

Cedille Records
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WORLD PREMIER RECORDING
Clarinet Sonatas by Easley Blackwood and Max Reger

Reger: Sonata No. 3 in B-flat major
for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 107

Blackwood: Sonata in E major
for Piccolo Clarinet and Piano, Op. 38

Blackwood: Sonata in A minor for
Clarinet and Piano, Op. 37

John Bruce Yeh, clarinet

Easley Blackwood, piano

**CLARINET SONATAS BY
EASLEY BLACKWOOD (b. 1933)
AND MAX REGER (1873-1916)**

Blackwood: Sonata in A minor, Op. 37* (24:23)

- 1 I. Molto Allegro (8:36)
- 2 II. Tema (Grave) con variazioni (9:06)
- 3 III. Allegro risoluto (6:32)

Reger: Sonata No. 3 in B-flat major, Op. 107 (31:08)

- 4 I. Moderato (11:40)
- 5 II. Vivace-Adagio-Vivace (5:26)
- 6 III. Adagio (6:02)
- 7 IV. Allegretto con grazia (7:48)

Blackwood: Sonatina in F major for Piccolo Clarinet, Op. 38* (11:05)

- 8 I. Allegro con brio (3:17)
- 9 II. Adagio (4:31)
- 10 III. Allegretto (3:12)

John Bruce Yeh, clarinet

Easley Blackwood, piano *World Premiere Recording TT: (67:00)

Sonata Op. 37 and Sonatina Op. 38 by Easley Blackwood

Both pieces were written between June 30 and October 24, 1994 - — first the Sonata, and then two weeks later, the Sonatina. They were composed for Mr. Yeh, with whom I have had a stimulating musical relationship for over 17 years. It seems rather strange that there should be so little for clarinet and piano in the standard repertoire. The only works of this genre by well-known composers are the Duo of Weber, the two Sonatas of Brahms, a Sonata by Saint-Saens, three Sonatas by Reger, the Sonata by Poulenc, and the Rhapsody of Debussy.

My Sonata is written for clarinet in A for two reasons: most of the aforementioned works are for clarinet in B-flat, suggesting that a gap might be filled; also, the additional low note furnished by the clarinet in A is very useful. My Sonata is in a conservative tonal idiom, which, for the past seventeen years, I have found more convivial than conventional, academic modernism. In the Sonata, I use the entire tonal harmonic vocabulary, including advanced altered chords and chromatic resolutions, such as those found in Franck, Strauss, and Rachmaninoff, but sparingly — only at dramatic or expressive moments.

The first movement is in sonata-allegro form, although with an unusual key arrangement, in that the first and second themes in the exposition are in A minor and B major, respectively. Another salient feature of the movement is its relatively frequent use of augmented triads to effect modulations between relatively remote keys. This is especially noticeable in the connection between A minor and B major in the exposition, and from B major back to A minor via a different route from the exposition to the development. In the recapitulation, the second theme is presented in A major. The movement closes with a brief coda, at the beginning of which augmented triads are again prominent.

The second movement is a series of gently contrasting episodes that bear some resemblance to a theme and variations, especially at the close of each episode. Each section is in a different mode and key; however the modes are used strictly only at the outset and a later return, while the central portions are freer. The scheme is as follows: Theme, in C-sharp minor Aeolian mode, a slow march; Variation 1, F major Mixolydian mode, rather quicker; Variation 2, C minor Dorian, slow and pensive; Variation 3, E major Lydian, a minuet; and Variation 4, C-sharp minor Phrygian, a barcarolle.

The last movement is a sonata-rondo, again featuring an unusual key scheme. The first statement of the refrain is in A minor, the first couplet is in C-sharp major, and the next version of the refrain is in A-sharp minor, a variation on the first featuring invertible counterpoint. The development is characterized by a more complex chromaticism; following this, the couplet returns in D major. The work concludes with a brief reference to the refrain and a coda.

The Sonatina posed a special challenge, for there is no repertoire whatever for piano and E-flat clarinet (piccolo clarinet) — at least to my knowledge. Furthermore, the E-flat clarinet is generally associated with humor or grotesquerie, such as the sardonic solo during the “bad-dream” episode of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, or the outlandish solo in Copland’s *El Salon Mexico*. But the instrument is adaptable to a lyric style as well, especially in the lower register, and it generally permits a higher tessitura, although this can become a dangerous endurance problem for the performer. In order that the Sonata and the Sonatina should be in contrasting styles, the latter uses a simpler harmonic vocabulary and a less intricate formal arrangement.

The Sonatina’s first movement is a conventional sonata form whose first and second themes are in F major and C major,

respectively, in the exposition. The development does not make use of the more remote keys, tonics being confined to A minor, E minor, G major, and C major. The second movement is in an A-B-A form; outer sections are in A-flat major, and the central section is in F minor. The finale is a rondo that uses a rather more intricate key scheme, but largely avoids chromatic progressions. Overall, the Sonatina is not unlike the three Sonatinas for violin and piano of Schubert, although the key successions of the last movement are rather more like Schubert's song *Die Sterne* (D. 939, 1828).

Sonata No. 3, Op. 107 by Max Reger

Reger's Sonata No. 3, Op. 107, was completed in 1909, seven years before his untimely death in 1916 at age 43. In 1909, this unjustly neglected composer was enjoying enormous prestige. From 1907 to 1911, he was professor of composition and director of music at Leipzig University. At the same time, he composed more than twenty large-scale works, while maintaining active careers as both conductor and pianist. Although best known and esteemed for his organ works, he composed in every genre, save for opera. As a composer, Reger is part of the German Romantic lineage that includes Shumann, Wagner, Brahms, Strauss, and Schoenberg in his pre-atonal period, and the influence of these can be plainly sensed in Reger's music. He is also consciously indebted to J.S. Bach, especially in his works for piano and organ.

One factor that aided Reger in his prolific creativity was his ability to work on several different compositions simultaneously. For example, part of the day might be given to advancing on a new work — sketching out the principle melodies, the bass line, and an overview of the form. Next, he might take a work already in this state, and add details regarding the harmony. Finally he would go on to yet another work that needed only the working out of the intricate voicings and textures that are so characteristic of his style. I strongly suspect that the Third Clarinet Sonata was written in these three stages.

The Sonata is a large, ambitious work that should certainly be regarded as among the best of the repertoire for clarinet and piano. Its harmonic idiom is complex and chromatic, but never diffuse or incoherent. Formally, it is entirely traditional; the first movement is in sonata-allegro form, the second is a scherzo and trio, the third is a ternary song form, and the finale is a sonata-rondo. Of particular interest is the use in later movements of material heard earlier. For example, portions of the scherzo are inconspicuously

quoted in the slow movement. Of more importance are the expressive transformations of a six-note motive that forms the principal part of the first movement's second theme. Transformations of this nature play a significant part in works of composers often characterized as post-Wagnerian. The six-note motive is recalled once in the third movement at a particularly expressive moment, and then assumes greater importance in the Sonata's finale, where it is presented first as a pastoral melody, then a stately chorale, and finally a lilting dance. The work closes with a coda that is drawn, first from the slow movement, and then from the ending of both the exposition and recapitulation of the first movement, which in turn contains a final statement of the six-note motive.

— Easley Blackwood

About the Clarinets

I am very grateful to the Yamaha Company which created the three clarinets used on this recording. The *Oehler-System*, or “German-system”, clarinet in B^b played in Max Reger's Sonata is typical of those widely used in Germany. Its sound is characterized by a homogeneous tone quality and the tendency to a phrasing aesthetic which emphasized long, smooth lines. The *Boehm-System* clarinets, pitched here in A and E^b for Easley Blackwood's Sonata and Sonatina respectively, employ the so-called “French-System” fingering widely used by clarinetists around the world (except in Germany and Austria). The slightly larger dimensions of the reed, mouthpiece, and bore of French-system instruments promote a degree of flexibility and brilliance in the tone quality not emphasized by German-System instruments. Hence, the French-style performance aesthetic tends toward coloristic shadings and tonal variety to a greater degree than the German-style.

— John Bruce Yeh

Copies of the scores of Easley Blackwood's Sonata in A minor, Op. 37 and Sonatina in F major for Piccolo Clarinet, Op. 38 may be obtained from Blackwood Enterprises, 5300 South Shore Drive, Chicago, Illinois, 60615. The Sonata costs \$25; the Sonatina costs \$17.50.

I am very grateful to the Yamaha Company who created the three clarinets used on this recording. The Oehler-System, or "German-system", clarinet in B^b played in Max Reger's Sonata is typical of those widely used in Germany. Its sound is characterized by a homogeneous tone quality and the tendency to a phrasing aesthetic which emphasized long, smooth lines. The Boehm-System clarinets, pitched here in A and E^b for Easley Blackwood's Sonata and Sonatina respectively, employ the so-called "French-System" fingering widely used by clarinetists all over the world except in Germany and Austria. The slightly larger dimensions of the reed, mouthpiece, and bore of French-system instruments promote a degree of flexibility and brilliance in the tone quality not emphasized by German-System instruments. Hence, the French-style performance aesthetic tends toward coloristic shadings and tonal variety to a greater degree than the German-style. Of course this explanation is purely academic, since the performer must always express himself with his own musical voice, while at the same time respect the composers intentions.

—John Bruce Yeh

About the Performers

Easley Blackwood's career as a composer has been consistent only in its seeming contradictions and strong individuality. A Professor at the University of Chicago since 1958, Blackwood received his musical training from such legendary figures as Olivier Messiaen, Paul Hindemith (at Yale, where Blackwood earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in 1953 and 1954), and Nadia Boulanger. Blackwood's recent return to tonal composition, which has even produced some works set in considerably older musical styles, stems from his research into the properties of microtonal tunings and his decades-long study of harmony.

As a pianist, Easley Blackwood is cited in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* "for his performances of modern works of transcendental difficulty." His recordings on Cedille Records of music of Alfredo Casella and Karol Szymanowski (CDR 90000 003; "Intelligent, sensitive, masterly playing." — *High Performance Review*) and sonatas by Ives and Copland (CDR 90000 005; "***** A bulls-eye." — *Cincinnati Enquirer*) have played to rave reviews.

John Bruce Yeh has been a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1977. Having joined the orchestra at the age of 19 as Solo Bass Clarinetist, he was appointed Assistant Principal

Clarinetist and Solo E-flat Clarinetist two years later by Sir Georg Solti. Mr. Yeh was a 1976 Fromm Fellow at Tanglewood, where he studied with Harold Wright of the Boston Symphony, and received the Benjamin H. Delson Memorial Award as Outstanding Instrumentalist. Mr. Yeh went on to win prizes at the 1982 Munich International Music Competition and the 1985 Naumburg Clarinet Competition in New York. John Bruce Yeh is Director of the Grammy Award-winning Chicago Pro Musica, which he organized in 1979. He also continues to perform as a soloist with orchestras throughout Europe and the United States, and with prestigious chamber ensembles including the Guarneri String Quartet and The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

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