



- Magazine Issues
- Conductors
- Performers
- Ensembles & Orchestras
- Instrumentalists
- Instruments
- Search
- Singers
- Voices
- Vocal Roles
- SACDs
- Reviewers
- Labels
- Feature Articles
- Composers & Works
- Collections
- Jazz
- Videos
- Bollywood & Beyond
- Book Reviews
- Want Lists
- Hall of Fame

Archive

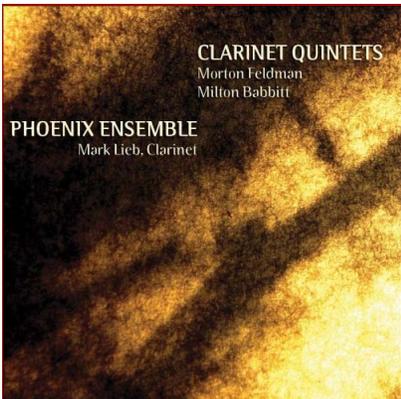
Related Articles

- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Issue 33:5 May/June 2010](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Feature Articles](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Robert Carl](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [BABBITT](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [FELDMAN](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [INNOVA](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Mark Lieb](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Phoenix Ensemble](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [clarinet](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)

Feature Article by [Robert Carl](#)

"Musicians Are Really Public Servants": An Interview with Mark Lieb of the Phoenix Ensemble

Clarinetist Mark Lieb founded the Phoenix Ensemble in 1992, and the group continues to this day, based in New York City—a remarkable track record for any arts organization, especially in today’s economic and cultural climate. The occasion for this exchange was the release of a recording on Innova that features the Morton Feldman and Milton Babbitt clarinet quintets, a pairing that’s surprising, but which I also find inspired (see the review below). Lieb and I conducted a conversation via e-mail over a week or so, which follows:



Clarinet Quintets: Morton Feldman, Milton Babbitt
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RC: I find your program pairing of Feldman and Babbitt is fresh and challenging. How did that come about?

*ML: I have a real love for pieces written for clarinet and string quartet. The instrument combination just feels so comfortable to me. I was working on putting a recording project together with my friend and colleague Jonathan Dawe, who was a student of Milton Babbitt. Jon and I both graduated together at Juilliard, and he has written a couple of pieces for the Phoenix Ensemble. I asked him to write a quintet for clarinet and strings to put on our recording. Jon mentioned that Babbitt had written a quintet, which I did not know about. The idea of a Babbitt quintet excited me, so I just had to see the score. It looked like a great piece, and an incredible challenge. I have always loved Babbitt’s music. At school (I think this was 1990), I got a chance to record his *Relata I* with the Juilliard Orchestra. It was quite an experience.*

A little later I discovered the Feldman quintet, and originally the idea was to somehow put the Babbitt, Feldman, and Jon Dawe’s new piece all on the same disc. Jon and I approached Babbitt to ask his permission to put his quintet on the recording. He actually loved the idea that the Feldman

would be a part of it. Because of scheduling reasons, the recording of Jon's piece was postponed, leaving just the Feldman and Babbitt.

I thought it would work well because Feldman and Babbitt are not just very different, they are complete aesthetic opposites of each other. Mozart and Ligeti sounds like an interesting combination, but I don't think it works as well as Feldman and Babbitt. Feldman is the less-is-more, simple and minimal, and Babbitt is the more-is-more, complex and maximum. I think they complement each other perfectly.

Another reason I wanted to put these two pieces together was maybe to prove a point. Ten or 15 years ago, there was such a pull to choose a side. Where was music going to go: toward minimalism, the Cage school, or the "new complexity" (Babbitt and his students)? I have always loved them all. I think we are in a time now where you don't need to choose a side, where anything goes. Composers can do whatever they want, and I think that's great. It's easier to look back now and see that Babbitt and Feldman were doing things equally important.

RC: Babbitt's music is both a challenge to listeners and to performers. What was the process of putting it together with your group?

ML: Often, the first thing a musician turns to when learning a new piece is a recording of the work. Babbitt's quintet had not been recorded so we did not have that. We literally had to work through the piece one measure at a time, which was a truly tedious process. We basically rehearsed over a six-month period (we had 20 rehearsals in all), tearing the piece apart and putting it back together again.

Musicians are used to spinning a phrase or rhythm in a certain way. There is a kind of common grammar to the musical language that we all get used to. Babbitt seems to knowingly throw a wrench in it, intentionally pulling or tugging the musicians in very uncomfortable directions. It's frustrating, but in the end it makes you think in completely new and different ways and causes a kind of wonderful tension in the music. As scary as it was, I grew to like the feeling. I think for all of the musicians in the group, this was the most difficult piece we had ever worked on. Babbitt made himself available whenever we had specific questions about the score.

I was also really amazed at the jazz writing in the Babbitt. In high school I went through a phase where I listened to a lot of avant-garde and fusion jazz, musicians like Chick Corea and the Brecker Brothers. This may sound strange, but I hear so much of that in Babbitt's quintet. So much of it also sounds traditional, linear, and lyrical to me now. Of course these "traditional" moments sometimes amount to just one single measure, or an isolated chord that hangs for a moment, then moves on. His music takes a little getting used to, but it's well worth the effort. I think it's beautiful.

RC: And what about Feldman?

ML: Some people have told me that Feldman's quintet sounds sexy or sensual; others say it sounds like it's about death, but I doubt it's about anything so specific. Feldman was quite a complex thinker and philosopher. Anyone interested in learning about him should check out

the book of his collected writings, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*. In his clarinet quintet, and most of his late music especially, he has a way of sustaining this beautiful world and keeping it interesting over very long stretches of time, and for some reason it works. It's a real challenge for the musicians because there is never any technique or flash to grab onto or hide behind. It's just this stripped-to-the-bone musical expression, and our ability to spin a phrase at a constant *ppp*.

RC: The Phoenix Ensemble has been around since 1992. What was the process of its founding?

ML: The group has very slowly grown into something more serious for me. I put it together right out of school as a way to generate some sort of income for myself, while I was freelancing in New York, working with many groups as well as my own. When I decided that I truly wanted to make the city my home, and that chamber music was what I wanted to pursue, then the Phoenix Ensemble became more of a full-time effort for me. We have basically stayed put in Manhattan, but I would like to do some traveling with the group in the future. I have done a good bit of touring with other ensembles in the past. But I hope that I am always working on a recording project. I just like the process very much, the performing as well as being involved in the editing and post-production.

RC: What do you see as the ensemble's mission and most distinctive aspects?

ML: Phoenix is a mixed instrument ensemble, made up of core players (strings, winds, brass, piano, percussion). In that way we can be very flexible in our repertoire. One of our main goals is to bring classical music to a larger audience. I think outreach and audience building are incredibly important right now, and we do a lot of that, as well as working with young composers and new music.

RC: While this recording deals with 20th-century American music, the Phoenix Ensemble seems also to be devoted to a wide range of repertoire. How do you see the connection between traditional and more contemporary works in our concert life?

ML: One thing I have noticed is that contemporary music is not as much of a mystery to general audiences as it used to be. Young people especially find contemporary music "cool," and even middle-aged and older audiences take to it a lot easier. We just finished a project downtown involving two performances of the *Quartet for the End of Time* that were preceded by a set of four preparatory lectures. The audience was great, but certainly not regular concertgoers. With just a little preparation, they loved the music. I think programming the traditional (Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, etc.) along with more challenging works is very important. Let's face it, it is our job as musicians to keep all of this music alive. If we don't program it, it will slip away.

RC: You studied at Northwestern with one of the great American clarinetists, Robert Marcellus. What did you feel you received from his teaching?

ML: As an undergraduate I really had my eye on an orchestral career, and he was the teacher who was producing the major orchestral players at the time. You always got the sense that he had meticulously thought through every aspect of playing the instrument, and could communicate very complex ideas clearly and powerfully. Certainly his ideas about sound were amazing. He had the most striking clarinet sound I have ever heard. But he also had a detailed method relating to the nuts and bolts of clarinet playing, including articulation, air and breathing, equipment, and phrasing. His teaching had a real Cleveland/Szell discipline to it that could be a little intimidating at times. I am so grateful I had the chance to study with him. I studied with David Schifrin at Juilliard for my master's, and being more of a soloist, I think he mellowed and freed up my playing. I think the combination of the two was good for me.

RC: What are some upcoming projects for the Phoenix Ensemble?

ML: I am a little superstitious about giving away the details, but we are working on a recording project of all 20th-century wind music. We plan to have it finished by the end of 2011. We also are continuing two residencies in Manhattan, one at a nice performance space on East 12th Street in the East Village and another near Washington Square Park. There will be four concerts at each venue in 2010. And then we will also present a series of about 25 outreach concerts throughout New York City at community venues, and most likely a series of school concerts.

RC: Finally, in view of the always-cited "crisis" of classical music, what do you see as necessary actions to take as a musician to keep serious music alive in our culture?

ML: Considering the kinds of work Phoenix has been doing, this is obviously something that I think about a lot. Clearly the number of people in this country who choose to experience the arts is getting smaller and smaller. I do a lot of fund-raising for the group, and I am definitely seeing a change. Many of the people at the helm of foundations and corporations that fund the arts, as well as administrators of schools and community venues, are now of a new generation, one that has had much less exposure or education in arts and classical music. For this reason, they don't see classical music as important or as valuable as the previous generation did.

From what I can see, the problem is not that people have seen what the arts have to offer, and make a decision not to experience them. It's more that they simply have not had anyone in their schooling or as adults present the arts to them in a genuine and communicative way. There are many stigmas to battle, that the arts are elitist, are only for the wealthy, or that they are from some ancient cultures that they can't relate to, or have nothing to do with them. Musicians need to put themselves in the heads of people with these misconceptions to figure out a way to reach them.

I played a concert with another group several years back. It was an all-Xenakis concert, believe it or not. We played it in a loft in Soho and I remember the plan was to dress in tuxedos. Well, because the audience was going to be mostly college age, and the weather was nasty hot (it was mid July), we decided to wear street clothes for the performance. One of

the musicians said, "No, we must show that this music is serious and important." I thought this was silly. Xenakis is plenty serious without the tuxedos, and the audience, considering who they were, had more of an authentic connection with the music with the group dressed down. I don't think performing in street clothes is going to solve the arts crisis, but caring a little more about the audience and its perspective will. As musicians we are really public servants, although a lot of musicians don't like to think that way. We need to find new ways of presenting music that match the realities that surround us.

 **FELDMAN** Clarinet and String Quartet. **BABBITT** Clarinet Quintet • Mark Lieb (cl); Phoenix Ensemble • INNOVA 746 (62:35)

While these opposites don't attract, they do complement each other surprisingly well. Feldman's 1983 Quintet is about 40 minutes long, Babbitt's slightly more than 20. The former is spacious, slow, and gradual in its growth, though there's hardly a sense of straightforward development. The latter is manic in its constant permutation of one idea to another: intense, dissonant, kaleidoscopic.

So in one sense these pieces couldn't be more different, and would seem to be mutual antitheses. And of course in a sense they are. But they're also both highly personal, idiosyncratic products of High Modernism. Feldman is a sort of minimalist, but more in the spirit of New York School painters of his circle; Babbitt is the ultimate serialist, but one who carries his formal obsessions further than almost anyone else, to a realm so gnarly it becomes distinctive. I personally have to say I think Feldman is the greater artist, and the one whose work satisfies on more levels. But a virtue of this release is precisely how it makes one rethink things, and freshen any too-simplistic views. In fact, the hyper-mutating Babbitt can start to seem strangely homogeneous unless you listen intently at every moment (as the rate of change is so fast), while the Feldman, despite its seemingly obsessive repetition and self-similarity, becomes increasingly differentiated in its detail as one delves deeper into its sonic pool.

Mark Lieb and the Phoenix players (Aaron Boyd, Kristi Helberg [Feldman], and Alicia Edelberg [Babbitt], violins; Cyrus Beroukhim, viola; Alberto Parinni [Feldman] and Bruce Wang [Babbitt], cello) bring enormous concentration and precision to both these pieces, and without forcing a point, bring out such commonalities. The sound is also extremely clear and close but not cramped. The Babbitt is a premiere, while the Feldman exists in a beautiful recording on Mode by Carol Robinson. That is slightly more leisurely than Lieb's interpretation (a few minutes longer; Lieb's is slightly more intent and edgy without in any way being rushed or nervous). If you already have the Mode, you don't have to buy the Phoenix version. But the recording under review here is a stunning feat of virtuosity and adventurous music-making by all involved, and will reward anyone who buys it. It's a great commentary on how the 20th century is showing its connections between movements evermore over time, like a subterranean root system slowly being exposed to the air.

Robert Carl

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| | | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| First | Prev | <i>Issue 33:5 May/June 2010</i> | Next | Last |
| First | Prev | Feature Articles | Next | Last |
| | | Robert Carl | Next | Last |
| | | BABBITT | Next | Last |
| | | FELDMAN | Next | Last |
| | | INNOVA | Next | Last |
| | | Mark Lieb | Next | Last |
| | | Phoenix Ensemble | Next | Last |
| | | clarinet | Next | Last |



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