

# NEWSLETTER

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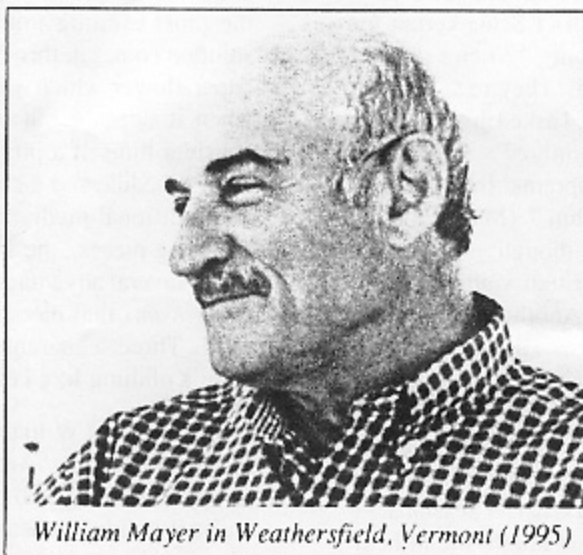
## QUIET REBEL: WILLIAM MAYER AT SEVENTY

When William Mayer speaks, the words tumble over themselves exuberantly. He leans into a conversation with his shoulders, trim as a welterweight, looking easily two decades younger than he is. His voice seems always to verge on laughter. After half a century as a composer and advocate for fellow artists (at various times secretary and treasurer of the MacDowell Colony, secretary of the National Music Council, and chairman of CRI records), he still overflows with enthusiasm, proffering scores and recordings of his own works with a mixture of boyish glee and self-deprecation. This is the William Mayer heard in the cartoon-like "music drama" *Brief Candle* (yes, all three lines of text and six minutes of music), the zany *Yankee Doodle Fanfare* for woodwind quintet, and the orchestral *Overture for an American*, commissioned by the Chautauqua Institute to celebrate the Theodore Roosevelt centennial in 1958. For an American, sure; by an American, clearly. In these works, Mayer has that recognizable mid-century American sound: clean, spacious, bustling, colloquial, optimistic.

But there's another William Mayer beneath what he calls the "protective coloration." It is revealed in the frequently performed *Andante for Strings*, the more recent *Inner and Outer Strings*, and the mercurial *Dream's End* for six players. These works have an elegaic core; they speak gently but restlessly of loss. The "real" William Mayer emerges most fully, however, in his largest achievement, the opera *A Death in the Family*, based on the book by James Agee.

*A Death in the Family* was first staged by the Minnesota Opera in 1983, winning an award from the National Institute of Music Theater as the outstanding new American opera of the year. The piece had a long gestation: it began not with a commission, but with a "kernel of emotion; a color, tincture, essence of an idea waiting to be born . . . an inner obligation." Agee's book concerns a young Tennessee family—son innocent and sensi-

tive, wife pious and dutiful, husband loving but profligate—and the events surrounding the latter's death in an auto accident. The story struck a personal chord for the composer, who lost both his parents by age nineteen. Basing his interpretation partly on Tad Mosel's stage adaptation, *All the Way Home*, Mayer crafted his own libretto, later revising the piece for a 1986 production in St. Louis.



William Mayer in Weathersfield, Vermont (1995)

*A Death in the Family* locates the mournful, nostalgic story in a phantasmagorical frame. The narrative is often nonlinear, layering diverse incidents and characters (and their equally diverse music) in ways that only opera can make comprehensible. Mayer's score blends blues, gospel, foursquare hymnody, and mountain balladry into an idiom that might be called "American lyricism," delicately suspended in a tonally ambiguous sound-world that stresses the dreamlike quality of the storytelling. The opera begins, for example, in a haunted, faraway mist of violin harmonics. And in a scene in which the

husband Jay shares a tender farewell with his wife Mary, simple diatonic material—four steps of a descending major scale—spins a lovely line that wrenches the emotions.

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Mayer calls *A Death in the Family* "a work of memory." The original version employed a narrator, the son Rufus (now grown up), who spoke sparingly but was onstage throughout. This device was cut from the St. Louis production, but the composer regrets the loss. "The narrator was like a filter for memory. He provided distance. Without him there's a danger of sentimentality. What seemed at the time a logical choice removed some of the poetry of the work. The audiences at the first production identified with him, because these are *everybody's* lost realms. He allowed us to see the story through a prism. The essence of the opera is that it's a work of memory."

William Mayer's own memories take him back to his parents, both of whom were artistic: his father was an amateur violinist, and his mother a professional writer. Like his father (whose favorite song was Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are"), the young composer developed an enthusiasm for show music. Though he went on to study with several eminent musicians, Mayer claims not to have benefited much from their instruction. He cites his work with Felix Salzer, a strict Schenkerian for whom pitch-based structure was paramount. "When I showed him some madrigals I had written, he said, 'They're appealing, but of course they rely on color and timbre.' I asked myself, 'Why can't music be organized by color and timbre?' And Salzer rarely mentioned rhythm. Pitch reigned supreme. Interestingly, my music is noted for its timbre and rhythm." (Mayer doesn't rule out the Schenker approach entirely, though. "It's useful when you're in trouble, when you've written yourself into a corner and don't know where to go next.") Another teacher, Otto Luening, emphasized the overtone series. His orchestration lessons stressed, for example, that the clarinet should be kept below the oboe in the orchestral texture. Typically, Mayer insisted on doing the opposite whenever possible, but Luening taught him the virtue of conciseness. One teacher to whom Mayer does acknowledge a significant debt is Roger Sessions. "I was used to listening homophonically. He taught me to hear beyond the vertical sounds. Still, remember that my earliest love was show music. Certain sonorities have a whole world to themselves. No amount of linear thinking can prevent a chord from being itself."

Like many other American composers, Mayer gained wide exposure on CRI recordings. He served on the label's board for twenty years, four of them as chairman. He credits CRI with providing a much broader range of American music than was previously available and with creating a sense of permanence, since no recording is ever deleted from its catalogue. (Currently CRI is repackaging its older material on CD.) "CRI was how contemporary composers got exposure," Mayer says. "Air play is what counts, not high volume record sales. The catalogue is also a terrific research tool for libraries. CRI has a great history of first recording composers who later went on to fame and to bigger labels: Ives, for instance, and Crumb. We got the prestige; the money went elsewhere!" Today CRI is only one of many labels attending to the contemporary composer, but a few decades ago it was still a plucky pioneer.

Mayer currently spends much of his time in Weathersfield, Vermont, where his studio cabin (redolent of the nearby MacDowell Colony) sits atop a mountain and offers a long view of the Connecticut River's Weathersfield Bow. A glance at Mayer's library reveals a passion for literature, one reflected in a leaning towards vocal works: settings of Keats in *The Eve of Saint Agnes* and *La belle dame sans merci*, both for chorus, and of Dylan Thomas in *Fern Hill* for soprano, flute, and harp, as well as numerous songs. A visitor to the Mayer household breathes an atmosphere of vigorous creativity: his wife, Meredith Nevins Mayer, an artist, matches him in youthfulness and buoyancy. Their son Steven, a concert pianist, is known for championing twentieth-century music, and daughters Jane and Cynthia are successful journalists.

When Mayer talks shop, he delivers a cascade of metaphors about those moments when it feels as if "there's a place in your back that itches and you can't quite reach it. Something's wrong . . . you can't rest until you get it just right. It taunts you. Then the most exciting thing is the breakthrough, when the right solution comes in through the back door; . . . it's like a Japanese paper flower which you hope will unfold. You're frustrated when it doesn't, but overjoyed when it does." He does not consider himself a prolific composer, despite a six-hour-a-day work schedule and a substantial list of compositions in most of the traditional media. "I have lots of ideas but lots of trouble finishing pieces," he says. He works mostly on commission, citing several advantages: "One, the good feeling that someone really *wants* that piece. Two, knowing the performers beforehand. Three, a guaranteed performance. Four, deadlines. Five, there's nothing like being paid."

Is it better to be William Mayer at age seventy than it was, say, at fifty or thirty? "Actually, it used to be very difficult for a composer like me, in the days when people looked down on your music if it didn't squeak, grunt, or groan. Things changed, but what interested the critics was the converts. You had to have a conversion to get attention." (He diplomatically neglects to mention names.) "If you're going to write fresh music, it has to be within the music itself, not some external quality. We composers are too hard on ourselves, searching for novelty but devaluing freshness of approach." He adds, sotto voce, "I guess my whole life has been a quiet rebellion."

—Zeke Hecker

Composer Zeke Hecker teaches English at Brattleboro Union High School in Brattleboro, Vermont.

Two excerpts from *A Death in the Family*, including the Butterfly Aria, appear on *Voices of Lost Realms* (Albany 068), along with the Three Madrigals, *La belle dame sans merci*, and *Fern Hill*. Also on that disc are *Abandoned Bells* for solo piano, played by Steven Mayer, and *Inner and Outer Strings*, led by Gerard Schwarz. Another important work, *Octagon* for piano and orchestra, is featured on CRI CD 584, with soloist William Masselos and Kenneth Schermerhorn conducting the Milwaukee Symphony. For information on Mayer's published works, contact Music Associates of America, 224 King Street, Englewood, NJ 07631; telephone 201-569-2898.