

Charles Mills

One would think certain things about a composer who has works with titles like *The Five Moons of Uranus* (for tenor recorder and piano) and *The Centaur and the Phoenix* (for jazz band, commissioned by flutist Yusef Lateef). One would think entirely different things about the composer of *The Ascension Cantata* (for tenor and chorus) and *The Fourth Joyful Mystery* (for two violins and piano). All are indeed works of Charles Mills, which may leave one wondering, "So what is this composer like and where in his style does the *Serenade* fit in?"

A quote from the composer answers this question best. "My daily life is consistent in only one respect, that of irregularity, though I would wish it otherwise." With this complaint, Charles Mills reveals much about his personality: a preference for a controlled environment, both external and internal; an inclination toward self-discipline; and a desire for guidedness to his life. Thus his conversion to Roman Catholicism on March 14, 1944 after being raised in a Protestant home should come as no surprise, nor should its great significance to his life. The following brief artistic platform should also not astonish: "In the practice of composition, I am a classicist Counterpoint to me is not only linear in concept but vertical equally as much. I don't think the diatonic system is 'used up,' nor even fully explored."

Mills was awarded first prize for best film score at the 1956 Edinburgh Film Festival for his music to *On the Bowery*, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1952. He received commissions from, among others, Dmitri Mitropoulos for the New York Philharmonic (*Theme and Variations*), the National Endowment for the Arts (Symphony no. 5), and oboist Josef Marx (Sonata for English horn and piano). Mills also wrote many recorder works which he played himself.

The composer has the following words to tell about his own artistic journey: "I was born in Asheville, North Carolina, on January 8, 1914, my parents being native Carolinians of English and Scotch-Irish lineage. Shortly after my birth, we moved to Spartanburg, South Carolina As soon as America entered World War I, my father volunteered in the infantry. We saw little of him after that, for he . . . spent the remaining years of his life after the Armistice in a government hospital. My mother and I lived alone, but we were not morbidly depressed.



By the time I started attending public schools, many musical influences of my environment had already made an impressionable dent in my consciousness. I well remember beautiful folk songs sung by mountaineers who could neither read nor write, and excitingly rhythmic and moving spirituals that Negro workers in cotton fields sang with perfect spontaneity and unaffected zest.

My chief interests during my grammar school years were literature and the graphic arts. I was offered a scholarship for study in Paris by an art teacher who thought my painting was promising [Mills would eventually marry an artist later], but I declined because I felt instinctively that my real vocation lay elsewhere. I discovered this to be true when I was fifteen years old”

At sixteen, Charles Mills left home for New York City, “meanwhile earning my living by playing saxophone, clarinet, and flute in dance orchestras. My first formal [composition] study of a serious nature began with lessons with Max Garfield . . .” and lasted four years from 1930.

“Beginning in 1935, I studied two years with Aaron Copland, composed prolifically, argued constantly about details, learned the meaning of the word ‘distinctive,’ and thoroughly enjoyed my musical life in general.

Between 1937 and 1941, I worked two years each with Roger Sessions and Roy Harris. Having a sound contrapuntal equipment already, I thoroughly enjoyed the somewhat disconcerting erudition of Sessions, whose compositions I had studied with interest and profit. My work with Harris served to reinforce my natural inclinations to compose first and ‘doctor up’ details later.

My day of work begins at ten (though I rise at six, attend Mass, have breakfast, and plan the day’s schedule before nine-thirty). Between ten and twelve I always compose, whether in the mood or not. Around noon, I take my dog for a walk, and return home to lunch with my wife. She spends the morning drawing and painting and I enjoy our rest period criticizing her day’s work.

My afternoons are devoted to teaching composition, including a constant analysis of important works. My evenings are largely spent at concert halls, the opera, or theatres, though quite often I enjoy attending rehearsals of my own works. During periods when I have time to read my taste is mostly for religious poetry. The literature that interests me most is the Holy Bible. I also enjoy Homer, Plato, Dante, Chaucer, and Milton.”

Although Mills played both the recorder and the flute, as previously mentioned, his hobbies also encompassed collecting pipes and exper-

imenting with blending tobaccos, habits he perhaps picked up in the dance halls of New York City.

“Since 1941, I have composed many commissioned works, taught composition privately, and been radio critic for *Modern Music*. One of the important factors in the development of my chamber music has been the distinguished musicianship of Morris and Sylvia Hochberg, violin and piano artists of Detroit. Morris Hochberg, a member of the Detroit Symphony, has not only performed and arranged many fine recitals of my works, but of other Americans as well.”

The *Serenade in D major*, Op. 68 is a work in one continuous movement in tripartite (=ABA) form and 15/16 time; it was completed in New York City on August 18, 1946 and is dedicated to Raymond Meltzer.