

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: April 2005

CHAMBER MUSIC CD SHOWCASES EVERGREEN WORKS BY EASLEY BLACKWOOD

World Premiere Recordings of Four Compositions For Piano and Strings by an American Master

"A lively, original, uncompromising talent"

The new CD *Easley Blackwood Chamber Music for Piano and Strings* offers world-premiere recordings of four works spanning more than 50 years, written by a major living American composer whose teachers included composers Paul Hindemith and Olivier Messiaen and famed French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger.

Blackwood, who turns 72 on April 21, performs as pianist on the new CD with Charles Pikler, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's principal violist, doubling on violin, and veteran CSO cellist Gary Stucka (Cedille Records 90000 081).

The CD opens with one of Blackwood's most recent compositions, the Second Viola Sonata, Op. 43 (2001), and closes with his first published work, the First Viola Sonata, Op. 1 (1953). In between are the First Violin Sonata, Op. 7 (1960), and Piano Trio, Op. 22 (1968).

Blackwood's stature as a composer (and pianist) is underscored by his presence in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, and *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

In a lengthy entry on Blackwood, *The World of Twentieth-Century Music*, published in 1968 and still a reference-room classic, quotes Alfred Frankenstein, the influential, longtime dean of West Coast critics, hailing Blackwood as a "lively, original, uncompromising talent."

Writing in the CD booklet notes, Blackwood categorizes himself as a composer who works "in a variety of styles, some of which are surprisingly different in nature." (But contrary to what some

- more -

commentators have written, Blackwood says he has never used serial techniques. Statements to that effect “are simply not true,” he said in an interview with Cedille Records.)

His recent Second Viola Sonata in five movements — the most conservative piece on the CD — offers innovations within its traditional tonality. It was commissioned by a violist who wanted elements suggestive of Bartok and Prokofiev. The unusual third movement is, for the most part, in 13/8 time, as was a section of Bartok's *Contrasts*. The Sonata concludes "in an unexpected way," Blackwood writes, "with its sudden change in tempo and rhythmic modality."

Three works from the 1950s and 60s represent Blackwood's atonal, modernist period. “Listeners who are curious about that era, which is now so fashionably vilified, will find these particular works an accessible, attractive, and stimulating introduction to that rarified musical world,” says Cedille Records founder and producer James Ginsburg.

Blackwood says "the melodic contours" of the First Violin Sonata show the influence of Hindemith, his teacher at Yale. "But the harmonic language is rather more like the pre-serial atonal works of Arnold Schönberg — an interesting combination, considering that those composers held each other's music in low regard."

As with a fair number of Blackwood's earlier compositions, The Trio, Op. 22, is in "an atonal, polyrhythmic idiom" pioneered in Germany during the 1960s. Unlike other purveyors of this style, Blackwood eschews random dissonance used for mere shock value. "On the contrary," he writes, "there is a constant sense of harmonic resolution from one sonority to the next."

The First Viola Sonata, Op. 1, reflects Blackwood's studies with Messiaen at the Berkshire Music Center. Blackwood recalls that the Sonata drew a rebuke from his teacher, Hindemith, who "thoroughly disliked the piece" and labeled its style "unnatural." Blackwood argued back that "all musical styles are basically unnatural, save perhaps for pentatonic monody." Hindemith, Blackwood writes, "was not a skilled debater."

What shines through in all of Blackwood's music is "a craftsmanship, a sense of resolution that's ultimately pleasing, and a certain way of phrasing that seem to transcend whatever style he's working in," says Ginsburg, who has known Blackwood since the 1980s. "There's also a tendency toward symmetry, as in his use of mirror-images or palindromes."

“I think the overall purpose of music is to entertain and please. Nothing more, nothing less,” Blackwood once told a Chicago interviewer.

Easley Blackwood Chamber Music is the eleventh CD from Cedille Records with Blackwood appearing as composer, pianist, or both.

His many other credits include having had his First Symphony premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Charles Munch, his Second Symphony by the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell, and his Fifth Symphony by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, under James DePreist.

A native of Indianapolis, Blackwood remains active as composer, pianist, and emeritus professor at the University of Chicago, where he taught music theory and composition full-time from 1958 to 1997.

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, consumers are invited to 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.

###

EASLEY BLACKWOOD CHAMBER MUSIC
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 081)

Second Viola Sonata, Op. 43 (24:09)
First Violin Sonata, Op. 7 (16:39)
Piano Trio, Op. 22 (16:35)
First Viola Sonata, Op. 1 (13:57)

Easley Blackwood, piano
Charles Pikler, violin and viola
Gary Stucka, cello