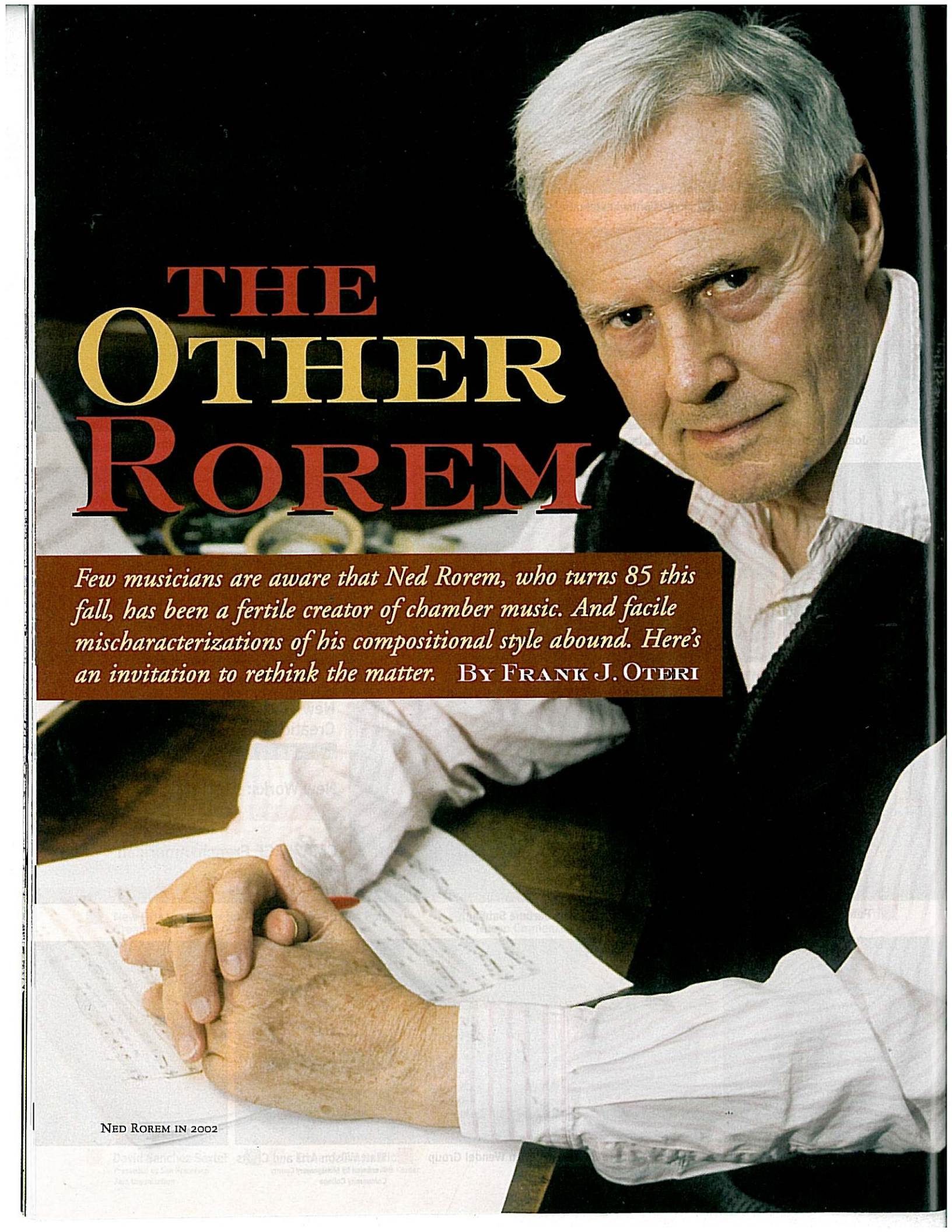


ChamberMusic

A PUBLICATION OF CHAMBER MUSIC AMERICA www.chamber-music.org

Rorem at **85**

PREVIEW: THE 2009 CMA NATIONAL CONFERENCE



THE OTHER ROREM

Few musicians are aware that Ned Rorem, who turns 85 this fall, has been a fertile creator of chamber music. And facile mischaracterizations of his compositional style abound. Here's an invitation to rethink the matter. BY FRANK J. OTERI

NED ROREM IN 2002

Renowned for his cornucopia of art songs (more than five hundred to date), Ned Rorem is also admired for his prose—his candid diaries from over a half-century ago remain popular. The composer has also been significantly acknowledged in the operatic and symphonic worlds. *Our Town*, Rorem's 2006 opera, has received praise wherever it has been staged—in more than a dozen cities to date—and his numerous orchestral works—one of which, *Air Music*, earned him a Pulitzer—have been turning up on concert programs these days, as well as on a series of recordings from Naxos.

Rorem's chamber music, however, remains among contemporary music's best-kept secrets. Although individual works have been championed over the years by the Beaux Arts Trio, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and the Guarneri, Emerson and Ying quartets, very little of the composer's impressive output for ensembles—five string quartets plus more than fifty works for other combinations—gets programmed, and his chamber music in general has few advocates among hardcore new-music specialists. While most of the ensemble works are readily available in print (mainly from Boosey & Hawkes, but also from Peters, Peerclassical, and ECS), only a small fraction have been recorded commercially; of those that have been, many are out of print.

Why the neglect? During the heyday of modernism, Rorem's music was dismissed, not entirely accurately, as old-fashioned; more recently, the composer has been claimed by the neo-Romantics as both forefather and elder statesman—another mischaracterization. While his music is usually tuneful as well as unapologetically tonal (key signatures abound), Rorem is no Romantic. Insisting that sound cannot communicate content,

he revels in music's unavoidably abstract nature. His compositions, usually terse, are often spiked with iconoclastic gestures: unresolved dissonances and even the occasional twelve-tone row, bizarre timbral combinations, aphoristic short movements, movements in which only some members of the ensemble perform, and completely exposed single parts (sometimes a piano part will consist of a series of single notes in only one hand for long stretches). Rorem admittedly has a penchant for waltzes, but he also explores strange meters and odd polyrhythms. In some works, insistent repetition, as well



as passages of near stasis, might even give the impression that Rorem is a proto-post-minimalist or at least a fellow traveler. In other instances, he might be mistaken for a partisan of polystylistic postmodernism. But ultimately, like a true American maverick, Ned Rorem has created a body of music that defies easy categorization. "Ned's music has always seemed to me to reflect the very best of American values in its honesty, its directness, its avoidance of any pretense or affectation," says Ying Quartet first violinist Timothy Ying. "He seems to manage

to always be true to himself, to trust his own instincts and intuition—and in this way he has achieved a voice that is both original and emotionally compelling."

ELUSIVE STRING QUARTETS AND MUSIC FOR TWO PIANISTS

Rorem's first string quartet is a student work dating from 1949; it has never been published and is, according to its composer, "stashed forever in a drawer with many another opus-minus-ones." However, String Quartet no. 2 [Peerclassical], a four-movement work from the following year, is formidable. A neoclassical (yet slightly impressionistic) composition, it's very much in the vein of mid 20th-century composers like David Diamond, Vincent Persichetti, and Quincy Porter, whose works in this idiom are only recently being re-evaluated. The most structurally and thematically conventional of Rorem's quartets, no. 2 has four hefty movements and bristles with rigorous motivic development. It was created during the composer's nearly two-year sojourn in Morocco, an extremely fruitful compositional period that also yielded his Sonata for Violin and Piano and the Dance Suite for Two Pianos. Never commercially recorded, the work was performed this fall by the NYC-based Voxare Quartet as part of a Bargemusic Rorem retrospective marking the composer's 85th birthday.

More than four decades elapsed between String Quartet no. 2 and String Quartet no. 3. A five-movement work, the latter is among the most cerebral of the composer's output. The opening Chaconne features a twelve-tone row played over and over again by the second violin in an extremely high register, but no other part is dodecaphonic. The other instruments enter with radically differing musical gestures—much like a quartet by Elliott Carter, except that, in this case, the

“In their heyday, the modernists dismissed Rorem as old-fashioned. Later, the neo-Romantics claimed him as a forefather or elder statesman.

But Rorem is no Romantic. His compositions, usually terse, are often spiked with iconoclastic gestures.”

gestures are repeating motives. And despite some tender passages (such as the gorgeous Sarabande following an intense scherzo or “Epitaph,” the hymnlike fourth movement), the music is predominantly turbulent. Premiered by the Guarneri String Quartet in 1991, and later recorded by the Mendelssohn String Quartet for Newport Classics, the third string quartet is a work whose overall effect is light-years away from the sound world most people associate with Ned Rorem.

String Quartet no. 4 synthesizes the approaches of the two preceding quartets, but from a structural standpoint it is something else entirely. Composed just three years after its predecessor, it is a collection of ten miniatures. In this work, Rorem must have wrestled with his assertion that music is incapable of representing anything. Individual movements, originally named for paintings by Picasso, were later given descriptive titles. There’s the spiky, predominantly 7/8 opening “Ugly and Relentless” (originally “Minotaur”), “Absolutely Strict” (originally “Still Life”), in which one of the violins maintains an off-the-beat minimalist riff throughout, or the concluding “Infinitely Tender” (“Death of Harlequin”), in which arioso-like passages contrast with powerful, harmonically dense, yet tonal chorales. The Emerson String Quartet, which premiered and recorded no. 4, continues to use Rorem’s original titles whenever the work is programmed, as has the Fry String Quartet on its 2004 recording.

Rorem’s most recent string quartet also has an evocative verbal title. *United States:*

Seven Viewpoints for String Quartet is made up of short movements; with the exception of the finale, all are less than three minutes long. Spirited dances are juxtaposed with more pensive music, though the contrasts are not as extreme as in previous quartets. Written in 2001, *United States* was premiered at New York City’s Symphony Space in 2003 by the Ying Quartet, which has also recorded it on its 2007 CD, *United States: LifeMusic 2*.

Like the string quartets, Rorem’s corpus for two pianos can be divided between very early works and pieces from the last 20 years. The five-movement *Dance Suite* (1949), written mostly in Fes, conjures up the charming sound world of a contemporary Double Piano Concerto by Rorem’s friend and mentor Paul Bowles. The central movement, a daredevil tarantella, in which the two pianists must have a complete mind meld, is particularly exciting. The *Sicilienne* [Peerclassical], from a year later, is much in the same vein. On the other hand, *Six Variations* (1995) is an excursion into concentrated music development, yet it maintains excitement throughout. The final variation—a dizzying cascade of off-kilter rhythms (all in 7)—is a compositional tour-de-force. Rorem’s only work for piano four-hands is *For Shirley* (1989), a two-minute waltz created as a birthday present for his lifelong friend Shirley Rhoads Perle, pianist wife of composer George Perle.

OTHER DUOS AND TRIOS

The aforementioned Sonata for Violin and Piano (1948–9) [Peters], written

when Rorem was 25, features a tantalizing dedication: “For Edward Albee (and also Bessie Smith).” Like the second string quartet, it is in four movements and somewhat conventional in structure (two hefty, fast outer movements with a dance and much slower music in between them). The opening movement is a frenetic Allegro, ostensibly in G minor although expanded and hardly triadic, with rhythms—passages with such peculiar time signatures as 2/1 and 3/1—to match. A short and relatively straightforward waltz follows, in which the piano and violin engage in quasi-imitative counterpoint. Next is a somber, hymnlike pascaglia that Rorem describes as “a funeral.” The Finale brings things back to the realm of the living with an energetic dance that wanders through a bunch of keys, ultimately ending up in E-flat major. Unfortunately, the work has never been commercially recorded.

When he was in his late 40s, Rorem composed two highly virtuosic and complementary violin-and-piano works: *Day Music* (1971) and *Night Music* (1972). Each has eight sections and is nearly a half-hour long. *Day* bristles with aggression much of the time; *Night*, while somewhat gnarly, is also introverted and mysterious. Rorem’s most recent violin/piano work, the much shorter, but similarly challenging *Autumn Music* (1996), was composed for the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis. It opens with an extended cadenza for the violin alone before the piano enters metronomically; this keeps the violin’s subsequent utterances in check, but just barely.

At the other extreme of the string register is *Nocturne*, for double bass and piano (2007), a three-minute work in which the bassist plays a soaring melody from its lowest to highest registers, as the pianist maintains a steady flow of eighth notes. *Nocturne* was premiered last year at the

Smithsonian by the Basso Moderno Duo. Rorem has also composed four works for cello and piano. The earliest, *In Memory of My Feelings* (1950), was written in Fes. The title, taken from a poem by Frank O'Hara, also cheekily references a comment by Paul Hindemith, whose musical philosophy resonates with Rorem's: "The reactions music evokes are not feelings, but they are the images, memories of feelings." Rorem later re-arranged *Memory* for eleven instruments and included it as one of his *Eleven Studies for Eleven Players*. He did not return to the cello/piano combination until the *Three Slow Pieces* of

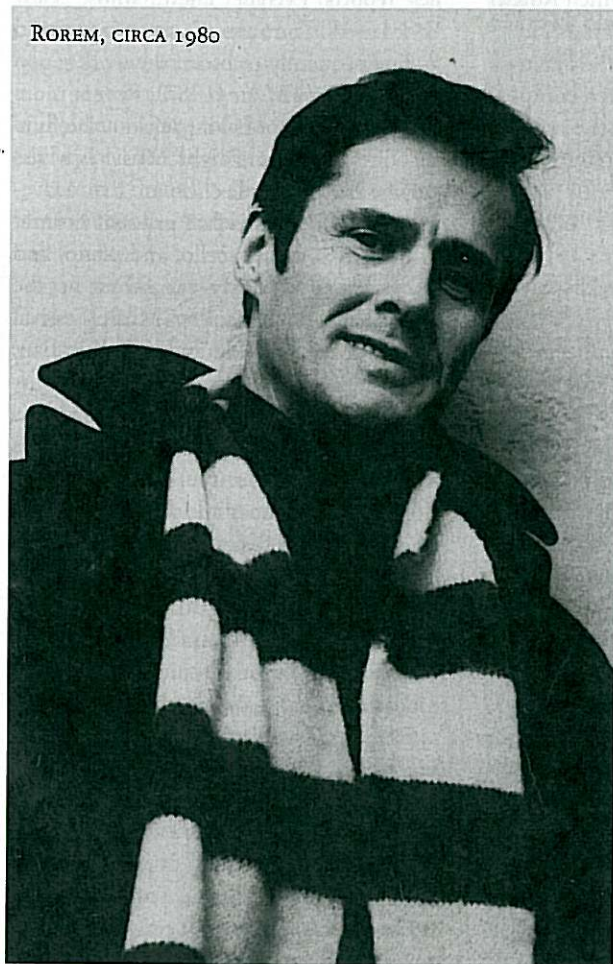
1978, and then again in his almost Messiaen-like *Dances* (1984). Rorem's very latest chamber composition, *A Little Fantasy* (2008), is a rhapsodic, 21-measure waltz that's barely a minute long. One of four pieces commissioned by cellist Joshua Roman and pianist Evelyn Luest as a contemporary response to Schumann's Opus 73 *Fantasiestücke*, it makes for an amiable encore piece. Says Luest, who premiered it with Roman earlier this year: "I told Ned that it is a little jewel."

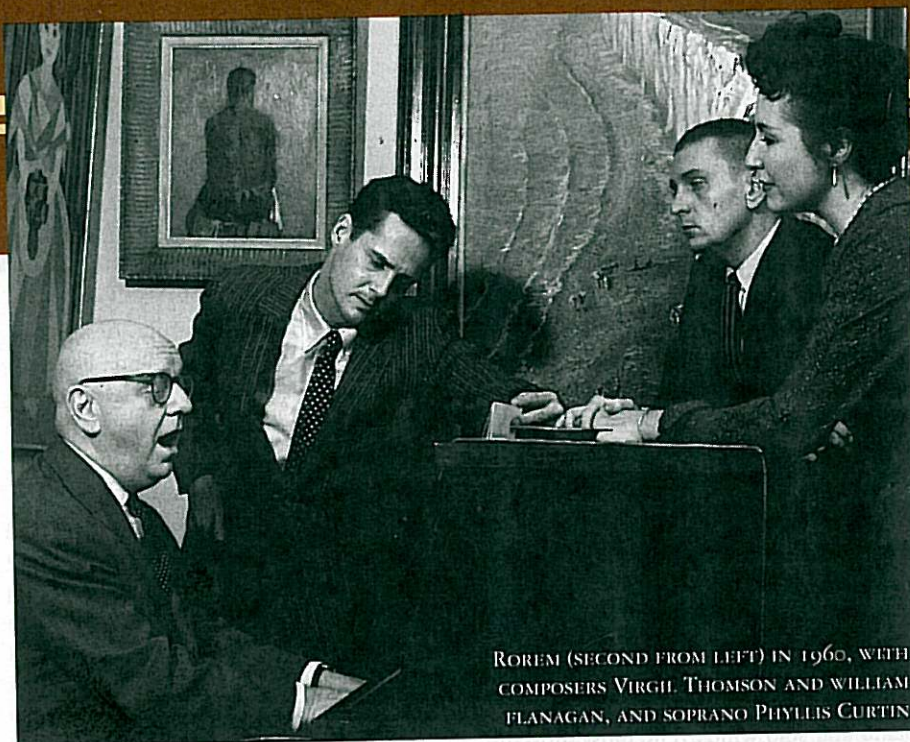
Rorem has composed generously for piano and solo winds. The most substantive is *An Oboe Book* (1999), an enchanting 19-minute oboe-and-piano work, whose nine movements are inspired by various numeric schemes. *Four Colors* (2003) for clarinet and piano, which Thomas Piercy and Judith Olson premiered at Weill in 2003, is four two-minute miniatures: "Red," predominantly in 7, is mercurial, with the clarinet and piano forging an equal partnership; more straightforward and even-tempered, "White" relegates the piano to an accompanist's role. "Blue" is a sonorous melody started by the clarinet unaccompanied, with the piano quietly wafting in, one hand at a time, and wafting out again. In "Orange," the concluding brisk waltz, the partners are once again on equal footing, trading arpeggiated figurations that culminate in a bravura flourish. *Four Prayers* (2006), whose

movements are laconically designated "First," "Second," "Third," and "Fourth," offers a similar interplay between flute and piano. In "First," the piano merely intones block chords over the flute's melody, but "Second" is a piano extravaganza. "Third" maintains a fast, off-balance quintuple meter throughout. The calm final prayer is the most nearly hymn-like, albeit in waltz-time. Each of the seven brief movements of the delightful *Picnic on the Marne* (1983), for alto saxophone and piano, is a waltz. *Cries and Whispers* (2000), a single, five-minute movement for trumpet and piano, is a showcase piece commissioned by the International Trumpet Guild.

Among Rorem's earliest duo compositions is the ravishingly beautiful *Mountain Song* [Peerclassical], which dates back to 1948. Allegedly based on a Kentucky folk tune, although Rorem has never given precise details, the three-minute composition was originally written as background music for a play in which the melody was performed by cellist Seymour Barab. (In published form, it is scored alternately for violin, flute, or oboe with piano.) Rorem has also composed a pair of 20-minute duos for flute with other instruments. The *Book of Hours* (1975), evoking a medieval prayer book, is his take on the classic combination of flute and harp; whereas *Romeo and Juliet* (1977) pairs the flute with another frequent chamber music partner, the guitar. Both are assemblages of vignettes. Rorem's most substantial chamber work involving the flute is the 1960 Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano [Peters], in which the flute's frequent flourishes might give listeners the impression that the work is a torso for a concerto. Composed at Yaddo in June and July of 1960, the work's movements—three relatively slow ones and a fast finale—are given only tempo

ROREM, CIRCA 1980





ROREM (SECOND FROM LEFT) IN 1960, WITH COMPOSERS VIRGIL THOMSON AND WILLIAM FLANAGAN, AND SOPRANO PHYLLIS CURTIN

indications, but contain much poetry.

End of Summer (1985), one of the rare Rorem compositions with several commercial recordings available, is a three-movement work for violin, clarinet and piano. Thanks to the commissioning efforts of the Verdehr Trio, for whom this work was written, the instrumental combination is now a chamber music regular. The opening, sprawling *Capriccio*, like *Autumn Music*, begins with a long, furious violin cadenza before the clarinet and piano enter with manic, synchronous, rapid-fire sixteenth notes; each instrument then goes on its separate path, periodically joining in duos along the way. "Fantasy," in which Rorem asks the players to sound "like falling leaves, from beginning to end," moves from relative stillness to muscular virtuosity. The concluding *Mazurka*, in Rorem's beloved triple meter, is a wild romp. *Pas de Trois* (2002)—a trio in six movements for oboe, violin, and piano that has yet to be recorded—opens with a single unaccompanied line on the piano before the other instruments enter in surprising unison. A more startling unison, featuring all three players at full volume, opens the second movement, which is frenetic and volatile throughout. Two waltzes follow, then a sultry *Cantabile*, in which the violin and

oboe never play at the same time. The conclusion is another romp, which Rorem instructs the players to play "fast as Hell." The premiere of the work, at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, featured composer Lowell Liebermann at the piano. Rorem's solo composition for the classic piano trio combination, *Spring Music* (1990), which the Beaux Arts Trio premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1991, is another showcase in which each participant gets moments of glory. Nearly half-an-hour long and cast in five movements, the work has a wide variety of moods, although according to Rorem it "wishes to reflect (insofar as non-vocal music reflects anything) the season of optimism." In 2006, Rorem composed another trio, the brief *Lullaby* for two violins and piano, which—in keeping with its name—is predominantly soothing.

LARGER ENSEMBLES

Rorem's sole work for piano quartet, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (2004), created for the Ravinia Festival's centennial season, alternates extremely lush textures—at the onset the piano is instructed to use the pedal "like a spider web against which the strings weave their tunes"—with propulsive figurations, at one point oscillating between eight- and seven-beat cycles.

While Rorem has never composed something for the classic Pierrot configuration (flute, clarinet, piano trio), *Nine Episodes for Four Players* (2001) lacks only the flute. The work—jointly commissioned by a nationwide consortium made up of Contrasts Quartet, Pacific Serenades, Soli Chamber Ensemble, and Music in the Park Series—balances turbulence and wistfulness. "Closing Pages," the final section, is both nostalgic and ethereal, evoking Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, the most famous work with the same instrumentation. "The piece has been a huge success, and we are often requested to play it," reports Evelyne Luest, whose New York-based Contrasts Quartet premiered and subsequently recorded the work.

With *Bright Music* (1987), Rorem more than makes up for having left out the flute in *Nine Episodes*. *Bright Music* is a viscerally thrilling collection of five movements for the somewhat unusual quintet of flute, two violins, cello, and piano, and was created expressly for forces at the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival—Marya Martin, Ida and Ani Kavafian, Fred Sherry, and André-Michel Schub. It may seem preposterous to claim that this work shares an affinity with the Bang-on-a-Can aesthetic, yet the insistent repetitions of dissonances and sub-impositions of three-, four-, five-, six-, and seven-beat cycles are undeniably akin to the sound world associated with Boac's "post-minimalist" crew. The overall effect calls to mind work of another composer branded a post-minimalist, Michael Torke.

Rorem returned to the instrumentation of *Bright Music* in *The Unquestioned Answer* (2003), also written for Bridgehampton. A magical work cast in a single 10-minute movement, it is an ironic response to the title of Leonard Bernstein's book *The Unanswered Question* (itself borrowed from Ives's composition of the same

FIVE ROREM RECORDINGS

name) and ends with an instruction for the players to hold the final fermata "forever."

Regrettably, Rorem has never composed a wind quintet, but he has composed for the brass equivalent. The fun-filled *Diversions* was commissioned in 1990 by a consortium of six ensembles—Brass Ring, the American Brass Quintet; the Anapolis, Chestnut and Tower quintets; and Saturday Brass. The work's exuberance contrasts starkly with the composer's much earlier brass octet, *Solemn Prelude* (1973), a two-minute work first performed by members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Another brief brass piece, *Fanfare and Flourish* (1988), sets organ against two trumpets and two trombones. It was premiered at Alice Tully Hall in a performance by Anthony Newman under the auspices of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Another unusual chamber music combination is the harpsichord, oboe, cello and percussion ensemble chosen by Rorem for his *Lovers: A Narrative in Ten Scenes* (1964). The work, whose title according to Rorem is meant to evoke episodes in the day of the life of a young couple, uses the harpsichord to great effect in completely contemporary ways—manic quasi-minimalist ostinatos, as well as in extraordinary dialogues with vibraphone and timpani (great-sounding combinations that were, of course, unimaginable in the Baroque era). The work owes its genesis to American harpsichordist Sylvia Marlowe, a tireless new-music crusader who was also the driving force behind the commissioning of Elliott Carter's famed *Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord* (1952). The premiere of *Lovers*, at what was then still called Carnegie Recital Hall, featured other luminaries, too: Ronald Roseman

continued on page 73

Sadly, recordings devoted to Ned Rorem's chamber music are not easy to find. Several excellent discs are currently unavailable, and many of his pieces have only been recorded on compilations. Perhaps this torso of a discography, which includes four all-Rorem discs and one compilation featuring a single string quartet (these works are not available any other way), will serve as an incentive to other groups to record his music.

Ned Rorem: *Winter Pages; Bright Music* (New World 80416)

This wonderful CD features definitive accounts from the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival by the musicians who premiered these two action-packed quintets: Ani & Ida Kavafian, violins; Fred Sherry, cello; Todd Palmer, clarinet; Marya Martin, flute; Frank Morelli, bassoon; Charles Wadsworth, Andre-Michel Schub, pianos.

Ned Rorem Contrasts Quartet (Phoenix USA PHCD163)

This Grammy-nominated disc features stellar performances of the *Episodes for Four Players*, which Contrasts co-commissioned, as well as *Dances* for cello and piano, and *Spring Music* for piano trio. With the exception of *Spring Music*, which is recorded on a long out-of-print Philips anthology of American piano trios performed by the Beaux Arts Trio, all are world premiere recordings.

Ned Rorem: *The End of Summer* (Naxos 8.559128)

The only chamber music disc thus far in Naxos's slew of Rorem releases features three works performed by the intriguingly named British ensemble The Fibonacci Sequence. Included are a spirited reading of the oft-recorded *End of Summer* for clarinet, violin and piano; the intimate *Book of Hours* for flute and harp; and another compelling account of *Bright Music*.

Ned Rorem: *The Auden Songs; The Santa Fe Songs* (Black Box BBM1104)

Susan Graham's performances of three of the *Santa Fe Songs* on her Rorem recital disc for Erato will forever remain my standard, but that disc is long out of print. She has yet to record the entire cycle, so this 2006 disc featuring mezzo Sara Fulgoni with the British group Chamber Domaine is a welcome addition to the Rorem discography. The wonderful performance of *The Auden Songs*, featuring Christopher Lemmings, makes for a great pairing.

Meyer: Quintet; Rorem: *String Quartet No. 4* Emerson String Quartet (Deutsche Grammophon 474 321-2)

It's shocking that no quartet has thus far gotten around to doing a disc devoted to the Rorem quartets—all three, four or five of them, depending on how you count and what materials you are able to procure. But the Emersons' passionate interpretation of the Fourth Quartet is still a great listen; and Edgar Meyer's Quintet, featuring the genre-hopping bassist/composer, is a great bonus.

FJO

“*Bright Music*, created in 1987 for the forces at the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival, is a viscerally thrilling collection of five movements for flute, two

violin cello and piano. Yet the work—with its insistent repetitions of dissonances and changing beat cycles—has an affinity with today’s postminimalist aesthetic.”

Rorem from page 31

on oboe and Harold Farberman on percussion. Marlowe subsequently recorded *Lovers*, as well as the Carter sonata, for Decca in the 1960s; but these recordings have been long out of print. Another work for harpsichord, composed when Rorem was only 23, is the three-movement *Concertino da Camera* (1946) for harpsichord and seven instruments (flute, oboe, bassoon, cornet, violin, viola, cello). It was thought to be lost but resurfaced a few years ago and was performed for the first time at the University of Minnesota under the direction of Alexander Platt. While nowhere near as distinctive as *Lovers*, the *Concertino* is nevertheless enjoyable. And as Rorem’s earliest surviv-

ing chamber music composition, it’s an undeniable curiosity.

In many of Rorem’s works for larger chamber music configurations—such as his quintet *Winter Pages* (1981) or *Scenes from Childhood* (1985)—the ensemble is treated in modular fashion, movements scored for subsets occur side by side with ones for the entire ensemble. The 12-

movement *Winter Pages*—for clarinet, bassoon, violin, cello, and piano—contains various trio combinations, a duo for clarinet and piano, a cello solo, and a bravura Concertante movement for bassoon. The eleven *Scenes*—for oboe, horn, piano, and string quartet—include duets for horn and piano, a couple of string duos, and a movement for string quartet. The work employing the largest forces of any Rorem chamber work, *Eleven Studies for Eleven Players* (1959–60)—for flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (doubling English horn), clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, cello, piano, harp, and two percussionists playing a wide variety of instruments—is also often scored for smaller satellites. Rorem self-effacingly claims he constructed this piece in modules to overcome his fear of having to conduct for the first time at the premiere. A highlight is an electrifying duo scored just for the percussionists on unpitched instruments—the only example of pitchless music in Rorem’s entire career.

VOCAL CHAMBER MUSIC

No survey of Ned Rorem’s chamber music would be complete without some examination of works involving the voice. There are at least 15 chamber vocal works in Rorem’s catalogue—or more, if you broaden the definition of chamber works a little. The earliest of these, *Mourning Scene* from Samuel (1947) [Peters], was completed at Tanglewood under Aaron Copland’s tutelage. It is a nearly seven-minute Biblical setting for medium voice



ROREM AND AARON COPLAND, IN 1946

“Rorem chose an unusual chamber music combination—harpsichord, oboe, cello, and percussion ensemble—for his 1964 work *Lovers: A Narrative in Ten Scenes*. The work owes its genesis to harpsichordist Sylvia Marlowe, a tireless new-music crusader who was also the driving force behind the commissioning of Elliott Carter’s famed *Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello and Harpsichord*.”

and string quartet, with the crystal-clear prosody that became the composer’s signature approach to vocal writing. *Last Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1972), which adds a cello to Rorem’s usual mix of voice and piano, is a cycle of seven solo songs, plus an instrumental prelude and interlude. The extra instrument allows for more permutations: one setting is principally for voice and cello without piano, and another is almost entirely an unaccompanied vocal. *Ariel* (1971) joins clarinet, soprano, and piano for settings of five Sylvia Plath poems. *Serenade on Five English Poems* (1975) bathes texts by John Fletcher, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Thomas Campion in the rich sonorities of a piano trio, as does *The Auden Poems* (1989), setting seven Auden works, and *Aftermath* (2001–2), a cycle of ten songs of war and love—based on poems by as many authors—in response to the attack on the World Trade Center. The earlier *Santa Fe Songs* (1980) gives a similar treatment to 12 poems by Santa Fe poet Witter Bynner (1881–1968), adding a viola to create even richer textures. Apart from *Ariel*, these cycles could be sung by a man or woman with a medium-range voice.

Two Sermons (2001), commissioned and premiered by the New York City ensemble Sequitur, is a setting of two sacred prose texts by John Donne for solo voice, clarinet, violin, double bass and piano. The first maintains a slow quintu-

ple rhythm throughout, although the contrabass is frequently a beat behind the other members of the ensemble, creating an unusual syncopation. The second is cast in a much more stable, four-beat pattern and the homogeneity of the ensemble is further intensified by several unisons shared between clarinet, violin and singer, sonically annotating such poignant lines as “Doth not man die even in his birth?” The unusually scored “Sound the Flute” (2004) is a stand-alone song for high voice, recorder and keyboard. But perhaps the weirdest of Rorem’s vocal works is the exploration of registral extremes in his 1980 setting of Thom Gunn’s poem “Back to Life” (1980), for counter-tenor and double bass. Rorem also carves out some strange textural territory in his eight-poem cycle *Songs of Sadness* (1994), composed at the instigation of guitarist Sharon Isbin. In it, the voice is accompanied by the contrasting sonorities of clarinet, cello, and guitar, whose timbral differences are further emphasized by the layering of differing rhythms.

At the edge of chamber music are *Two Psalms and a Proverb* (1963) [ECS] and *Present Laughter* (1993), two works that pit a full chorus against groups of only five instrumentalists—in the former, a string quintet and in the latter, a brass quartet and piano. Both works come across sounding orchestral despite the small instrumental forces. Still, the way Rorem treats voices in several works for

multiple voices, even when only one or no instruments are present, arguably falls under the chamber music rubric. Perhaps most touching in this regard is his early *Four Madrigals*, for vocal quartet, composed in the autumn of 1947 while he was still a student at Juilliard. Rorem’s well-proportioned vocal-instrumental balance is also evident in his *Four Dialogues* (1954), for two voices and two pianos and based on poems of Frank O’Hara; *Some Trees* (1968), three John Asbery poems scored for piano, soprano, mezzo-soprano, and bass-baritone; and in *Gloria* (1970), a 13-minute setting from the Roman Catholic Mass, for two voices and piano. But the most imposing of such works is the massive, 95-minute *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1997), 36 songs for four solo voices in various combinations with piano. For the sake of completeness, mention should also be made of *Hearing* (1976), a one-act chamber opera whose text by poet Kenneth Koch is scored for four singers and seven instrumentalists. Rorem’s solo songs have also been arranged for other configurations such as the collection *Four Poems Without Words*, a set of transcriptions created expressly for clarinetist Thomas Piercy, who recorded them with the Gotham Ensemble (Albany, 2002).

All in all, chamber musicians have plenty of repertoire to choose from to create an exciting and varied Ned Rorem celebration. While this hasn’t happened for his 85th birthday, there’s plenty of time to prepare for a real extravaganza for his 90th!

New York City-based composer Frank J. Oteri is the composer advocate of the American Music Center and founding editor of its web magazine, *NewMusicBox* (www.newmusicbox.org).