

Cedille Records
5255 N. Lakewood Ave.
Chicago, IL 60640
(773) 989-2515
www.cedillerecords.org

Press contact: Nat Silverman
Nathan J. Silverman Co./PR
1830 Sherman Ave., Suite 401
Evanston, IL 60201-3773
Phone (847) 328-4292
Fax (847) 328-4317
Email: natsilv@aol.com

News

For release: November 2005

NEW CD CELEBRATES THE SINGULAR CLASSICAL MUSIC OF COLERIDGE-TAYLOR PERKINSON

World Premiere Recording Spans Half-Century Career of Prolific Black Composer

Contemporary American composer Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (1932-2004), the focus of a new CD from Cedille Records, worked with a who's who across a wide range of musical enterprises: conductor Leonard Bernstein, jazz drummer Max Roach, choreographer Alvin Ailey, Broadway's Jerome Robbins, and pop singers Marvin Gaye and Harry Belafonte.

Perkinson earned a master's degree from the Manhattan School of Music and took advance training at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, and at the Berkshire Music Center. On the advice of Roger Sessions, he studied composition with Earl Kim at Princeton.

He co-founded and conducted New York's Symphony of the New World and guest conducted the Dallas Symphony, North Carolina Symphony, Brooklyn Philharmonic, and other orchestras.

Yet, Perkinson, named for the nineteenth-century Afro-English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, remains little known to the general public, including classical music audiences.

The CD *Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson: A Celebration* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 087) offers world premiere recordings of six of Perkinson's most durable classical compositions, plus a short piece he completed just before his death from cancer at age 71 in Chicago.

Perkinson was intimately involved in planning the recording, which includes his *Sinfonietta No. 1 for Strings* (1954-55); *Grass: Poem for Piano, Strings, & Percussion* (1956); *Quartet No. 1* based on "Calvary" (Negro spiritual) (1956); *Blue/s Forms for Solo Violin* (1972); *Lamentations:*

Black/Folk Song Suite for Solo Cello (1973); and *Louisiana Blues Strut (A Cakewalk)* (2001). His last work, “Movement for String Trio” (2004), was included as a posthumous tribute.

“Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s uniqueness lies in the diverse styles that he brings to composition,” says the *International Dictionary of Black Composers*. “He has created a number of colorful contemporary compositions that are diverse, original, and challenging.”

Artists include Cedille Records’ stalwarts the Chicago Sinfonietta and conductor Paul Freeman; the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble Quartet, based at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago (Perkinson was the Ensemble’s artistic director from 1998 until his death); noted pianist Joseph Joubert; former New York Philharmonic violinist Sanford Allen, the orchestra’s first regular black member (1962-1977); cellist Tahirah Whittington, first prize winner at the 1999 Sphinx Competition; busy New York violinist Ashley Horne; Jesse Levine, former principal violist with several major orchestras; and current New York Philharmonic principal cellist, Carter Brey.

Perkinson’s most-performed work, the Sinfonietta No. 1 for Strings, is a tour-de-force he wrote at age 22. The first movement shows the influence of Bach and traditional baroque counterpoint while also illustrating Perkinson’s rhythmic inventiveness — one his stylistic signatures. The serene, lyrical second movement has been compared to Barber’s Adagio for Strings. Regarding the final movement, Perkinson wrote: “Stylistically, it is Americana, both North and South.” The main theme is based on a south-of-the-border *clave* rhythm.

Grass: Poem for Piano, Strings, and Percussion was inspired by Carl Sandburg’s poem of the same name. The piece is a reflection on war, specifically the Korean conflict of the 1950s. The repeated opening phrase echoes the rhythm of the poem’s refrain, “I am the grass, I cover all.”

The 1956 world premiere of Perkinson’s String Quartet No. 1: *Calvary* was performed by the Cumbo Quartet at Carnegie Hall. A *New York Times* review, excerpted in the *International Dictionary of Black Composers*, called Perkinson “an artist who has something to say. Although his idiom is

unmistakably modern, it is not warmed-over atonality of the Viennese School. Jazz idioms are used fluently and without self-consciousness. The quartet has great rhythmic vitality.”

The quartet marks one of Perkinson’s first uses of a traditional African-American melody, in this instance, the spiritual “Calvary.” Perkinson knew the song from church: “When I sat down to write this string quartet, I was not trying to write something black; I was just writing out of my experience.”

Blue/s Forms for Solo Violin was written for Sanford Allen, who performs it on the new recording. Perkinson employs traditional 12-bar jazz blues and free-form folk blues. The predominately atonal yet highly engaging work has been likened to Bach’s unaccompanied works for violin and cello because of its technical demands. The virtuoso showpiece invokes violin techniques such as *con sordino* (with mute); double, triple, and quadruple stopping; *pizzicato* (plucking), *glissandi* (gliding), and *sul ponticello* (played at or near the bridge).

In devising the title *Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite for Solo Cello*, Perkinson invited the listener to think of the piece as either a black folk-song suite or a black-folk song suite. Each of the four movements is based on a different song or tune. The first movement, “Fuguing Tune,” uses a black spiritual as its source. Stylistically, Perkinson described the movement as a “hybrid” of the Baroque fugue and the “fuging-tunes” popularized by eighteenth century New England hymn composer William Billings. The reserved, melancholy second movement is based on a work song. The striking third movement, “Calvary Ostinato,” makes effective use of a repeating *pizzicato* bass line as an accompaniment to the melody from the “Calvary” spiritual. The melody line is also played *pizzicato* throughout for a suspenseful, dramatic feeling with a blues or jazz effect. The fourth movement, “Perpetual Motion,” weaves intricate melodies around a repeated, pulsing note representing movement through time.

Perkinson originally conceived of *Louisiana Blues Strut* as a belated fourth movement for *Blue/s Forms*, but ultimately left it separate. It is subtitled “A Cakewalk,” a dance believed to be of

slave origins that parodied the mannerisms of plantation owners. The movement “takes the form of a rondo, with a laid-back groove,” writes Gregory Weinstein in the CD booklet notes.

Perkinson wrote the last piece on the CD, the string trio movement, literally on his deathbed in February and March 2004. Its simplicity sets it apart from the complex musical designs of the Sinfonietta and “Calvary” Quartet. “Yet even here, in this most poignant movement, Perkinson’s rhythmic games are afoot, as he occasionally adds and subtracts a single sixteenth note from a measure,” Weinstein writes. Fittingly, Perkinson’s counterpoint evokes Bach, “one of the earliest and most enduring influences on his unique compositional style.”

Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson: A Celebration was made possible in part by the Sara Lee Foundation, the recording’s exclusive corporate sponsor, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and the Louis M. Rabinowitz Foundation.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE’) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: info@cedillerecords.org. On the Net: www.cedillerecords.org.

###

Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson: A Celebration
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 087)

Sinfonietta No. 1 for Strings (15:17)
Grass: Poem for Piano, Strings, & Percussion (16:08)
Quartet No. 1 based on “Calvary” (Negro spiritual) (17:04)
Blue/s Forms for Solo Violin (7:26)
Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite for Solo Cello (15:38)
Louisiana Blues Strut (A Cakewalk) (2:49)
Movement for String Trio (3:56)

Chicago Sinfonietta, Paul Feeman, conductor
New Black Music Repertory Ensemble Quartet; Joseph Joubert, piano
Sanford Allen, violin; Tahirah Whittington, cello; Ashley Horne, violin
Jesse Levine, viola; Carter Brey, cello