

“Philomel: For Soprano, Recorded Soprano, and Synthesized Sound”-Bethany Beardslee, soprano; Milton Babbitt, composer (1971)

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Essay by Andrew Mead (guest post)*



Milton Babbitt



Original album



Bethany Beardslee

Milton Babbitt was a significant part of the wave of composers turning to the tools of the recording studio and to the synthesis of sound as new compositional resources in the years after World War II. One of the pioneering instruments of this period, the RCA Mark II Sound Synthesizer, installed at the Columbia-Prince Electronic Music Center, was central to Babbitt's electronic compositions, and despite the fact that its technology had become outdated by the mid-'60's, Babbitt continued to work with it until its unfortunate demise in the mid-'70's.

One of the features that attracted Babbitt to sound synthesis was, as he often remarked, that it allowed the composer to enter the studio with the score and walk out with the finished product. With certain noted exceptions, early performances of Babbitt's instrumental and vocal music had not been entirely happy affairs. Babbitt's compositional practice, which had its origins in his study of the music of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, required and still requires musicians to rethink their assumptions about rhythm, pitch, dynamics and attack. And while the earlier composers of the 2nd Viennese School saw their work as having deep roots in the history of European and especially Germanic compositional practice, Babbitt's own musical background included not only the experience of performing Carl Maria von Weber's "Oberon" overture on the clarinet in the Jackson (Miss.) Boys' Band, but also being steeped in a variety of quintessentially American music, from jazz to the songs of Jerome Kern. When Babbitt took up Schoenberg's "method of composing with twelve tones related only to each other" he did so not entirely out of a desire to find a new way to write the music in the footsteps of Brahms, but to see what thinking about music from the basic precepts of 12-tone composition might suggest to his musical imagination. Put another way, he wanted to take that baby out on the road and see what it could do.

Writing for the synthesizer meant there would be no need to overcome the training and intuitions of sometimes-reluctant musicians. Composition could now be limited not by performers' abilities, but by the limitations of the listener's perceptions and ability to construe relationships. This might suggest that Babbitt could have readily turned away from human performance for his compositional satisfaction, but despite eventually producing three works for synthesized sound alone, the majority of his music involving the synthesizer also included live performers, and these compositions themselves are but a small proportion of his work as a whole.

"Philomel" is arguably Babbitt's best-known composition, and it is, with the exception of "Concerti" for violin, small orchestra and synthesized tape, his most extended work involving the synthesizer. The piece was commissioned by the soprano Bethany Beardslee, one of his earliest champions, and funded by the Ford Foundation. The poet John Hollander wrote the text, which draws on the myth of Philomena both as it is unfolded in Ovid's "Metamorphoses," and in earlier and later poetic treatments. The soloist sings with a synthesized tape that includes both sounds generated by the RCA Mark II as well as frequently altered recordings of a soprano voice. In live performances these are projected by four speakers playing different sound tracks, distributed around the central figure.

The current recording raises a number of issues, and presents us with the paradox of contemplating the differences between a live performance and a recording of a composition whose main sound sources are themselves prerecorded. The voice heard on the synthesized tape is that of Bethany Beardslee, the originator of this in many ways operatic monodrama. In the recording, it is also Beardslee we hear performing the live portion of the work. While it is not difficult to distinguish between the "live" vocal part and the prerecorded part, the difference is not as dramatic as that in a live performance, and the sense of a sound space provided by the original four-track tape is flattened to a degree in stereo. For those lucky enough to have heard Ms. Beardslee perform the work live, the recognition of the sound of her voice both in person and on tape was electrifying. Nevertheless, the recording is a valuable document. Subsequent live performances by other sopranos have offered their own satisfactions, but this special linkage between the living dramatic character and her musical surroundings cannot help but be altered.

Throughout his career Milton Babbitt was seen by many as the embodiment of academic intellectualism in music composition, offering only patterns for the mind of the educated listener with seeming contempt for emotional expression or widespread appeal. This viewpoint arose for a number of reasons, some of which can be traced to his own writings about music, and to the unfortunate choice of the editors of "High Fidelity" to retile his 1958 article, "The Composer as Specialist" as the more provocative "Who Cares if You Listen?" There is no denying that Babbitt took a high-toned stance on questions of popular appeal, and it certainly is the case that he would sidestep any discussion of affect in his music. But the musical experience afforded by "Philomel" should quickly dispel any sense that his music can't carry an emotional wallop. After all, the first utterance of the soloist, after some wordless vocalizing, is, "I feel..."

The compositional and poetic technique brought to bear on the work by Babbitt and Hollander alike can readily be understood to be at the service of illuminating the underlying wrenching drama of the text. The two artists seized on the harrowing story of Philomela, raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, and left in the woods with her tongue cut out lest she reveal his crime. In

Ovid's rendition, Philomela is turned into a nightingale, a bird whose song has entranced poets and musicians ever since. Hollander's text is placed at that moment of transformation and traces Philomela's reemergence in life, in the forest, in song and language. In its three large sections, 'Philomel' limns the central character's reclamation of sound, song, and action in a transformation from victimhood through self-discovery of a new-found life as a bird, to a final outpouring of song as a nightingale. In Hollander's words, "Suffering is redeemed in song."

Andrew Mead has taught music theory for nearly 40 years, first at the University of Michigan, and, since 2013, at the Jacobs School of Music of Indiana University. He is the author of the book "An Introduction to the Music of Milton Babbitt," as well as numerous articles on the music of Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Elliott Carter, Max Reger and others. He is also active as a composer.

**The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*