

## **A questionnaire completed at the request of the Dorian Woodwind Quintet**

COMPOSER: Richard Trythall

TITLE: *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* for Wind Quintet and Tape (1975)

PREMIERE: 4/23/76 - Rome, Italy

### **SUBSEQUENT PERFORMANCES:**

4/27/76 - London, England

8/12/76 - Saratoga, NY

11/30/76 - Austin, TX

3/1/77 - Burlington, VT

3/2/77 - Middlebury, VT

3/5/77 - Brattleboro, VT

3/15/79 - Baden-Baden, Germany

3/17/80 - Florence, Italy

3/18/80 - Rome, Italy

1/22/82 - Boston, MA (Harvard University)

1/24/82 - Kaufman Concert Hall, NYC, NY

### **RECORDING: CRI 382**

#### **How did the commission come about?**

I met several members of the original *Dorian Quintet* when they were at the Tanglewood Music Festival (Lenox, Massachusetts) as members of the *Fromm Players* in 1960. I was attending the Tanglewood summer music courses as a composition student studying with Leon Kirchner and I was in frequent contact with the *Fromm Players* for discussions, seminars, concerts, etc. Later in the mid '60's, when I was at the American Academy in Rome as recipient of the Rome Prize in Music Composition, I became good friends with Karl Kraber, flutist, and Jerry Kirkbride, clarinetist. Both spent time in Rome during the '60's and, as luck would have it, both went on to become part of the *Dorian Quintet*. It was, I suppose, this long set of contacts and personal friendships which facilitated the commission.

#### **Did a member of the quintet contact you?**

Both Karl and Jerry mentioned it to me. I believe it was Jerry Kirkbride who "finalized" the commission. During the Spring of 1972 and 1973, I spent time at the University of New York, Buffalo, as a member of the "Center for the Creative and Performing Arts" and saw Jerry frequently when I visited New York City to perform with the Center's ensemble. We talked about the commission then.

#### **How did you approach composing the piece?**

I was very involved with "tape recorder music" through much of the '70's - most particularly with the *musique concrète* idea. I was, therefore, interested in how the studio manipulation of recorded acoustic sounds could alter those sounds. My particular perspective on *musique concrète* was that, when tape related procedures such as speed change, looping, splicing, multiple playbacks, etc. were applied to musical material -

identifiable patterns of pitches and rhythms, the results could be used to effectively extend the technique of "motivic development" to an entirely new realm, bending and reshaping the musical material in unpredictable yet relevant ways. It seemed to me that such procedures were a natural next step for the principle of variation. They projected the linear variation process into a non-linear, distorted world of dreamlike imagery - a world where every sound, no matter how distantly transformed, still bore the indelible stamp of the original source from which it was derived.

For the Dorian commission project, therefore, I set about to find a musical "source material" which would serve both for studio manipulation and for the development of live material. I looked for a well known, pre-existent musical material that an audience might know. I believed that such a familiarity would facilitate the listener's awareness of - and therefore participation in - the variation process. After considering a number of possibilities within the standard woodwind quintet repertoire, I decided on the "St. Anthony Chorale" as taken from a transcription of Franz Joseph Haydn's Divertimento No. 1 for woodwind quintet. I had, in fact, frequently played this work as oboist in a woodwind quintet during my student days at the University of Tennessee and now, as a composer, I believed that its harmonic structure and tight motivic construction provided ideal material for my *musique concrète* developmental purposes. Strangely enough it was only later, after I had decided upon the chorale, that I recalled Brahms had used the same theme for a set of orchestral variations!

### **How did the concept of the piece develop?**

I prepared a score containing the entire chorale as transcribed for woodwind quintet, a series of chords (the harmonic progression of the chorale), the opening chorale motive in various registers (played by the group or performed by individual instruments), single tones with special instrumental effects, etc. and asked the *Dorian Quintet* to record these for me. I subsequently isolated these materials on tape and subjected each one to a variety of tape music processes.

The piece itself evolved gradually. The studio processes often yielded surprising results and led my work in unexpected directions. I spent many months developing material and "getting to know the territory" before I found a way to organize the new musical imagery. The hours and hours spent daily in the tape studio were tedious, but also exciting, one never knew what might happen next, what unusual sounds might unexpectedly appear thanks to the various tape manipulations and subsequent remixings.

In the end I conceived the tape part as if it were an orchestral accompaniment to the wind soloists. Its dreamlike imagery was intended to complement the live discourse - at times functioning as background and articulation, at other times as equal partner and at still other times it was intended to absorb the quintet's lines within thick chordal and motivic textures. I had begun experimenting with this sort of textural variety in a previous work for live and recorded sound, Suite for harpsichord and tape, and the Haydn theme provided me with the opportunity to explore the interchange in depth.

Formally I organized the material into a group of variations. The theme for the variations, however, appears in its entirety at the end rather than the beginning of the variation process - as if the variations were the preparation for the theme and not vice versa.

### **How long did it take to write the piece?**

I began creating the studio material for the Variations on a Theme by Haydn in the Fall of 1973. The tape portion was completed in December of 1975 and the final score in

March of 1976. This was fairly continuous work, with the exception of February and March of 1975 during which I created another *musique concrète* work, Omaggio a Jerry Lee Lewis. I concluded writing the score for the Variations while I was in Davis, California, where I was teaching for two semesters in the Music Department of the University of California, Davis, as a sabbatical replacement.

**Did you work with the quintet before the first performance? To what extent?**

In April I flew to New York for a week and met several times with the *Dorian Quintet* for rehearsals. They recorded the work for the RAI (the Italian Radio/Television network) the very next week, April 23, 1976, in Rome. This was the first performance.

**Were you able to attend the world premiere?**

Although Rome, Italy, is my home, during this period I was teaching in Davis, California, and was, therefore, unable to attend the premiere.

**What were your thoughts when you first heard your piece played?**

The first recording that I heard was from the *Dorian Quintet's* first public performance of the Variations on a Theme by Haydn - in Saratoga, New York. They played marvelously, of course, but I was concerned because, judging from that recording, it seemed to me as if the tape had been played back at too low a volume level thereby falsifying the relationship between the recorded and live material. I spoke with Jerry Kirkbride about this, however, and he assured me that this impression was only due to the microphone placement for the concert recording. I think this was, in fact, the case, but this uncertainty underscored a problem with compositions of that epoch which mixed live and recorded material - the practical problems with regard to the quality and placement of the replay equipment, the balance of the dynamic levels in the hall, and the problem of having someone start and stop the tape recorder in order to maintain synchronization. In today's digital era these problems may seem strange, but they were often formidable at the time. The dynamic balance between the live performers and the tape portion is crucial to the understanding of the work as is the spatial placement of the speakers in relation to the performers. This is particularly true of my tape work which is often "orchestral" i.e. made up of many simultaneous layers of motivic material. I think these very real practical performance problems made it difficult for the quintet to travel with this piece. Even the final LP recording, where all of the sound material was, inevitably, reduced to a single stereo field, falls short of what the ideal performance effect should be: where the physical spatial differences between the performers and the loudspeakers literally give perspective and depth to the multi-level musical experience.

**Has the piece been recorded and were you at the recording session?**

The Variations on a Theme by Haydn were recorded in New York by the *Dorian Quintet* for CRI Records on June 21, 1977. I flew to New York from Rome to supervise the recording and editing. The recording engineer was a good friend, Roger Rhodes, and the recording itself came out extremely well. I felt the balance of the tape and live sound created the dreamlike effect I had been trying to achieve.

**What relationship developed with the members of the quintet and yourself as a consequence of your commission?**

My friendship with various members of the quintet pre-dated the commission and has remained strong to the present.

**Any further comments?**

I am now in the process of re-mixing my tape compositions from the 1970's. The new possibilities offered by computer recording and mixing have already enabled me to considerably upgrade the sound quality and mix precision of two of these works, Omaggio a Jerry Lee Lewis and Suite for harpsichord and tape. I am particularly looking forward to re-mixing the Variations on a Theme by Haydn because this work was the most ambitious of this series of compositions. The tape work is the most complex and, for that reason, has the most to gain from the kind of digital remasterization which is now possible.

Richard Trythall, December 12, 2004/July 29, 2016