

Aaron Jay Kernis is often considered the most eclectic of a generation of American composers who have grown up knowing music as a plural noun. His music accepts the worlds of Mahler, Barber, Berg, John Adams, Arvo Pärt, Bach, Debussy, Steve Reich, Britten, Messiaen, Morton Feldman, Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss. In one sudden moment of the symphony included here, Kernis evokes the classic rocker, Jerry Lee Lewis; meanwhile he turns for inspiration, in the string quartet, to the medieval mystic, Hildegard of Bingen.

Eclecticism is, for a young cosmopolitan late-century American composer, an inevitable recognition of a world teeming with all ages, varieties and cultures of recorded and live musics. But for Kernis it is more. As a composer profoundly engaged with the world around him, he enthusiastically embraces musical possibilities.

“I want everything to be included in music,” Kernis has written, “soaring melody, consonance, tension, dissonance, drive, relaxation, colour, strong harmony and form - and for every possible emotion to be elicited actively by the passionate use of these elements.” The result is a music enfolding extremes, be it political rage or exultant beauty; a music which finds surprising room for both restless urban energy and rapturous contemplation; a music never afraid to be boisterous, gorgeous, majestic or monumental; a music that bursts with attention-getting colours.

Born in Philadelphia on the fifteenth day of 1960, Kernis was, by his admission, a late bloomer. His interest in music began when he taught himself piano at the age of twelve and soon after began composing. But he quickly proceeded through a remarkable succession of teachers, among them John Adams at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music; Charles Wuorinen at Manhattan School of Music; Morton Subotnick, Bernard Rands and Jacob Druckman at Yale. And success came early. At the age of twenty-three, he received national attention when Zubin Mehta conducted a New York Philharmonic performance of his first orchestral score, *Dream of the morning sky*.

From then on Kernis became a familiar figure on the New York music scene, producing, throughout the Eighties, an impressively large body of orchestral, chamber, solo instrumental, vocal and choral pieces, much of it programmatic or text-inspired. With the two works recorded here, however, Kernis has produced his first traditional full-fledged, four-movement symphony and quartet; although in neither case has he forsaken his penchant for poetic illusion, dramatization or intense expressivity.

The composer claims that before composing his First Symphony, *Symphony in Waves*, in 1989, he had never imagined he would write a symphony. "It seemed such an outdated and irrelevant form," he wrote in the programme note of its first complete performance. But by bringing his own experiences and passions to it, he found himself "excited by the communicative potential, by the highly varied ideas and emotions, latent in traditional forms."

Kernis devised the symphony around a central image of waves - waves of sound, light, wind and water. And each movement, Kernis writes, "uses some aspect of wave motion: swells and troughs of dynamics, densities and instrumental colour; the "sounds" of light broken into flickering bits by water's action."

The waves of the first movement, titled "Continuous wave", are primordial, the kinds found in the Rhine of Wagner and the cosmos of Philip Glass. For the scherzo-like second movement, the composer describes the random sounding (though precisely notated) sprinkling of isolated quick notes, beginning as harmonics in six solo violins, but soon spreading through the strings, as a kind of flickering of light on waves; but one is tempted to take the analogy further, as if these are light waves in their particle guise.

The arresting slow movement called “Still movement”, with its glacial sonorities, is, as described by the composer, the stopped motion of a cresting tidal wave, while the eerie middle section then seems a hallucinatory floating under water, beneath the turbulent surface. A velvety calm returns in the brief fourth movement, an *intermezzo* which the composer asks to be played “smooth and silken”. One is tempted to liken the raucous dance-rhythm-drunken finale to the lively party on the cruise ship riding the oceanic waves.

With the risk of carrying the wave metaphor too far, the entire symphony can also be viewed as the natural progression of the wave. A grand, ascending melody, beginning in low solo cello and rising high in the violin, is first heard early in the opening moment and it signifies a vast swelling that occurs throughout the first two movements. Practically every motive and sequence in those first two movements ascends, reaching a massive climax in the momentous stop-frame cresting of the third movement. The fourth movement, which contains the first real downward directed figuration, is a surprisingly gentle fall until one realizes that far less energy is consumed sliding down than confronting gravity. That energy is reserved for the finale, a joyful splash, with the symphony's thematic elements thrown asunder.

One could approach the symphony in many other ways - as a complex and ingenious melding of minimalist repetition and rhythmic irregularity; as a study in common musical ground between sinuous chromatic melody and salsa; as an exploration in musical coherence, for instance, the subliminal setting up of a Jerry Lee Lewis-inspired final bar of the scherzo that simultaneously seems to come out of nowhere but belong. But such complexities and subtleties come at a price - the piece is even more difficult to perform than it sounds. The symphony was commissioned by the St Paul Chamber Orchestra, conducted by John Adams, but so intricate is its rhythmic structure that only the first two movements were able to be prepared during normal rehearsal time. The first complete performance was given two years later, in 1991, by the New York Chamber Symphony under Gerard Schwarz, from which concerts this recording evolved. The score is dedicated to John Adams.

For his String Quartet *musica celestis*, which was commissioned by the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation and written for the Lark Quartet in 1990, Kernis began his programme note with the kind of disclaimer that questions the efficacy of the above poetic interpretation of his symphony. “I believe that a good piece of music should not need words to be described,” he wrote. And, to live up to such words, he produced his most classically designed piece, or at least he began to.

The first movement is in traditional sonata form. It opens with an arching, chromatic melody for the second violin and viola, using a rhythmic section as the transition to an expressionistic second theme first heard in the viola. A development and recapitulation follow as classically prescribed. But already by the rapt, mysterious second movement, titled “musica celestis”, extramusical imagery finds its way in. Inspired by a phrase which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God, Kernis writes that he doesn’t particularly believe in angels, but “found this to be a potent image that has been reinforced by listening to a good deal of medieval music, especially the soaring work of Hildegard of Bingen.” Like the slow movement of the symphony, this is timestopping music, and this time its ascent is unstoppable, all the way up into the spheres.

A scherzo, with a sweet *Ländler* centre, again displays the composer’s facility of juxtaposing grabbing rhythms and hyper expressive melody, all of which explodes once more in a finale that can’t keep its feet still, with episodes of “quasi funk” and “quasi jazz”. There are, in Kernis’s kaleidoscopically coloured, multi-music universe, an appropriate multitude of ways to contemplate the infinite.

Mark Swed (1991)

The Lark Quartet: Eva Grusser (violin), Robin Mayforth (violin), Anna Kruger (viola), Astrid Schween (cello) In addition to its cutting edge special projects and commissions, The Lark maintains it's tradition of excellence in the classical quartet repertoire. They recently completed the Beethoven Quartet cycle for the Beethoven Society of New York, and the Larks are noted as having a special affinity for the music of Ravel, Debussy, Bartok and late Beethoven. In 2006 and 2007, the Lark will release CDs of Ravel and Debussy Quartets, the Bartok Quartet cycle, and a CD called "American Landscape" which features the music of Bolcom, Gershiwn, Tillis and other American icons. Over the course of its long history, the Lark has earned numerous international awards, including the Naumburg and Shostakovitch Prizes; commissioned leading American composers such as Aaron Jay Kernis who wrote his Pulitzer winning "Musica Instrumentalis" for them, Peter Schickele, Julia Wolfe, and Jennifer Higdon; and collaborated with artists as varied as dancer-choreographer Bill T. Jones, Edgar Meyer, and Gary Graffman. The quartet has held the position of ensemble-in-residence at Columbia University's Miller Theatre, Dartmouth College, and Florida State and Ohio Universities, and in 2005-2006 concert season, they are the Quartet in Residence at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Gerard Schwarz: American conductor Gerard Schwarz, born to Viennese parents in 1947, has been Music Director of the Seattle Symphony since 1985 and of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra since 2001. In Seattle he has initiated several concert series and was integral to the creation of the spectacular 2,500-seater Benaroya Hall; in its centenary in 2003-2004 he conducted the orchestra's debut at Carnegie Hall and gave the world premieres of specially commissioned works by six leading US composers.

He began his conducting career in 1966, and within ten years was appointed Music Director of the Waterloo Music Festival, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the New York Chamber Symphony. In 1981 he founded the Music Today Contemporary Series and in 1982 became Music Director of Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival, of which he became Conductor Laureate in 2002. He made his operatic conducting debut in 1982 and has worked with Washington Opera, Seattle Opera, San Francisco Opera, Juilliard Theater and Kirov Opera in works by Mozart, Richard Strauss, Beethoven, Wagner, Verdi, Janáček, Stravinsky and Debussy.

He has made over 125 recordings, primarily with the Seattle Symphony, with whom he received 10 Grammy nominations for American Music; he has also recorded with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, London Symphony, Berlin Radio and English Chamber Orchestra among others. His recent recording activity includes cycles of Mahler symphonies and Strauss tone poems with the RLPO; he has made many recordings for the Milken Archive for American Jewish Music. He conducted the RLPO at the BBC Proms in 2002 and will return again with them in July 2005; he will lead the RLPO on a tour to Spain in March 2006.

A graduate of the High School of Performing Arts and The Juilliard School, in 1994 he was named Conductor of the Year by *Musical America*. He has received honorary doctorates from The Juilliard School, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Seattle University and the University of Puget Sound; in 2001 he was named an Honorary Fellow of Liverpool John Moores University. In 2002 he was recognised by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) as a “champion of American music and the music of our time”.



Aaron Jay Kernis was born in Philadelphia on January 15, 1960. He began his musical studies on the violin; at age 12 he began teaching himself piano, and in the following year, composition. He continued his studies at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and.

One of America's most honored composers, Mr. Kernis received the coveted Grawemeyer Award in Music Composition (2002) for the cello and orchestra version of *Colored Field*, the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for his *String Quartet No. 2* ("musica instrumentalis"), and Grammy Award nominations for both *Air* and *Second Symphony*. Among his many other awards are the Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Rome Prize. He has become an especially familiar and much-admired presence in Minnesota's Twin Cities; in September 1993, he was appointed Composer-in-Residence for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Minnesota Public Radio, and the American Composers Forum, and he returned in the fall of 1998 as New Music Advisor to the Minnesota Orchestra, a position he retains to this day. In 2003 he joined the composition faculty at Yale School of Music.

His music figures prominently on orchestral, chamber, and recital programs around the world. America's foremost musical institutions have commissioned his work, including the New York Philharmonic for its 150th Anniversary (*New Era Dance*) and the San Francisco Symphony (*Colored Field*, an English horn concerto for Julie Giacobassi). Other commissions include *Air* for violinist Joshua Bell; *Lament and Prayer*, a work for violin and string orchestra for Pamela Frank and the Minnesota Orchestra; a piano quartet (*Still Movement with Hymn*) for Christopher O'Riley, Pamela Frank, Paul Neubauer, and Carter Brey for American Public Radio; *Goblin Market* for narrator and ensemble, on a text by Christina Rossetti for the Birmingham [England] New Music Group; and *Double Concerto for Violin*,

Guitar, and Orchestra, commissioned by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Aspen Music Festival, and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra for Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Sharon Isbin.

Recent orchestral works included *Newly Drawn Sky* (2005) commissioned by the Ravinia Festival for James Conlon and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, *Color Wheel* written in 2001 for the Philadelphia Orchestra and the opening of the Kimmel Center. *A Concerto for Toy Piano and Orchestra* was created in 2003 for Margaret Leng Tan, the Singapore Symphony and Minnesota Orchestra, and in a chamber ensemble version for WNYC radio. New works were commissioned and premiered by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Lincoln Center Great Performers Series (for Renee Fleming), Dale Warland Singers, Rose Center for Earth and Space at the American Museum of Natural History, the Seattle Symphony, Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Recordings of the music of Aaron Jay Kernis are available on Virgin Classics, Decca/Argo, Koch Classics, CRI, Nonesuch, Arabesque, Phoenix USA and New Albion. Decca/Argo, with which Mr. Kernis had an exclusive recording contract, released many of the works written between 1989 to 1996, including the *Second Symphony*, *New Era Dance*, *Colored Field*, *Lament and Prayer* and this disc of *Symphony in Waves* and other works. Mr. Kernis' music is published by Associated Music Publishers, and since 2001 by AJK Music for which Boosey & Hawkes acts as administrating publisher.

Aaron Jay KERNIS

The Lark Quartet

Gerard Schwarz, conductor

The New York Chamber Symphony

SYMPHONY IN WAVES

- (1) Continuous wave 10'21
- (2) Scherzo 4'11
- (3) Still movement 15'12
- (4) Intermezzo 1'59
- (5) Finale 6'54

STRING QUARTET No.1 ('musica celestis')

- (6) Flowing 12'47
- (7) Musica celestis - Adagio 11'43
- (8) Scherzo - Trio semplice 2'56
- (9) Quasi una danza 5'09

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Aaron Jay KERNIS

SYMPHONY IN WAVES STRING QUARTET No. 1 ('musica celestis')

The Lark Quartet
New York Chamber Symphony
Gerard Schwarz, conductor

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