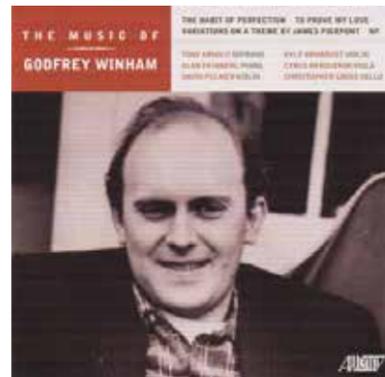


## THE MUSIC OF GODFREY WINHAM

[Albany TROY1408]

By Mark Zuckerman



Nearly 40 years have elapsed since Hodgkin's disease claimed the life of composer Godfrey Winham (1934-1975). Born to an aristocratic British family, Winham was educated at the Westminster School and the Royal Academy of Music before coming to the United States to study music at Princeton University, where he earned his first Ph.D. in music composition. He was not just a composer: a prolific writer of music criticism and essays on music theory and a pioneer in computer sound and speech synthesis, he was also expert in philosophy, mathematics, and computer science (as well as a master at poker, bridge, chess, and go).

His music has a distinctive voice and an inherent integrity, the more remarkable because his catalog is so small. With four pieces, a new Albany CD (*The Music of Godfrey Winham*) presents about a third of his output.

Two of the works, both from the late 1950s, feature voice: *The Habit of Perfection*, for soprano and string quartet with poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and *To Prove My Love*, a cycle of three Shakespeare sonnets for soprano and piano composed for Winham's wife, soprano Bethany Beardslee. Both of these modernist pieces demonstrate a fluency, lyricism, and rhetorical assurance reminiscent of Nikos Skalkottas (a composer Winham admired), though with a different personality. The text settings are elegantly simple and eloquent readings of the poetry.

*Variations on a Theme by James Pierpont*, the last piece Winham finished, is a homage to Romantic virtuoso piano pieces, principally those by Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms

(with occasional touches of Liszt and flavorings of Elgar). The title disguises a tongue-in-cheek premise – the theme in question is *Jingle Bells*, although its rendition is unlike any you'll hear in Christmas season Muzak or commercials – but also promises a seriousness of purpose worthy of a lengthy work (almost half an hour). It soon gets past the joke, which is never played for laughs or easy effect, into the realm of extensions to the style and idioms of the aforementioned composers, convincingly and with conviction.

The CD closes with *NP*, a set of two short computer pieces the jewel case insert dates from the early 1970s but was initially realized much earlier (the liner notes by Benjamin Boretz credits this as probably the first piece composed for computer performance, referencing liner notes from its CRI LP release). The title, an abbreviation for "nondeterministic polynomial time," is from computational complexity theory, and its use here is somewhat tongue-in-cheek in the manner of many titles by Milton Babbitt, a fellow Princetonian and friend. *NP's* instrumental vocabulary is similar to some of Babbitt's RCA Synthesizer pieces, but the musical basis is decidedly Winham's.

Winham's two sons, Baird and Chris, served as editing and recording engineers, respectively, on this CD.

## STEVEN R. GERBER: (MOSTLY) SOLO PIANO MUSIC

[Albany TROY1416]

By Matthew Harris



Steven R. Gerber, a New York City composer with many orchestral, chamber and vocal works to his credit, recently released this album of his piano music with the composer at the piano. It covers a forty-two year artistic

journey. And like the movie *Memento* with its scenes in reverse order, Gerber flipped the chronological order of his works so that as we go forwards in the CD we go backwards in time – all the way to 1971 – and discover his aesthetic evolution in reverse. There's beautiful and enticing music all along the path.

Gerber happens to be an excellent pianist who delivers steely attacks, delicate colors, rich, deep sonorities and endless legato as needed. There's an impetuosity to his playing that perfectly matches the composing. Also worth mentioning: the piano is nicely close up in the recording; we hear every nuance but without any buzzes, clicks or thumps.

The CD opens with *Three Little Duets*; that is, duets between the left and right hand. Though these inspired little bursts of polytonal/modal writing owe something to Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*, they create a genre all their own, something between an invention and bagatelle. Unfortunately, just as we get settled in, the three minute-long pieces are over. How nice it would have been to hear at least a dozen, especially since they represent Gerber's latest work and he's clearly at the top of his game.

Next, *Two Intermezzi* introduces us to Gerber's signature piano sound: a vast sonic canvas consisting of a melody in the two outer registers and chords in the middle. The first Intermezzo, *Improvisation*, shimmers with beautiful arpeggiated harmonies, the second, *Homage*, is joyfully eccentric.

The Piano Sonata is grand and engaging in its first movement, *Fantasy: Homage to Copland*. But the Scherzo never really takes off and the final *Variations on a Ground* slowly meanders instead of wrapping things up.

Gerber then hands things over to violinist Gregory Fulkerson and pianist Jennifer Rinehart to play his *Duo in Three Movements*. This is the hidden gem you're always hoping to find when attending a concert of contemporary works you don't know. It's sizzling bravura writing, wickedly inventive, at once playful and dramatic in an Elliott Carter sort of way. And these performers are equal to the task; Fulkerson shreds through this thing like a demon. A mesmerizing slow movement briefly interrupts the cascade of trills, tremolos, *scorrevole* and quick pizzicato runs.

Gerber returns to the piano for his *Voices* and *Variations for Piano*, two rigorous serial works from the seventies. *Voices* opens with

little spurts of intervals that gradually find their way to sustained melodies. *Variations*, the earliest piece on the CD, has a nice spunkiness but nevertheless comes off as a student effort.

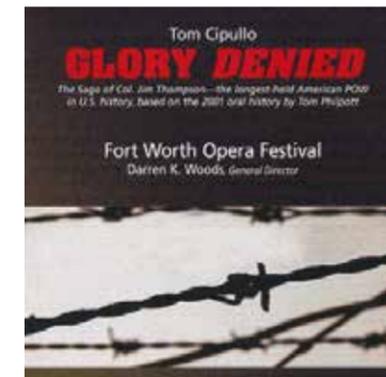
For an encore, we get *Cocktail Music (Song Without Words)*, a little bonbon to send us on our way after a delightful evening chez Gerber. (It would have been a fun "hidden track," back in the days when you could actually hide a track.)

This is an album that keeps growing on me. My wish is that Gerber is busy knocking out material for a Volume Two and won't make us wait another forty-two years for it!

## TOM CIPULLO: GLORY DENIED

[Albany TROY1433]

By Matthew Harris



If you like your contemporary operas "ripped from the headlines," you probably still take it as given that those gritty, real-life characters will sing in finely-crafted verse. For instance, in New York City Opera's swan song, *Anna Nicole*, rhymed couplets ruled the day.

Tom Cipullo's *Glory Denied* (2006), however, is a two-act chamber opera that lets real-life characters speak in their own words. This fresh approach has gained *Glory Denied* a good bit of success, including this excellent recording by the Fort Worth Opera Festival.

Cipullo fashioned his libretto from Tom Philbott's 2001 book, *Glory Denied: The Saga of Vietnam Veteran Jim Thompson, America's Longest-Held Prisoner of War*. In it, Philbott interviews Col. Thompson and the people who make up his past, especially ex-wife Alyce.

But since Thompson and Alyce naturally tell their story to Philbott in the past tense while opera demands real-time action, Cipullo's solution was to have a younger and older version of each character. Older Thompson and Older Alyce do most of the reminiscing while the Younger Thompson and Younger Alyce usually act out what is being reminisced about (at least at the beginning). Cipullo's subtle interweaving of each pair – often culminating in their singing together – adds a wonderful multidimensional and kaleidoscopic quality to the opera. For example, here's the opening:

**OLDER THOMPSON:** It didn't matter... whatever I did.

**YOUNGER THOMPSON:** It doesn't matter, whatever I do.

**OLDER THOMPSON:** I had some intelligence training, so I understood what they were doing.

**YOUNGER THOMPSON:** But even knowing, I can't change it.

**OLDER THOMPSON:** That's the Hell of it...

Documents included in Philbott's book also make up a good part of the libretto (Alyce's letters to Jim, the military's letters to Alyce, government statements, etc.) and effectively put us in the moment. Yet certain lines, whether from a document or interview, take on a ghostly presence by their repetition throughout the opera.

Act I begins with Col. Thompson a tortured prisoner of the Viet Cong while Alyce lovingly writes to him, unaware of the situation. (Unfortunately, we never see this couple in their pre-tragedy state, yet that's the baseline from which we're to measure everything that happens to them and why we should care.) The music here is declarative, motivic and fragmented, adroitly switching between Jim's martial, dissonant material and Alyce's lyricism. In Act II, when Jim returns after his nine-year ordeal only to find Alyce remarried, actual arias with extended melodies enter into the mix. Cipullo briefly breaks from his pre-existing libretto concept to give Jim a fast-paced aria about how the country has changed (think Billy Joel's *We Didn't Start the Fire*): "Teflon cookware, men with long hair, stay-pressed shirts, mini- skirts...".

Older Alyce's tender "After you hear me out," is beautifully sung by Caroline Worra, who is equally good as the tough broad Alyce later becomes. Sydney Mancasola's sweet soprano perfectly captures the Younger Alyce's all-American girl persona. Tenor David Blalock as Younger Thompson sings clearly