

textura



Michael Colgrass: *Side By Side*
BMOP/sound

How wonderful it is that the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) and conductor Gil Rose recently honoured Michael Colgrass (1932-2019) by dedicating a full album to works by the American-born, Toronto-based composer, who passed away on July 2nd at the age of eighty-seven. Not only does the recording showcase the exemplary playing of the ensemble, it provides an excellent sampling of Colgrass's maverick sensibility. The works created by the Pulitzer Prize recipient and Emmy Award-winning composer never lack for seriousness, but, as this release so satisfyingly illustrates, they exemplify a wry humour and are often fun, too. Issued on BMOP's independent record label BMOP/sound, *Side by Side* captures Colgrass making irreverent connections to Mozart and Schubert in two of the works, whilst the third, a live in-concert concerto performance, features Joanne Kong tackling the dual role of both pianist and harpsichordist.

For listeners new to Colgrass, a few preliminary words are in order. After spending the first half of his life in the United States, he moved to Toronto in 1974 whereafter he established himself as one of Canada's preeminent composers as well as an educator and writer (on a personal note, I have fond memories of reading the "Speaking of Music" column he contributed from 1978 to '86 to *Music Magazine*, the Toronto-based periodical co-founded by his wife Ulla). A graduate of the University of Illinois with a degree in performance and composition, Colgrass studied with Darius Milhaud and Lukas Foss; following on from his earlier experience as a jazz drummer (1944-49), he spent eleven years (1956-1967) in New York as a freelance percussionist, performing with everyone from Dizzy Gillespie and the Modern Jazz Quartet to the Columbia Symphony Orchestra for

its "Stravinsky Conducts Stravinsky" series; he also played in the pit band for the premiere Broadway run of *West Side Story* and with various jazz ensembles. In his mid-thirties, he transitioned from percussionist to full-time composer, and in 1978 won the Pulitzer for *Déjà Vu*, a concerto for percussion quartet and orchestra, and four years later an Emmy for the PBS documentary *Soundings: The Music of Michael Colgrass*.

The broad range of experience he acquired before composing had a huge impact on the character of the work he created thereafter. Refusing to align himself to any one stylistic camp, he instead drew from whichever genre seemed to fit the compositional challenge at hand. Composers from earlier eras were as ripe for plunder as were those from his own time, and Colgrass wasn't shy about mixing classical and jazz either. On the BMOP release, for example, *The Schubert Birds* obviously references the composer named, but the title also alludes to Charlie Parker, famously nicknamed Bird.

The recording begins with *Letter from Mozart* (1976), a piece of such complexity Andrew Clark appears in the role of second conductor. For this fifteen-minute work, Colgrass imagined his precursor imploring him to compose a piece with a Mozart-styled theme as a springboard and to apply to the Austrian-type folk melody contemporary music techniques so that he might witness how one of his ideas might sound filtered through the mind of a modern-day composer. In true Mozartian fashion, that melody resounds joyfully through the opening moments before being derailed one minute into the piece. Thereafter the material shifts constantly, destabilizing the listener as it advances from one fleeting episode to the next. A rather woozy effect is produced by having the theme reemerge, often in fragmented form, and passed from one instrument to another; flirtations with dissonance surface, the music during one section evoking the serial character of Berg's 1935 *Violin Concerto*. Colgrass's penchant for humour is never far away, however, as indicated by the accordion material that appears alongside piano restatements of the theme and the bluster of an oompah band. Among other things, *Letter from Mozart* provides an apt illustration of the composer's strong predilection for both seriousness and irreverence.

The writing of the title work was inspired by Kong, who gave its World Premiere in 2007. If the opening work's focus is Mozart (albeit in severely skewed form), the second's is on sonority and timbre, not only between the piano and harpsichord but also with the orchestra to which each is conjoined. To create better balance between the two lead instruments, Colgrass altered the piano with tuning mutes and bobby pins. Sensitive to the sound properties of the two, he

then associated different elements with the two, celesta, harp, and vibraphone with the harpsichord and cowbells, wood blocks, and kitchen bowls with the prepared piano. The impression created is of a dialogue involving multiple voices, each one delivering rapid statements in brisk, staccato fashion, Colgrass's material a dizzying swirl of stimulation. The music repeatedly shape-shifts via contrasting moods, tempos, and dynamics until a rapprochement of sorts is achieved, the two main instruments gradually coming closer together and ultimately blending.

As mentioned, *The Schubert Birds* (1989) references Schubert and Parker, Colgrass explaining the latter's inclusion by noting certain commonalities between the two (e.g., both died young, Parker at thirty-four, Schubert thirty-one). The piece opens softly, Colgrass using flute effectively to evoke birdsong and the mood ponderous; on a recording largely characterized by high energy, the presence of a slow, quietly majestic passage isn't displeasing. Consistent with the other pieces, this closing one is still very much a complex tapestry, but its development is easier to monitor when a slower pace is often involved. The pace picks up, however, six minutes into the twenty-minute setting, a solo violin leading the charge and inciting the others to greater degrees of animation. The Parker dimension, by the way, shows up midway through in the form of material strongly informed by both blues and jazz, the swing of a muted trumpet and ride cymbal directly adding jazz associations. Colgrass's own likening of the music as "a stroll through my own fanciful concept of Schubert's subconscious world" is mirrored in the work's design.

How fitting that the word kaleidoscopic should appear not once but twice in the liner notes included in the release: the word definitely applies to the mercurial music featured on this hour-long set by Rose and the BMOP. That the ensemble executes the pieces so well is a compliment to all concerned, especially when the extraordinary performative challenges posed by Colgrass's music are taken into account.

July 2019