POWERHOUSE PIANISTS

Blair McMillen, piano
2. Basic Training (1994) (13:30)

Stephen Gosling, piano
8. Or-like... a an Engine (1994) (3:24)
10. Five Etudes for Piano** (2001)
11. I, Les Innocence (2:50)
12. If, Rain (4:43)
13. Ill, Melt (3:35)
14. IV, Papilloes (6:14)
15. V, Schizophrenia (3:24)
Total Time: 77:55

*World Premiere Recording of this version
**World Premiere Recording

“Brilliant young stars... The dynamic duo of contemporary music pianists.”
Every journey begins with a single step. A personal dream of mine began with forming the American Modern Ensemble in 2005. For our first season, we thought it wouldn’t be amazing to hear two world-class pianists, Stephen Gosling and Blair McMillen, on the same concert, back to back? They are both members of AME and quite different: dividing the program would allow them to choose repertoire and add more variety, since they each have distinct tastes. The audience loved it. We received a terrific reception at that first concert, complete with a glowing New York Times review and a separate write-up of Blair and Stephen on the cover page of the Weekend Arts section. The demand for a recording became so overwhelming that we decided to embark on our first recording project on the AMR label.

After months of scheduling, rescheduling, and a recording session complete with two broken keys (the result of Blair playing the keyboard with baseballs in the Gosfield), two broken strings and two exasperated piano tuners, we finally finished. The recording you have in front of you is the result of excellent music by outstanding composers, fantastic playing, a significant amount of labor by everyone involved and much love.

Robert Paterson, Artistic Director
American Modern Ensemble

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**Program Notes**

**Piano Sonata - Chester Biscardi**

Since the early 1970s, I have been interested in the ways literature and painting influence musical ideas and forms—how literary images or use of color can inspire everything from the smallest melodic shape to a work's overall structure. The structure of Piano Sonata is based upon Jasper Johns' Voice 2. Voice 2 has gone through three transformations: originally an oil and collage triptych (1971), later a three-panel lithograph (1982), and, in a final version, a nine-panel interchangeable series made of the 1982 lithograph. Johns borrows material from earlier works and utilizes overlapping, extension, and repetition as the main ingredients of form. Piano Sonata is divided into three sections which reflect three musical textures: angular and pulsating; fast runs and chords; and lyrical. As with Johns' series, the three sections of Piano Sonata evolve into nine interactive sections and a coda.

*Piano Sonata* was written for Anthony de Mare and premiered on his New York debut recital in 1986.

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**Basic Training - Lee Hyla**

Basic Training was written for Steve Drury as a tribute to Margaret Ott, a wonderful pianist and teacher based in Spokane, Washington. The piece was commissioned by the Friends of Margaret Ott for performance at a concert in her honor in May, 1995. Basic Training loosely (and not really linearly) traces the development of a pianist from the Neanderthal-like, noise-producing thuds of first contact, through a number of textures and variations, finally achieving something of a sophisticated intimacy with the instrument. The piece also has as one of its primary ideas the development of a strong sense of space. This sense of space occurs both horizontally (often through the use of silence) and vertically (through hard juxtaposition of registers).

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**Where Branched Thoughts Murmur in the Wind**

- **Eric Moe**

*Where Branched Thoughts Murmur in the Wind* is intended to be performed as a prelude to my Dance of the Honey Monkey (1999), although it can be performed independently. It is an ethereal meditative dance, melancholy in tone, inspired by the dance of the celestial sirens of Greek mythology, creatures responsible for the music of the spheres and for conveying the souls of the dead, so-called psychopomps. The title comes from Keats' *Ode to Psyche*:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrdden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind...

The work was written at the kind request of the admirable pianist David Piyol, who suggested I write him a celestial dance to accompany the very earthly and earthy Honey Monkey. I am very grateful for his interest and encouragement.

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**Svetlana Dibiaso**

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Brooklyn, October 5, 1941 - Annie Costfield

When I was asked to compose a piano piece representing Brooklyn for a concert commemorating the 100th anniversary of the unification of the five boroughs of New York City, I was inspired by the 1941 Dodgers vs. Yankees baseball World Series, thus coining the phrase “World Serial Music.” The piece is named for the notorious fourth game of the series. My mother, born in Flatbush, Brooklyn, was a wildly enthusiastic 12-year-old Dodgers fan at the time, and was recently reminiscing about watching this memorable but heartbreaking game at Ebbets Field. At the top of the ninth inning, a hair’s breadth away from the end of the game, Dodgers pitcher Hugh Casey struck out Yankee Tommy Henrich with a pitch that should have ended the game in a 4-3 Dodger victory, which would have tied the series at two games each. Instead, the ball rolled under the catcher Mickey Owen’s glove, getting by him and allowing Henrich to reach first base safely. The Yankees went on to score four more runs to win, 7-4, and turn the series around. Shaken by their unexpected loss, the Dodgers lost again the next day, and the Yankees won yet another world championship.

Brooklyn, October 5, 1941 is performed with two baseballs and a catcher’s mitt, which are used to strike both the piano keys and the strings and soundboard inside the piano. The score gives instructions to have additional baseballs available to the pianist, should he, like Mickey Owen, suffer the mishap of letting the ball get away.

Playing the piano with baseballs and a catcher’s mitt produces different sounds and tonalities than the traditional method of playing with the fingers: new groups of notes and rapid sequential chords become possible by rocking the balls both side-to-side and back-and-forth on the keyboard, and wider spans are reached with the aid of the mitt. Sounds also differ inside the piano, using the baseballs to mute strings and strike the metal soundboard under the lid. Speed is enhanced, and the technique of rocking the baseballs creates a distinctive machine-like flurry of notes and tremolos. Although I know of no previous works composed for piano and baseballs, this is a tip of the hat to the late Nicholas Slonimsky, who performed Chopin’s Black Key Etude by rolling an orange on the piano keys.

Brooklyn, October 5, 1941 was premiered by Guy Livingston, at Bruno Walter Auditorium, Lincoln Center, New York, December 1997. – A.G.

Bagatelle - George Tsontakis

I composed this Bagatelle in 1989, thinking it was to be a movement of an extended work, or a piece within a set of light, colorful pieces for piano. Instead, I decided to write a different type of work entirely, and abandoned the first concept for a large-scale formal work which was to be more serious in intent. The eventual result of my change of heart was Ghost Variations, a thirty-minute work for piano which was premiered and recorded by Stephen Hough on the Hyperion label. In Bagatelle, I was very conscious of my attempt to add to my own technique and palette an evocative fluidity and the brand of effortless design and phrasing that I so admired in Debussy. At the same time, there can be heard a hint of Brahms, I think, in the strong and warming harmonic verticalities. The works remained unpublished until John Cheek premiered it at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music in 1993. – G.T.

Episodes for Piano - Perry Townsend

Episodes for Piano was written in 1983-84 and revised in 1994. It is a virtuosic solo piece focusing on three musical ideas or "episodes," each with its own distinct character. The first episode is a swirl of sensuous cascades, the second a hypnotic loop of counterpoint, and the third a dark, quivering bass melody. The drama really begins once these musics are introduced, as their remnants go wandering about, soloizing, interweaving and competing with each other—ultimately copulating, crashing, burning and dissipating, leaving memories and questions in their wake. Whether the three episodes remain separate or become fused somehow is unresolved.

Tango? - Conlon Nancarrow

From 1983-84, pianist Yar Mikhashoff (1941-93) collaborated with Quadriaurum Music Press to compile a collection of tangos for solo piano. The main stipulation was that they not exceed four minutes in duration. Nancarrow composed Tango? for this collection, and composers as diverse as Aaron Copland, Milton Gabbett, Oliver Knussen, Per Nørgård and Jukka Tiensuu—to name a few—were also invited to submit works. The result of this initiative was a collection of 126 new tangos for solo piano. Mikhashoff selected nineteen of these for his recording Inclination & Desire, released in 1995 on New Albion Records.

Or like... an engine - Joan Tower

"Joan Tower was invited to join eleven other composers in writing new works for the 50th anniversary concert honoring the New York public radio station, WNYC-FM. All the pieces were linked to a poem by John Ashbery, from which Tower selected the line "like a... an engine" as the title for a toccata-like piece for piano solo. Although the title seems to stammer slightly, the piece emphatically does not, surging ahead in a swirl of rapid 16th-note figurations. It is dedicated to pianist Ursula Oppens, who gave the first performance in New York's Alice Tully Hall in 1994."

– from the G. Schirmer website

E-Machines - David Rakowski

E-Machines was written outdoors, in six days, in a playground in Mesa, Arizona, thus proving that too much sun can be bad for you. It was written at the request of Martin Butler, a college roommate of mine whose lips constantly jugged and whose body was constantly involved in jittery motion. Martin could play repeated notes on the piano very well, and it became a running gag that whenever he was at the piano and I walked through, he would play some. Thus E-Machines was meant as a funny musical portrait of him, utilizing the repeated note as the basis of an etude. E-Machines was the first of an expanding series of piano etudes currently numbering 82.

– D.R.

Five Etudes for Piano - Mischa Zupko

Five Etudes for Piano is a set of character pieces labeled etudes more for the severity of their technical demands and obsessive nature than the idea that each one explores a specific pianistic issue. The idea was to produce a set of pieces that would contain a high level of contrast in character and pianistic approach from one piece to the next as well as within each piece. At the same time, I wanted to create links that would connect these contrasts in an organic way. The solution was a formal approach I refer to as 'virus', in which a steady state idea is interrupted by an anomaly.

– Robert Paterson
that reappears with more frequency as the piece continues until it finally takes over and hence the music becomes transformed. For example, the first etude begins in a somewhat sinister manner where a steady stream of tripletts in the left hand serve as a grid over which various rhythmic gyrations in the right hand take place. Soon after the piece begins, faster four-note groupings are heard within the context of the steady tripletts. At the same time, a short two note descending motive played at a sudden soft dynamic is heard as an interruption of the rhythmical gyrations in the right hand. Within the context of the overall relentless character of the opening section, these anomalies seem like small glitches in a machine-like process, but toward the end where these musical fragments dominate, they yield a very different, almost ethereal music. There are also some obvious and other more subtle motivic connections between the pieces that serve as points of departure and ultimately yield very different results in the different contexts.

Another issue of central importance to these etudes is the use of pedal in relation to harmony. In these works I tried to create a sense of slowly metamorphosing harmony by utilizing various pedaling techniques in conjunction with subtly changing harmonic fields to produce what in essence sounds like a melting process. This can most easily be recognized in the third etude titled Melt.

Ultimately, these pieces were written in an attempt to capture the awe inspired by the briefest of moments; the splash of a rain drop in a quiet pool, the slow changing form of a candle as it burns down, the mystique of the butterfly hovering in a single spot as the world moves around it. Five Etudes for Piano were written for and are dedicated to Winston Choi.

M.Z.

For information on each composer, visit the following websites:
Chester Biscardi
www.chesterbiscardi.com

Annie Gosfield
www.anniegosfield.com

Lee Hyla
www.leehyla.com

Eric Moe
www.ericmoe.net

Conlon Nancarrow
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conlon_Nancarrow

davidrakowskiprofilehome.earthlink.net/~ziordadn/default.htm

Joan Tower
www.schirmer.com

Perry Townsend
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perry_Townsend

George Tsontakis
www.presser.com

Misha Zupko
www.mischaZupko.com

Energetically committed to the music of our time, pianist Stephen Gosling is a member of the New York New Music Ensemble, Ensemble Sospeso, Columbia Sinfonietta, and Neotrux. He is additionally a frequent guest artist of many other groups, including the New York Philharmonic, Orpheus, American Composers Orchestra, Riverside Symphony, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, Speculum Musicae, Ensemble 21, Absolute Ensemble, Continuum, SEM Ensemble, DaCapo Chamber Players, the League of Composers/ISC Chamber Players, and Da Camera of Houston.

Mr. Gosling moved to New York from England at the age of eighteen to study with Oxana Yablonskaya at the Juilliard School, where he earned his Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral degrees. During this time he was awarded the Menin Prize for Outstanding Excellence and Leadership in Music and the Sony Elevated Standards Fellowship. He was also featured as a concerto soloist an unprecedented four times in works by Stravinsky, Schnittke, Schoenfield (whose Four Parables for Piano and Orchestra he subsequently performed in Europe with the Dutch Radio Philharmonic Orchestra under Lukas Foss) and Corigliano (conducted by Leonard Slatkin).

Mr. Gosling performed in the New Juilliard Ensemble for three years from its inception, was pianist of the Aspen Contemporary Ensemble for three summers, and has been featured in four Summergarden programs at MOMA. He has also performed at the Friedheim Composition Awards at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the Chamber Music Society’s Great Day in New York festival, the opening of the new Winter Garden in downtown Manhattan (in Daniele Lombardi’s Symphonies for 21 Pianos), and Zankel Hall’s inaugural concert.

Among Mr. Gosling’s recent performances have been the world premiere of John Paath’s Piano Concerto with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, solo recitals at Weil Recital Hall (featuring works by Alexander Tcherpchin and his students) and Faust-Harrison Pianos (presented by the International Society for Contemporary Music and featuring works for piano and electronics), orchestral piano duties with the New York Philharmonic in works by Leonard Bernstein, and a performance of Brian Ferneyhough’s Lemmalan Epigram at the Lincoln Center Festival. Upcoming projects include performances next month in Xian, Xi’an, and Lisboa with Shen Wei Dance Arts at Het Muziektheater in Amsterdam, a solo recital (March 30th) at Merkin Hall, with Brian Schorer’s “Manhattan Impromptus,” the premiere of some new piano etudes by Augusta Read Thomas, and performances of solo and chamber works by William Babbitt, to celebrate the composer’s 90th year.

Mr. Gosling has made over 30 recordings for Albany, Bridge, Capstone, Centaur, CRI, Innova, Koch, Mode, Morrison Music Trust, Naxos, New World Records, and Rattle Records.

For more information, please visit:
www.americanmodernensemble.org.
Blair McMillen has established himself as one of the most versatile and sought-after pianists today. The New York Times has described his playing as "riveting," "brilliant," and "prodigiously accomplished and exciting." Known for imaginative and daring programming, his repertoire spans from late-medieval keyboard manuscripts to the 21st century. Recent recitals include Miller Theatre's 15th-anniversary "Piano Revolution" series, the Moscow Conservatory, Caramoor, CalArts, Dartmouth University, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton NJ, and the Musica Antica e Nuova series at Columbia University. Mr. McMillen recently made his Carnegie Hall debut as soloist, under the baton of David Robertson.

Dedicated to new and groundbreaking projects, Blair McMillen is intensely committed to performing the music of today. He recently gave the premieres of Frederic Rzewski's "Dust" and Gacinto Scelsi's "La Sera" on solo recitals, and he continues working with young composers in commissioning new works for the piano. He is a founding member of the performer/composer collective Coupéduinduction, an ensemble-in-residence at Columbia University and recently featured at the MATA Festival. Mr. McMillen is also pianist for the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players. In addition to its New York concert season and residency at Bard College and Conservatory, Da Capo has toured Russia several times since 2003.

An avid chamber musician, Mr. McMillen has given collaborative concerts across the country and abroad. He has performed with violinist Leonidas Kavakos,, soprano Lucy Shelton, cellist Fred Sherry, the New York Woodwind Quintet, the Locrian Chamber Players, Amelie Piano Trio/East Meets West, and the Eos Ensemble, among others. Festival appearances include Aspen, Music Academy of the West, Princeton, Maverick Concerts, the Moscow Forum, St. Petersburg's "Sound Ways", La Jolla, Taos, Cape and Islands, Green Lake, and Summergarden.

Raised in San Francisco and Charlotte, NC; Blair McMillen holds degrees from Oberlin College, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Juilliard School. A past winner of the National Young Artists Competition and the Aspen Music Festival's Time-Warner Prize, he won the Gina Bachauer Competition and the Sony ES Grant for Musical Excellence while a student at Juilliard. A solo CD "Soundscapes," featuring music of Debussy, Scriabin, Liszt, and Bolcom was released to critical acclaim in 2004. Other recent recordings include Concert Music of Fred Hersch on Navé; Multiplicities: Born in '38 on Centaur; and The Complete Keyboard Music of Esa-Pekka Salonen on Bridge.

Mr. McMillen resides in New York City and teaches at Bard College. For more information, visit www.blairmcmillen.com.
Standing Room Only for New Music, 
Fierce and Quiet Alike

By BERNARD HOLLAND
Published: October 18, 2005

Pessimists about the future of classical music may be looking in the wrong place. There were empty seats at the Metropolitan Opera's estimable "Aida" on Friday night, but on Saturday, "Powerhouse Pianists" filled the Carnegie Institute to its gills, with standees crowding the rim of this small West Village gallery and hopeful ticket buyers stretching out onto 13th Street. The American Modern Ensemble is new this year and dedicates its time to American composers. This evening belied 10 of them, their music executed alternately by two first-rate pianists, Blair McMillen and Stephen Gosling.

There were bursts of bright, ringing optimism (Chester Biscardi's "Piano Sonata") and, to call such good thoughts into question, the purposeful brutality of Lee Hyla's "Basic Training": spasmodic violence followed by long silences meant to absorb its energy. There were a few quieter moments. Eric Moe's "Where Branched Thoughts Murmurd in the Wind" was stripped-down counterpart, a kind of mournful two-part invention. George Tsontakis's "Bagatelle" swayed and rippled like wind chimes. Annie Gosfield's "Brooklyn, October 5, 1947" remembered a calamitous moment in Dodger history using baseball gear as props. What we mostly heard was a kind of musical factory in tone painting, with macabrelike estimations of pounding, clanking and trilling. So much 20th-century style was manufactured on the spot, not drawn from the past. Conlon Nancarrow, master of the player-piano, was the evening's exemplar in this regard. His "Tango?" sets up a wall of rapid-fire complication and allows snippets of dance music to peek out from behind.

Joan Tower's "Or like a... an Engine" was as the program notes describe it: "toocattlike" with little rhythmic glitches to interrupt the steady flow of notes. Perry Townsend's "Episodes for Piano" suggest that a lot of young composers (Mr. Biscardi is another) have leapedfrogged backward over Schoenberg and his school and are listening to Debussy.

Most of this music was fiercely virtuosic: David Rakowski's "E-Machines" a whirl of repeated notes, and Mischa Zupko's "Five Studies for Piano" Liant-like in their florid generosity. This is a worthwhile new organization with what seems a strong fan base and, if Mr. McMillen and Mr. Gosling are examples, performers of high quality.

American Modern Ensemble

Hailed by the New York Times as having "a strong fan base and performers of high-quality," "exceptional energy and thoughtful programming" (MusicWeb International) and "consummate versatility" (Sequenca21), the American Modern Ensemble has quickly become a major force in the American new music scene, having performed works by over fifty living composers with a world-class ensemble made up of the finest performers in North America.

The American Modern Ensemble is based in New York City and was formed in 2005 with the goal of premiering, performing, recording and commissioning the widest possible repertoire written by American composers. The focus is to celebrate and showcase American music, especially works written by living composers. Each season, we choose one American composer to feature on a program devoted to his or her music. AME is also dedicated to education and outreach programs that expose communities to American music.

Support AME!

Be a part of our family of donors who celebrate and support the rich tradition of American music. The incredible synergy between composers, artists and audience members is what makes AME so unique, vibrant and special. Your generous donation ensures our continued success.

For upcoming performances and to hear AME live, please visit www.americanmodernensemble.org

AME is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Please visit the AME site to make a tax-deductible donation online.

Technical Details

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