Performance Ltd, 1, Upper James Street, London W1R 3HG.

Fast Colours

chamber music by
Anthony Powers

Psappha



1 Fast Colours (1997)

Claire O'Neill (flute), Dov Goldberg (clarinet), Richard Casey (piano), David Routledge (violin) and Jennifer Langridge ('cello)

7:30

2 Double Sonata (1993)

Dov Goldberg (clarinet), Richard Casey (piano), David Routledge (violin) and Jennifer Langridge ('cello)

15:13

3 In Sunlight (1993)

David Routledge (violin) and Richard Casey (piano)

8:10

4 Quintet (1983)

Claire O'Neill (flute), Dov Goldberg (clarinet), David Routledge (violin),
Scott Dickinson (viola) and Jennifer Langridge ('cello)

4 I Lento - Andante

6:46

5 II Presto e leggiero

5:15

6 III Lento molto - Moderato - Allegro (molto) - Prestissimo

5:02

7 Another part of the island (1980)

Nicholas Kok (conductor), Claire O'Neill (flute), Dov Goldberg (clarinet), Richard Casey (piano),
Tim Williams (percussion), David Routledge (violin) and Jennifer Langridge ('cello)

7 I Lentissimo - Lento

6:17

8 II Allegro energico - Presto

8:09

9 III Molto meno mosso 'Cadenza' - Molto lento e tranquillo. Calmo

9:58

Anthony Powers is published by Oxford University Press



This recording was made in Taxal Parish Church, Whaley Bridge, Cheshire on 4 & 5 September 2000.

Producer / Balance Engineer / Digital Editing / Booklet Design and Layout: David Lefeber

Cover image: Howard Hodgkin, *Patrick Caulfield in Italy* - supplied courtesy of

Howard Hodgkin and the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.

Metier Sound & Vision and Psappha would like to acknowledge the generous support of
the University of Cardiff, the Holst Foundation and Oxford University Press in making this recording possible.

© 2000, Original recording made by David Lefeber, Metier Sound & Vision

© 2000, David Lefeber, Metier Sound & Vision

METIER
MSV CD92038