Sheer Pluck

modern guitar compositions by
Luciano Berio
Ursula Mamlok
James Dillon
Milton Babbitt
Charles Wuorinen
Elliott Carter
Robert Morris

Todd Seelye, guitar

Guitare et compotier, Picasso (1924)
Sheer Pluck

Ursula Mamlok: Five Intermezzi
1  I.  0:53
2  II. 0:46
3  III. 2:53
4  IV. 1:22
5  V. 0:31
6  James Dillon: Shrouded Mirrors 9:38
7  Milton Babbitt: Sheer Pluck 8:36
8  Charles Wuorinen: Guitar Variations 16:35
9  Elliott Carter: Changes 7:53
10 Luciano Berio: Sequenza XI 17:13
11 Robert Morris: To the Nine 11:18
(for guitar and tape)

Publishers

Five Intermezzi: C.F. Peters*
Shrouded Mirrors: C.F. Peters*
Sheer Pluck: C.F. Peters‡
Guitar Variations: C.F. Peters*
Changes: Boosey and Hawkes (Hendon Music)
Sequenza XI: Universal Edition
To the Nine: manuscript*

* First recording
‡ First recording of revised edition
Composers

James Dillon (b. 1950) first became involved in music through playing in traditional Scottish pipe bands and rock groups. He studied music, acoustics and linguistics in London, but received no formal training in composition.

Dillon's name is commonly associated with the “New Complexity” movement, a label used to describe a group of young British composers who became prominent in the early 1980's.

Dillon's music has received wide recognition in Britain and continental Europe. His works have been commissioned by IRCAM in Paris, London Sinfonietta, Nieuw Ensemble, Ensemble Recherche, Radio France, and performed in a wide array of major festivals including ISCM World Music Days in Stockholm, Musica in Strasbourg, the La Rochelle Festival, “Ars Musica” in Brussels, the Darmstadter Ferienkurse, the Venice Biennale, the Festival d'Automne à Paris, and a major retrospective at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in November 1995.

Shrouded Mirrors takes its title from “Los espejos velados” (“Shrouded Mirrors”) from the collection El hacedor (Dreamtigers) by Jorge Luis Borges.

“As a child, I felt before large mirrors that same horror of a spectral duplication or multiplication of reality. Their infallible and continuous functionings, their pursuit of my actions, their cosmic pantomime, were uncanny then, whenever it began to grow dark.”


Ursula Mamlok (b. 1928) began her study of music in her native city of Berlin and continued at the Mannes College of Music in New York with George Szell. She has also studied with Roger Sessions, Ralph Shapey and Stefan Wolpe. Among her many commissions are those from the Koussevitsky and Fromm Music Foundations, Jubal Trio, Eastman School of Music, Earplay, American Guild of Organists, and The San Francisco Symphony. She has received awards from the National Endowment For The Arts, Meet the Composer, American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Martha Baird Rockefeller, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. In 1987 Ursula Mamlok received a Commendation of Excellence “for her contribution to the world of concert music” by BMI. Her works are performed regularly by major domestic and foreign ensembles and have been recorded
by the CRI, Gasparo, Leonarda, Newport Classic, Music and Arts, Opus One Centaur and True
Media labels. She is currently on the composition faculty of the Manhattan School of Music.
She has said, “In my music, I have never striven for novelty or originality for its own sake. Rather, my
primary concern as a composer has been the consolidation of older and newer techniques as they
best serve the work at hand.”

*Five Intermezzi*, her only work for guitar, is a suite of generally through-composed short character
pieces, each bringing out a different aspect of the same material. The outermost pairs of pieces
frame the central and longest piece, which is in ABA form.

**Charles Wuorinen** (b. 1938) began composing at age 5. One of the world’s leading composers, his
many honors include a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and the Pulitzer Prize (the youngest com-
poser to receive the award). A prolific composer, he has written over 185 compositions in every
form and medium, including works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, soloists, electronic media, bal-
let and stage. Wuorinen is recorded on nearly a dozen labels, including Music and Arts, Nonesuch,
New World, Bridge, GM, and Koch International. He is Professor of Music at Rutgers University and
a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts And Letters and The American Academy
of Arts and Sciences.

*Guitar Variations* follows the line of other similarly-named pieces for solo instruments by Wuorinen.
At over 15 minutes, it is by far the longest and most substantial. The piece divides into four large
sections set off by fermatas. As a whole, the work has a broad bilateral symmetry, for instance, sec-
tions 1 and 2 share similar figures as do sections 3 and 4, and these two yet larger sections balance
one another. *Guitar Variations* is “in” e-natural, as the first and last pitch of the piece, with other
boundary identities. *Guitar Variations* was written for and dedicated to Todd Seelye.

**Milton Babbitt** (b. 1916) was educated in the public schools of Jackson, Mississippi, and at New
York and Princeton Universities. His principal teacher of composition was Roger Sessions. Babbitt’s
many awards and honors include two New York Music Critics Circle Citations, National Institute of
Arts and Letters Award, Brandeis University Gold Medal, Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, George
Peabody Medal and MacArthur Fellowship. He is recorded by Bridge, CBS, CRI, Harmonia Mundi, Nonesuch, and Music and Arts. A member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he is presently William Shubael Conant Professor Emeritus at Princeton University and on the composition faculty of The Juilliard School. He is internationally recognized as one of the foremost composers of our time.

Babbitt has written of Sheer Pluck (formerly, Composition for Guitar), “The character of this one-movement work manifestly changes at about its midpoint, where there is a reinterpretation of the underlying rhythmic conception, which itself is a reflection of the basic six part polyphony, conceived as, and—therefore, I, trust—perceptible as three contrapuntal duets.” These “contrapuntal duets” each inhabit one of the three octaves available on the guitar from the lowest sounding note E to the e’ on the twelfth fret (pitches above that are not used). This recording includes many important revisions of the score as first published and recorded which were suggested by Todd Seelye in collaboration with the composer.

**Elliott Carter** (b. 1908) was first encouraged toward a musical career by his friend and mentor Charles Ives. He later studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris during the period 1932-1935. Internationally recognized as one of America’s leading composers, his many awards include two Pulitzer Prizes, the United States National Medal of Arts, Germany’s Ernst Von Siemans Music Prize, and a Grammy for Best Contemporary Composition of 1994 (Violin Concerto). His work has been showcased repeatedly at the Warsaw Autumn Festival, the South Bank Festival in London, the Bath Festival, the Holland Festival, the Venice Biennale, the Donaueschingen Festival, and IRCAM in Paris. Carter’s musical manuscripts are permanently housed in public archive maintained by the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel. He is one of the most frequently recorded American composers; at least eleven of his pieces are available in three or more recordings.

The title Changes can be regarded as a wry reference to the several revisions the work underwent during the course of composition and also to the way in which, according to Carter, “various aspects of the basic harmony” (the piece is based on two different six-note chords, which are heard at the outset) “are brought out in the course of the work, which resemble patterns used by bell-ringers in ringing changes.”
Luciano Berio (b. 1925) began his early musical education under the guidance of his grandfather and father. He later studied at the Milan Conservatory and with Luigi Dallapiccola at Tanglewood. One of the most important composers of the second half of the twentieth century, he has written for a wide variety of media including voice, solo instruments, orchestra, music theatre, and digital processing of sound in real time. Berio's compositions are performed regularly throughout the world at leading music centers, opera houses and festivals, and have been recorded by RCA, SONY Classical, Deutsche Grammophon, CBS, Mode Records, Harmonia Mundi, and Nonesuch.

The Sequenza is a personal genre cultivated by Berio and begun in 1958 with Sequenza I for solo flute. It is a solo virtuosic work, exploiting an array of conventional and unconventional playing techniques. Berio has said of the guitar: “There is a very idiomatic component to guitar writing, a kind of music that goes with the instrument. You cannot destroy this; what I tried was to use it, to present it in a different context.”

Broadly speaking, the piece contrasts two types of material: that which forms the basis of the strumming and other chordal sections, and a 6-note chord upon which the single line music is based. The development of the work juxtaposes three instrumental styles: Flamenco, Classical, and Berio's own inventions.

Robert Morris (b. 1943) has written over 100 compositions for all musical media except opera. Morris is the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the A. Whitney Grislad Foundation, the American Music Center and the American Council of Learned Societies. His music has been performed throughout the United States and abroad including the ISCM Festival of Contemporary Music and the International Society of Computer Music. His music is recorded on CRI, New World, Music Gallery Editions and Attacca. Morris' book, Composition with Pitch-Classes: A Theory of Compositional Design, published by Yale University Press, was awarded the “Distinguished Publication Award” of the Society for Music Theory in 1988. Morris is Professor of Composition and Music Theory at the Eastman School of Music.

The title refers to “the tuneful Nine,” the Muses of Greek antiquity, and to the various “nines” of the piece. For example, the maximum number of contrapuntal voices in the piece is nine.
The work can be heard as a kind of chamber concerto, mixing elements of the Baroque concerto grosso and the more dramatic concerto of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the electronic sounds themselves suggest both types of concerti since they both embellish and contrast the plucked string sound of the guitar; they range from neighboring harp, lute, and pizzicato sounds to sustained wind, brass, and other not-so-easily described sounds. The interaction of the guitar with the tape is multivalent; sometimes the guitar opposes, other times confirms or embellishes the tape sounds; at still other times, it embeds unto camouflage in the piece's weave of lines, gestures, and textures.

—Robert Morris

To the Nine was written for and dedicated to Todd Seelye.

Todd Seelye has performed widely with programs that highlight the music of our time. He has been a featured soloist with New York's Ensemble 21, the New York New Music Consort, and the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, as well as at festivals including June in Buffalo and the International Festival of the Guitar Foundation of America. He has also recorded for Bridge Records.

Todd Seelye has the DMA from The University of Arizona, and teaches at Grinnell College.

Credits

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