

April 27, 1992

Note to Critics and Broadcasters:

Schubert never composed a cello sonata or discovered some of the harmonic progressions that Wagner and Liszt used. Sibelius never composed a symphony imbued with the European modernism of 1915.

Not to worry. Contemporary composer-pianist Easley Blackwood has filled in the gaps for them.

Yes, Easley Blackwood. This prominent composer and interpreter of modernist music makes news this season with two "conservative" works from recent explorations in tonality and idioms of great composers:

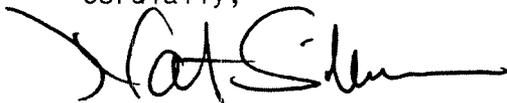
- His "1845" Schubert-style Cello Sonata, composed in 1985, receives its first recording on a new release from Cedille Records.
- His "1915" Sibelius-style Symphony No. 5, written with modernist idioms Sibelius ignored, receives its world concert premiere by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under James DePriest in a series of six concerts May 21, 22, 23 and 26 and June 12 and 13. The piece, completed in 1990, was commissioned by the CSO. (Cedille Records is talking with the CSO about funding to record the piece later, perhaps coupled with Blackwood's First Symphony.)

The CSO concert premiere of Blackwood's Fifth Symphony will be heard this summer via syndication on some 650 U.S. radios stations reaching 80 per cent of the country (airdate to be determined).

First up, though, is Blackwood's romantically inspired Cello Sonata, coupled with the impressionistic cello sonata of Frank Bridge from Cedille Records. Your CD is enclosed.

Your press kit also has background materials and photography for interview and feature development. I'm sure you'll agree it's a good story.

Cordially,



Nathan J. Silverman
Public Relations Consultant
Cedille Records

Writers: If you want to pursue an article on Blackwood's new stylistic period, we can send you demo tapes of his Five Concert Etudes for piano, modeled after Russian composers, and his Suite for Guitar in 15-Note Equal Tuning, also modeled on earlier composers. Call or fax your request to us.

NEWS & INFORMATION

From: Nat Silverman (708) 328-4292

Q&A Interview

For: Cedille Records
1250 W. Grace St., Suite 3F
Chicago, IL 60613
(312) 404-0758

PUTTING NEW SPIN ON FAMOUS COMPOSERS

CHICAGO, April 4, 1992 -- Following is a special interview with composer Easley Blackwood (312-324-0219) about his surprising new creative direction: composing in styles of past masters, with touches of musical speculation.

Blackwood's new, romantic Cello Sonata, composed in a style Schubert might have used, has just been released on Cedille Records. Blackwood's Symphony No. 5, composed in a style Sibelius could have used (but didn't), receives its world premiere May 21 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under James DePriest. Blackwood, a professor of harmony, composition, and music theory, spoke by phone from his office at the University of Chicago.

Q: You describe your Cello Sonata as written in an idiom Schubert would have discovered if he had lived until 1845. Where did this idea come from?

A: I'd been involved with Schubert a great deal, particularly with the songs. I've used them as illustrations in my harmony classes. Some of the most unusual harmonic progressions of any period occur in the songs, particularly where the text depicts strange happenings. All kinds of interesting things can be discovered looking at the obscure songs. Schubert is often praised for having such expressive and characteristic melodies. Oftentimes, I think, the melodies are a result of the underlying harmonic progression. In composing my own tonal pieces, I usually start with a harmonic progression and let the melody come from that. I never start with a melody and then look for a harmonization, but sometimes the melody and harmonization are conceived simultaneously.

(MORE)

Q: Is any part of the Cello Sonata purely speculative, with no sources in Schubert's music?

A. Yes, and there is a very clear example in the last movement, where the piano has a very quiet rippling effect. It starts out with the cello playing the accompaniment and the piano playing a rather dance-like tune. Then, suddenly, the roles reverse and the cello has a different dance-like tune and the piano has rippling effects. The rippling effects in the piano all outline major or minor triads. The major and minor triads shift unexpectedly, following each other in a succession Schubert never used. Schubert was just beginning to explore these chromatic relations between triads in his very last pieces. The Cello Sonata also uses altered chords you don't find in Schubert, but which I think he was close to discovering.

Q: Schubert never actually wrote a cello sonata.

A: No, but he did write a piece for an obsolete experimental instrument called an arpeggione. It looked rather like a guitar, but it had a rounded bridge and you played it with a bow. The arpeggione piece is in a rather early Schubertian style, and today it's often played on the cello.

Q. What would you like people to walk away with after hearing your Cello Sonata?

A. I'm simply hoping they'll get the same feeling they have after hearing a chamber piece by Schubert that they admire very much. I hope people will walk away with some of the tunes running around in their heads.

Q: Somebody's going to be tempted to call it neoclassical, neoromantic or neo-something.

A: Perhaps a better thing to do would be to say romantic. Neoclassical implies that there is a stylization. But that's not my intention in the Cello Sonata at all. Stravinsky's neoclassic pieces written in the 1920s and 30s do not go back to the older styles exactly. They are stylized with what I would describe as a Picasso-esque distortion. If you look at a face drawn by Picasso, it's recognizably a face, but it's twisted and distorted in very stylized ways. Stravinsky's neoclassic pieces in that period were the same way. There's no such similar stylization, at least intended, in my conservative pieces.

Q: Besides the Cello Sonata and Fifth Symphony, what other works have you written in the styles of past composers?

(MORE)

A: My Sonata for Guitar (1983) is in a style that I think Beethoven would have used if he had written a guitar sonata in 1820. The Five Concert Etudes for Piano (1984) are frankly spin-offs from Russian composers, respectively, Scriabin, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rachmaninoff, and early Prokofiev. My Sonata for Solo Violin (1986) is in an idiom maybe a little earlier than the guitar sonata, something, say, around 1800. There were no solo sonatas being written by significant composers at that time, except for piano. Even my Suite for Guitar in 15-Note Equal Tuning (1987) has older models -- Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Satie, and Bach.

Q: Is the Cello Sonata a return to earlier musical interests?

A: No, I don't think so. I'd never written anything quite that conservative.

Q: In the liner notes for the Cello Sonata, you say that your new conservative works are not a renunciation of your modernist works.

A: I don't entirely reject modernism. In fact, I feel comfortable at the present time writing in just about any idiom. But if someone asked for an orchestral piece in an ultra-modern idiom, I think I would just have to say no. It's not idiomatic for orchestra. Players loathe it. It makes the orchestra sound bad, especially the strings. An ultra-modern piece for chamber ensemble is possible. For solo piano it's also possible. For solo violin, it's really not. I'm not exactly radical right now in the Fifth Symphony, but there are places where the piece is not in keys. On the other hand, the Cello Sonata is always in keys, even though there are some places where it's deliberately a little bit vague, but it never departs from conventional harmonic textures. The Fifth Symphony does. Sibelius never really experimented with modernism, but you can see some tendencies in that direction, especially in his Fourth and Sixth symphonies.

Q: You're listed in all the major reference books, but their discussions of your music are incomplete and sometimes inaccurate. Fill us in.

A: Composers can be classified as to how rapidly they change styles as they go through their lives. Some, like Brahms, quickly find a style and stick with it for the rest of their lives. Others, like Scriabin, undergo a continuous evolution that can be very clearly seen. The works written at the end of their lives are totally different from the works written in the beginning. Another is the composer who writes in a wide variety of idioms and

(MORE)

shows some evolution but will frequently switch styles in a most surprising and unexpected way: Igor Stravinsky is a case in point. I think I'm also in that latter category.

The very first pieces I ever wrote, at age 15, were wildly radical. I was radical up until the early 1950s, when I got a bit more conservative. In the mid 1950s I was mixing radical and conservative idioms, as in my First Symphony (1955). In the 60s I began to get more radical again, though I never did use the serial technique; the proper word would be atonal. I probably wrote my most radical pieces between 1962 and 1975, with my really abstract pieces coming in the 60s. I began to go away from it in the middle 1970s. I can see it in my Fourth Symphony: the first movement is radical; the last movement is not. Then come the 12 Microtonal Etudes and, shortly after that, these very conservative pieces, starting with the Guitar Sonata.

Q. The Microtonal Etudes represent a turning point. Is there any connection between them and the Cello Sonata or the Fifth Symphony?

A. Very definitely. The Microtonal Etudes were designed to illustrate a research project to discover chord progressions in equal tunings that would give you the sensation that you're in a key, if at all possible. So what I essentially set out to do was to write something as tonal as I possibly could within the confines of each of the microtonal tunings. One of the very first etudes that I wrote is one of the most tonal. I can honestly say it was the first completely tonal composition I ever wrote. I was writing tonal music and finding that it was very much to my liking. Upon their completion, my opinion was that the Microtonal Etudes probably were my best work. The next time someone came to commission a piece -- a guitarist, in fact -- the first thing I asked was what kind of idiom he was interested in. I told him I honestly didn't think the current modern idiom is very attractive for the guitar, and I asked if he would be interested in an older idiom. The result was the "1820" Beethoven-style guitar sonata.

Q. Have your ideas influenced the broader musical world?

A. I've never had a large body of students. I'm not anxious to be surrounded by an enclave of disciples or admirers. Rather than inspire students, I'm inclined to simply criticize what they show me. I'm not particularly anxious to enforce my style on someone else, as some of my teachers tried to do to me. If my current stylistic ideas catch on, it will be through their own merits.

#

NEWS & INFORMATION

From: Nat Silverman (708) 328-4292

For Release: April 1992

For: Cedille Records
1250 W. Grace St., Suite 3F
Chicago, IL 60613
(312) 404-0758

SURPRISE! EASLEY BLACKWOOD ECHOES SCHUBERT IN ROMANTIC NEW CELLO SONATA

Easley Blackwood, closely identified with modernist music both as composer and pianist, recently composed a surprisingly romantic Cello Sonata which makes its recording debut this month on Cedille Records, the enterprising independent label from Chicago.

The Cello Sonata, performed by cellist Kim Scholes and Blackwood, is coupled with the unjustly neglected Cello Sonata of 20th-century English composer Frank Bridge.

Blackwood conceived his four-movement sonata as the kind of work Schubert probably would have written if he had lived until 1845, by which time, Blackwood believes, the German composer would have discovered some new harmonic progressions. The "1845" sonata, completed in 1985, is one of several works to emerge from Blackwood's newest stylistic preoccupation: composing works in the styles of past masters, sometimes adding musical elements the original composers never used.

Blackwood's speculative, "what if" approach appears to be unique among contemporary composers.

[Blackwood's Symphony No. 5, written as a Sibelius symphony imbued with modernist elements the Finnish symphonist never adopted, receives its world premiere performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under James DePreist in six concert programs May 21-June 13.]

(MORE)

BLACKWOOD CELLO SONATA -- 2

Cedille's advertising for Blackwood's Cello Sonata -- "It was written when?" -- echoes the astonishment of most listeners. The label describes the sonata as "an elegant and unusual work, updated with streamlined styling and propelled by a contemporary dynamic verve." Its companion, the Bridge Cello Sonata, is described as "a rhapsodic work imbued with sparkling impressionism, improvisational surprises and exotic Oriental influences."

Blackwood wants to leave listeners exhilarated. "I'm simply hoping they'll get the same feeling they have after hearing a chamber piece by Schubert that they admire very much. I hope people will walk away with some of the tunes running around in their heads."

Why would a small label take a chance on an unfamiliar cello sonata by a composer widely identified with complex, ultra-modern works, dissonance and atonality?

"I thought it was a terrific piece when I heard it premiered in 1986 at the University of Chicago," says Cedille president Jim Ginsburg, a former student of Blackwood's at the university. "It's one of the great cello sonatas, a lovely and convincing work that deserves a wide audience."

Chicago-based cellist Scholes contributes incisive phrasing and remarkably lyrical, well-articulated playing. He won first prize at the 1985 Concert Artists Guild International Competition and has performed regularly with the Boston Musica Viva, New England Camerata, and Chicago Ensemble. Scholes recently recorded Chopin's complete works for cello and piano on another label.

The release marks Blackwood's return to the record catalog as a composer. Previous recordings of Blackwood compositions, such as the acclaimed First Symphony recording by Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra for RCA, are out of print.

Blackwood points out in the liner notes that his recent works in traditional idioms don't represent a renunciation of his ultra-modern works but rather a new interest in tonality arising from his extensive research into microtonal tunings and long repertoire study during his 30-plus years of teaching harmony at the university.

(MORE)

BLACKWOOD CELLO SONATA -- 3

He focused on Schubert because of an intimate familiarity with Schubert's works, especially the obscure songs with unusual harmonic progressions. To make a genuine contribution to the repertoire, Blackwood settled on an "1845" Schubertian cello sonata because Schubert never composed a cello sonata, and there is a dearth of major works for cello and piano between the great sonatas of Beethoven and Brahms.

The cover art on the CD booklet uses a playing-card theme as a visual pun on the names Blackwood and Bridge. Blackwood's father (also named Easley) wrote a syndicated column, "Blackwood on Bridge," and invented the famous Blackwood bidding convention.

#

Bridge: Cello Sonata
Blackwood: Cello Sonata, Op. 31
Kim Scholes, cello
Easley Blackwood, piano
Cedille CDR 90000 008

Note to Broadcasters: For a quick sample of the Blackwood Cello Sonata (a "needle drop," to use a quaintly archaic but descriptive phrase), listen first to the Scherzo Movement (track No. 5, 9:40). This is the one that might make the phones ring -- with no Pachelbel aftertaste. Cellist's name is pronounced SKOHLs.

Contact:
Nat Silverman
Nathan J. Silverman Co./PR
1830 Sherman Ave., Suite 401
Evanston, IL 60201
Phone: (708) 328-4292
Fax: (708) 328-4317

4/27/92

Available for Interview

EASLEY BLACKWOOD

Composer of inventive new
Schubert-style Cello Sonata, just released
on Cedille Records, and Sibelius-style Symphony,
to be premiered May 21 by Chicago Symphony Orchestra
and heard nationally via CSO radio syndication

The Story Behind the Music

Composer Easley Blackwood has been creating works in the styles of past masters and, in a sense, adding works to their catalogs, sometimes with stylistic touches the composers never used but which Blackwood wishes they had. Blackwood asks "What if?" and speculates on what these composers might have written.

Blackwood's direction appears to be unique among contemporary composers and puts him -- once again -- at the leading edge of musical trends.

These "conservative" works are all the more surprising coming from Blackwood, a prominent figure closely identified with the complex rhythms, chromaticism, dissonance and atonality of musical modernism, both as composer and concert pianist.

Blackwood's present interest in tonal music grew out of his research into microtonal tunings: "That project made me aware, for the first time, of the poetic aspects of writing in tonal idioms." He does not, however, renounce his ultra-modernist works.

The Cello Sonata is "in an idiom best described as ultra-conservative," Blackwood says. "I have tried to approach, as nearly as possible, the style I think Schubert would have discovered if he had lived until 1845."

Blackwood describes his Fifth Symphony as "the kind of piece Sibelius would have written in 1915 if he had experimented with the kind of modernism that was prevalent in Europe at that time."

Other works written in the same speculative vein include a Guitar Sonata "in a style that I think Beethoven would have used if he had written a guitar sonata in 1820"; Five Concert Etudes for piano "reminiscent of" Scriabin, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rachmaninoff and early Prokofiev; and a microtonal Suite for Guitar in 15-Note Equal Tuning. (Writers: Demo tapes of the Five Concert Etudes and Suite for Guitar in 15-Note Equal Tuning are available for those considering Blackwood feature articles.)

#