

CD Anthology Liner Notes

“Synthesizer Classics”

by Peter Vantine

1. **Two-Part Invention, for keyboard No. 14 in B flat major, BWV 785** (Johann Sebastian Bach), performed by Wendy Carlos (1:05)
2. **Sonata for keyboard in D major, K. 491 (L. 164)** (Domenico Scarlatti), performed by Wendy Carlos (3:45)
3. ***Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, Serenade in G Major, K. 525: III. Menuetto*** (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart), performed by Syntesen (2:03)
4. **Bagatelle in A-minor, WoO. 59 “*Fur Elise*”** (Ludwig van Beethoven), performed by Don Dorsey (2:52)
5. **Prelude in E-minor, Op. 28, No. 4** (Frederic Chopin), performed by Les Baxter (2:47)
6. **Hungarian Dance No. 1 in G minor** (Johannes Brahms), programmed by Harry F. Olson and John Preston (3:06)
7. **Clair de lune** (Claude Debussy), performed by Isao Tomita (5:53)
8. **Pavane pour une infante défunte** (Maurice Ravel), performed by William Orbit, remixed by Ferry Corsten (3:13)
9. **“Mars, the Bringer of War” from *The Planets*, Op. 32** (Gustav Holst), performed by Emerson, Lake and Powell (7:58)
10. **“Hoedown” from *Rodeo – Four Dance Episodes*** (Aaron Copland), performed by Emerson, Lake and Palmer (3:43)
11. **“Floe” from *Glassworks*** (Philip Glass), performed by The Philip Glass Ensemble (5:32)
12. **Tubular Bells, excerpt** (Mike Oldfield), performed by Mike Oldfield (10:00)

Liner Notes

A 1965 Ford Thunderbird – now that’s a classic! Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Beethoven’s *Für Elise*, and Rockwell’s *Saturday Evening Post* covers are also classics. What about the Arp 2600, Moog, Buchla, Yamaha DX7, or Synclavier? These are another type of classic in the oft far-reaching esoteric world of the synthesizer. Once on the cutting edge of electronic music, these

mammoths would have gone the way of the dinosaur if not for the interest of collectors, historians, and analog enthusiasts. Electronic music was not a new idea when these particular inventions emerged. The concept of performing music through quasi-electronic devices can be traced back to the mid-1700s with a Jesuit priest’s creation of an “electronic harpsichord”. This device controlled the striking of bells and metallic bars by way of very simple electro-mechanical principles. Since then, and particularly in the 20th century, the pursuit of music production by way of electronic means has been vigorous and undaunted.

As technology progressed so did classical music: the transition from monophonic chant to the polyphony of the Baroque composers, the expansion of harmonic practices from simpler cadences and voicing of the Classical era to the more lush textures of the Romantic and Impressionist composers, and the maturity of orchestration such as the use of brass instruments simply as percussive accents during the time of Beethoven and Mozart progressing to the more inventive, complex, and substantive use of instrumentation by the likes of Holst and Copland. Electronic music developed as a new form of “serious” music exploration and was typically left to innovators who sought to create new sounds and new ways of hearing in contemporary music composition. Perhaps this is why some synthesizer artists seceded from the avant-garde circles to pursue their own electronic realizations of the classic music literature.

A collection such as this could not properly begin without tipping the hat to Wendy Carlos, the American composer who worked closely with Robert Moog as advisor on the development and refinement of the *Moog* synthesizer. She became known as an expert in the field of translating orchestral sounds to synthetic versions, an art that became insurmountably popular through her recordings *Switched-on Bach* and *The Well-Tempered Synthesizer*. The keyboard works of J.S. Bach in particular would become the quintessential example of Carlos’ efforts. Since much of Bach’s composition education came from his knowledge and intimacy with keyboard music, it only makes sense that he composed his inventions with the goal of

teaching “clear playing in two and three obbligato parts.”¹ This type of part-writing, as well as similar types of works by Scarlatti, perfectly reveal the delicate and masterful interplay between voices, and Carlos’ translation to synthesized sound is effortless. Her placement of each voice in the stereo field enhances the independency of line in both the Bach and Scarlatti selections.

Unlike the synthesizers of the 1960s and 70s, most of which involved an elaborate method of connecting circuits via patch cords (much like the early days of the telephone operator), and whose devices were comprised of analog circuits made up of capacitors, resistors, transistors and the like, the evolution of digital synthesizers saw much less cumbersome hardware that created a wider variety of tone colors through the use of integrated circuits. This newer breed of synthesizer gave electronic composers a more diverse palette from which to work. It is a wonder that young electronic music artists of today, such as Syntesen, would dare follow Carlos’ footsteps. However, the unique twist on Syntesen’s approach to realizing the third movement of Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* is that the delivery mechanism of choice is a completely digital electronic device with the capability of mimicking the sort of analog sounds used by Carlos on *Switched-on Bach*. Serenades such as *Eine Kleine* have more freedom in style than most larger types of works and can be particularly effective with their slower second movements. Yet Syntesen chooses the third movement of this originally five-movement work (the second movement *minuet* has been lost) due to its jovial character as well as the clear delineation of melodic lines and bass motion. The vitality and vibrancy of the analog sound reproduction is presented clearly as additional harmonic elements are added, such as the ostinato accompaniment during the ‘B’ section. His simulation of a Carlos reproduction is commendable.

As a creator of music that goes beyond the bounds of multimedia entertainment franchises, Don Dorsey’s arrangement of *Für Elise* goes beyond the bounds of the original composition by setting Beethoven’s favorite work among budding young pianists to common meter while maintaining the triple feel through the use of eighth note triplets. Being the first time

we hear digital synthesizers acting purely . . . digital, the bell-like tones of the Yamaha DX7 (one of the first completely digital synthesizers to hit the market) is clearly presented as the primary instrument coupled with an acoustic piano sound (most likely a *sample*, or short recording, of an actual acoustic piano digitized and reproduced through the synthesizer) along with reproductions of a bass guitar and drum set. It is interesting that Dorsey would divert from Beethoven’s original musical intent, striving to make a more contemporary and accessible version to young listeners (although it’s difficult to imagine *Für Elise* needing to be *more* accessible). Published 40 years after Beethoven’s death, a very different version of *Für Elise* appeared by way of his original sketches. While it is common to uncover earlier drafts of composer’s works, it is quite remarkable and unique to discover a draft – especially one that is compositionally more interesting and most likely considered an improvement by the composer – that is dated *later* than the familiar version. Dorsey’s version and Beethoven’s draft show there is room for interpretation even in the most beloved classics by performer and composer alike.

Interpreting and popularizing the classics has been an underlying theme in the popular music world for decades. Eric Carmen borrowed the theme from Rachmaninov’s *Piano Concerto No. 2, Mvt. 2* to create his hit song “All By Myself”. Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5, Mvt. 1* was forever immortalized in the pantheon of disco with Walter Murphy and The Big Apple Band’s rendition of “A Fifth of Beethoven” in 1976. Les Baxter, who worked with the likes of Mel Torme, Artie Shaw, Nat King Cole and Bob Hope as singer, arranger, conductor, film scorer, and orchestra leader, was an aficionado of the “concept album” producing countless recordings based on music of exotic lands, exotic rhythms, and exotic women. His firm grasp of the peculiar enabled him to combine rhythmic elements of early 1970s rock, familiar classical themes, and the otherworldly sounds of analog synthesizers producing an almost hallucinogenic trance-like sonic texture. His use of saw tooth and sine wave based sounds give the performance a science fiction mystique, a backdrop that one might not anticipate for a Chopin prelude. Chopin’s gift in

melodic writing is vividly portrayed in this prelude from the Opus 28 collection that showcases his inventiveness in conceiving stand-alone works within the context of a complete cycle based on major/minor key relationships. The structure of melody in the soprano voice with harmonic accompaniment in the tenor range provides an easy transition to a more popular chord/melody style such as rock and roll. The combination of other musicians and acoustic instruments also adds to a greater use of dynamics than the previous selections.

As a categorically opposite example of incorporating dynamics in an electronic realization, the 1955 recording created using the RCA Electronic Music Synthesizer demonstrate the vast difference between performing music and *programming* music. What was to become a new era in music, this “electronic composition machine”² was developed at RCA Laboratories in 1951-52 but not released to the public until 1955. It was an enormous system that required music to be programmed by punching holes in a paper roll (much like a player piano) by way of typing on a keyboard. Every parameter of every note had to be programmed, including pitch, volume, duration, articulation, etc. What a tedious way to make music! Composers such as Milton Babbitt, who would go on to be a leader in the “serious” electronic music movement, were fixated with this new technology. It is fascinating how the era of experimental music was birthed out of what would initially be demonstrated by way of classical and romantic period repertoire. In this case, *Hungarian Dance No. 1 in G Minor* would showcase this innovative machine. The Hungarian Dances, written by Brahms in the 1860s, approach another type of synthesis – the synthesis of folk tradition with high art in an engaging and facile manner. The augmented fourth, often referred to as the “Hungarian” or “gypsy” sound, is noteworthy in this case as it provokes a sense of romanticism on a more visceral level. The dotted-eighth followed by a sixteenth rhythm is also characteristic of the Hungarian style, and both features give the electronic version a somewhat uneasy allure.

Much like the use of coupling registers on the harpsichord or adding stops on a pipe organ to alter dynamics, the predecessors of the modern synthesizer functioned much in the same way. The more synthesizers and recording technology advanced, the more dynamics could be performed on electronic instruments. Isao Tomita became very expressive through his recordings in this way. When Tomita first saw Carlos perform live in 1970 at the Universal Exposition of Osaka, he was drawn in by the thought that within a single instrument an entire orchestra could be available at your fingertips. Tomita believes in the natural energy found in electricity and that “electricity is a new form of energy which allows one to interpret [existing] music in a different manner, that of Bach, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Ravel.”³ He felt that he was not a composer but rather an interpreter of earlier composed works to be heard in a new format. Debussy sought a new format in his use of tonality and as such experimented with Asian modes as a way to support his claim that “music is neither major nor minor”. This fundamental notion for Debussy was at the heart of his work. It is fitting that these two musical masters would find a common ground in their music making, even separated by decades of musical endeavors. The composer’s harmonic textures and the “realizer’s” use of synthesized portamento on *Clair de lune* illustrates this common ground and the ethereal qualities in such an evocative performance.

Maurice Ravel sought after similar principles as an impressionist composer yet was known for his strong stance on the practice of imitation (learning and copying from master composers through studying their composition and orchestration style) balanced with the necessity for originality. Even amidst this balancing act he countermanded accusations that his *Pavane* was nothing less than innovative. The composer’s rich harmonic textures and use of repetition offer William Orbit’s rendition a way to conform to the techno-pop style; where classic synthesis meets modern day rhythmic sequencing. His Emmy-award winning production and writing work on Madonna’s *Ray of Light* album catapulted Orbit into worldwide recognition. The “distinctive ethereal atmosphere and its breakbeats and drum ‘n’ bass-influenced sound”⁴ is

what illuminated this production as well as much of his other work. This would become the foundation for his concept album, *Pieces in A Modern Style*, which presented works of Vivaldi, Beethoven, Satie and the selection here by Ravel. Much of Orbit’s work, among other contemporaries, is largely producible through the facilitation of MIDI – Musical Instrument Digital Interface. This standard of interconnectivity was developed in 1983 and has been the cornerstone of synthesis technology and the manner by which it is controlled ever since. This technology provides communication between synthesizers and computers by which the flexibility of recording music and data is vast.

While programming synthesizers has become the norm today, especially within the confines of studio production, there are still artists and groups who seek to retain the live performance element that was essential during the heyday of analog synthesizers. Keith Emerson is yet another influential counterpart to the infusion of synthesis into classical and rock genres. His allegiance with Greg Lake and Carl Palmer, who together formed the progressive rock trio *Emerson, Lake and Palmer*, would eventually subside after their 1978 farewell tour, only to reform again in 1986 with drummer replacement Cozy Powell. Still known as ELP (*Emerson, Lake and Powell*), both iterations were iconoclasts of “traditional” rock forms, breaking new ground by incorporating odd meter, successive changes in time signatures and tempos, refraining from the stereotypical song form, and generating much enthusiasm by audiences with their creative renderings of 20th century classical compositions, including works by Holst, Ravel, and Copland. Holst took up to 5 years to complete *The Planets*, which became the watershed piece for his own career. “Mars” has a similar approach in harmonic structure with two of the other movements – “Mercury” and “Venus” – in that he emphasizes the use of bitonality that creates a striking dissonant flavor to this movement. This dissonancy is accentuated in ELP’s version due to the micro tonality and intentional abrasiveness of the synthesized timbres. The use of a

timpani sample is also noted as providing a more profound pulse than the original *col legno* method of playing stringed instruments with the wooden part of the bow.

This melding of 1970s progressive rock culture and American neo-classical music was an easy leap as both had intrinsic similarities including style, commercialism, and a foundation of cultural heritage. ELP would become the benchmark for such genre fusions as in the case of Copland’s “Hoedown” from the ballet *Rodeo*. Copland’s use of a disjunct melodic style filled with leaps and skips adds to the fire and vitality of this fourth movement in the suite for orchestra version. The quick movements, short bursts of energy, emphasis on intervals of fourths and fifths, and a near frenetic tempo lends well to the synthetic translation from ELP. Copland’s use of orchestration that is characteristic of smaller chamber groups, tending to stay away from doubling of parts, works well for the rock trio since each band member must sustain interest in his part throughout and has not the luxury of masking their own part within other sonorities. In many ways it refers back to the simplicity of part writing in the earlier Baroque selections giving equal importance of voice to each instrument within the context of the composition. Emerson also makes use of his improvisational style in both ELP tracks, again commingling the cadenza style of classical music with the free improvisational style of jazz and rock genres.

Copland’s idea of “imposed simplicity”⁵ was the underscore for his creative output during the 1930s and 40s, a time when the American people were hurting after a devastating depression and costly war. He sought to make his music more accessible, to bring “serious” music to the masses. This has been the goal of most synthesists for decades, which is perhaps why there has always been an interest in recreating the classics. However, newer “classics” have also developed through the efforts of contemporary composers who have created their own works via the use of the synthesizer. In the 1960s the outgrowth of minimalism was largely due directly to the active participation of composers such as Riley, Young, Reich, and Glass. Whether a conscious effort or not, Philip Glass has established himself as a commercial success, much like

that of Copland in the mid-20th century. His incorporation of electronic instruments on *Glassworks* becomes more of an accepted role within the ensemble, much like an electric guitar is now the standard for any contemporary rock band. His overall packaging, from his instrumentation down to the album cover and credits, is yet another step towards popularizing “serious” music through the use of more commercial conventions. More and more artists in similar genres would come to use these same conventions.

What Smokey Robinson’s hit “Shop Around” was to Motown Records, *Tubular Bells* was to Virgin Records as the company’s premiere release. While it has been categorized as progressive rock, quasi-minimalist, and even new age, Mike Oldfield’s epic exploration of sound gained the most attention as the underlying motif for the film *The Exorcist*. Both Oldfield and Glass employ the synthesizer as its own entity, another choice in the tonal palette within the context of the ensemble. It stands equal with the woodwinds in *Floe* and with the piano and rhythm section in *Tubular Bells*. This transition of the synthesizer from novelty instrument to an accepted member of the ensemble has only been fully accepted in recent years. More and more composers incorporate the synthesizer in with orchestras and popular ensembles, thus finally arriving at the place that Wendy Carlos may have been hoping for from the very beginning – a place where synthesis is no longer an oddity or a marvel of modern technology, but rather a voice of its own like all other instruments now placed within the prestige of classical music. Perhaps this time in history will one day be known as a “classic” in and of itself.

Footnotes

1. Christoph Wolff, et al, "Bach," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/article/grove/music/40023pg10> (accessed November 23, 2008).

2. "RCA Electronic Music Synthesizer," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/article/grove/music/53329> (accessed November 22, 2008).

3. Emmanuelle Loubet and Marc Couroux, “Laptop Performers, Compact Disc Designers, and No-Beat Techno Artists in Japan: Music from Nowhere,” *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (Winter, 2000): 26-27

4. “William Orbit,” in *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., edited by Colin Larkin, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/article/epm/54494> (accessed November 22, 2008).

5. Elizabeth B. Crist, “Aaron Copland and the Popular Front,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56, no. 2 (Summer, 2003): 410.

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