

# Roots of Modern Minstrelsy: Islam

CLASSICAL

GUITAR

JoAnn Falletta 2006  
Guitar Concerto  
Competition

November 2006

[www.classicalguitarmagazine.com](http://www.classicalguitarmagazine.com)

**David Starobin**

2006 New York Guitar  
Seminar at Mannes

3rd Waltons Guitar Festival  
of Ireland

UK £2.95 / USA \$6.99



11

9 770950 429077



# DAVID STAROBIN

By JULIA CROWE



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRIDGE RECORDS, INC.

*Michael and David Starobin after premiere of Michael's 'Four Stevens', New York City.*

NEW YORK native David Starobin is recognized as being one of the foremost interpreters of contemporary music for classical guitar, responsible for cultivating an entire body of new, diverse and challenging works while remaining comfortably grounded in traditional 19th century guitar repertoire. He has served as the guitar department chair of Bennington, Brooklyn College, the North Carolina School of the Arts, the State University of New York at Purchase and most recently the Manhattan School of Music, up through 2004, where he continues to teach. For the last 25 years, Starobin has been the president and chief producer at Bridge Records, a New York based company for which he has produced hundreds of highly regarded recordings of classical, jazz, and computer music. Among his many honors are a Harvard University Fromm Grant, a Lincoln Center Avery Fisher Grant, and Peabody Conservatory's 'Distinguished Alumni Award.'

Starobin was seven years old when his parents arranged for him to have his first lessons with Puerto Rican guitarist, Manuel Gayol in New York.

'My parents had a great love for music, specifically classical music. It was always in our ears, on the radio, on the recordings my dad collected and most importantly, in the many concerts they took us to as we grew up,' he says. 'I vividly remember attending Budapest String Quartet concerts as a very young boy. Many years later,

the Budapests would become an important part of my life's work. As to why my parents thought classical guitar would suit me, I can't really say. Both of my siblings had started on piano and I also played trumpet from the time I was nine until I enrolled in a conservatory.

'How can one ever be thankful enough for parents who were so encouraging? My brother certainly benefited, and has made a wonderful life in music.' His brother, the TONY-award winning composer/orchestrator, Michael Starobin, is well known for his work for stage and screen.

'As a trumpeter, I had a sound that would probably curdle milk,' Starobin confesses, 'but I could read like crazy and ended up playing good repertoire like the Hindemith *Sonata* and the Haydn *Trumpet Concerto*. Most importantly, playing the trumpet and later, percussion, enabled me to play in student bands and orchestras which provided invaluable ensemble training and an avenue to meet musicians my own age who would also open up new musical worlds for me.'

His mother had studied guitar along with him for a time and he credits his parents' steady encouragement here as well. 'Their patience with my then-lazy ways, along with my broken nails from being a baseball catcher until I was fifteen, kept me going at a time when I could have lost interest.'

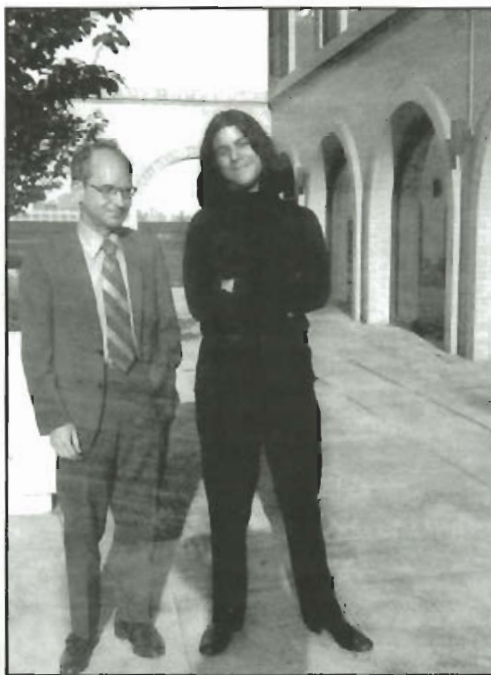
Starobin's first instructor, Manuel Gayol, had left a lasting impression on him, instilling a



respect for thorough musical study along with a love for early 19th century guitar music. 'The first twenty minutes of each lesson was devoted to theory and counterpoint exercises—and this, for a little kid,' Starobin recalls. 'He introduced me to many of the finest guitar composers of the 19th century and his performances stood as inspired examples of the art. Gayol's rendering of Molino's D-major *Rondo*, with its dotted-rhythms so full of life, is a memory that hasn't faded.'

'Gayol had come to New York City from Puerto Rico in the 1950s. The classical guitar in New York was still several years away from general acceptance by the musical public so the economic prospects for an immigrant classical guitar teacher at that time were bleak. When Gayol ended up returning to San Juan in 1963, I felt orphaned. He remained a respected professor at the San Juan Conservatory until his death.'

When Starobin attended the Peabody Conservatory of Music during the early 1970s, he studied with both Aaron Shearer and the great pianist and pedagogue, Leon Fleisher.



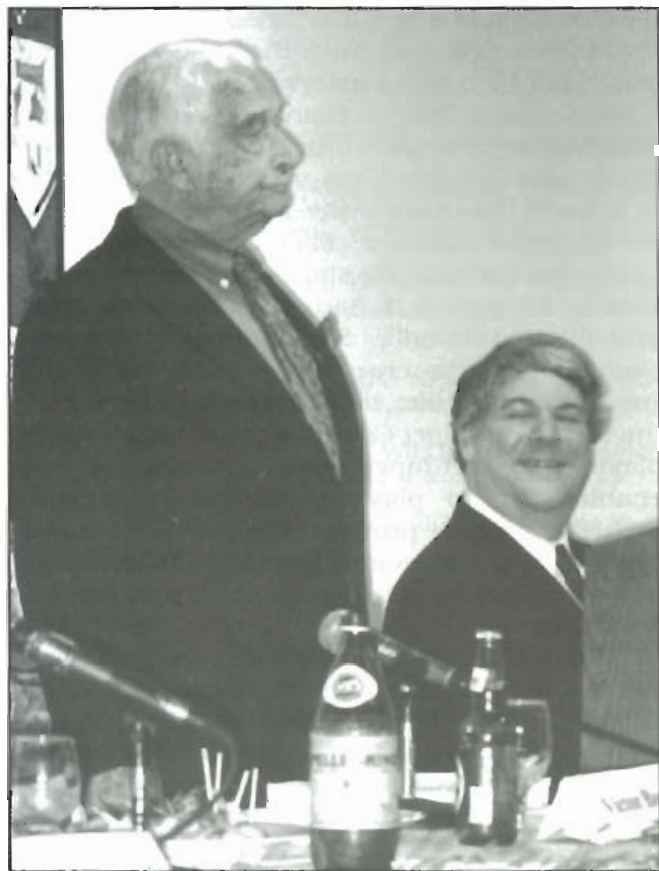
Aaron Shearer and David Starobin, Baltimore, April 1973.

'Leon had given me some private coaching and invited me to play for his performance class. He had just begun a professional chamber ensemble in Washington D.C. and asked me to join and I remained a member of this group for nearly twenty years,' Starobin says. 'While I was a student at Peabody, we would drive together to rehearsals in Washington. These hours spent in conversation provided a wealth of information—the kind of expert musical opinion that is rarely available to a young musician. My most vivid memories of our discussions were his opinions about pianists. I remember a very heated discussion about Gyorgy Cziffra, a particular hero of mine at the time.'

While Leon certainly recognized Cziffra's technical prowess, I don't think he regarded his interpretive accomplishments as 'important.'

'The work with Leon's ensemble led to many years of playing with another extraordinary musician, the late violinist, Pina Carmirelli,' Starobin adds. 'Pina's way with Italian music was unique. Her originality as an instrumentalist, and her love for Boccherini's music in particular, touched me deeply. I miss her very much.'

Starobin, who was 22 years old when he made his first Boccherini Quintet recordings with Carmirelli at Marlboro in 1974, had found the most exciting aspect of this experience to be the growing acceptance of the guitar's presence within the larger classical music world. 'During that period I was searching for repertoire that suited me,' Starobin says. 'Though I admired his playing a lot, early on I questioned a number of things that Segovia was doing with the instrument. Gayol's militancy about recovering the guitar's 19th century heritage, as opposed to a



Victor Borge with straight man, David Starobin, New York City, 1999.



Pina Carmirelli (left), David Starobin and friends, Marlboro Music Festival.



repertoire built around transcriptions, had clearly influenced my thinking.'

Mel Bay Publications has recently released a concert DVD filmed in London, featuring David Starobin's performance of nineteen pieces by Sor and Giuliani. 'Making this DVD, my first, was a lot easier than audio recording,' he says. 'We filmed it in a lovely little church in Ealing. I played each piece once or twice and that was it. Almost all of the performances are unedited takes. I had a terrific director, Paul Balmer, and crew, so that helped a lot. The whole thing was done in one morning and afternoon.'

'I love this music. The best of Sor and Giuliani's short pieces provide an ideal vehicle for developing a performer's re-creative instincts. The pieces always demand technical refinement and encourage intuitive exploration. After playing some of these pieces for more than forty-five years, I continue to be amazed at the secrets held within their fragile structures.'

When I asked Starobin to list the 19th century guitar music he could not be without, he replied that 'the solo works of Sor and Giuliani are a cornerstone of the art and the ten Regondi *Etudes* stand as a high point of 19th century guitar composition.' 'Giuliani's *Op. 24a, 25* and *52* for violin and guitar and a couple of Sor's guitar duos contain brilliant writing. I have a sneaking suspicion that the second of Giuliani's *Op. 68 Rondos* for guitar and piano (the one in b minor) might bear the hand of Beethoven. It is a lovely thing and not quite Giulianian. And then there's Paganini's 15th quartet—the one featuring viola. It's a perfect piece, great fun to play, and audiences love it. I'm sure that I'm leaving out a lot of wonderful material.'

'Guitar players are only at the beginning of what will hopefully be a long period of recovering this nearly lost art. For too many years we virtually discarded the kinds of instruments this repertoire was composed on, let alone the music itself. But



David Starobin, Eliot Fisk, John Duarte, Bath, England.

the last few decades have seen increased experimentation with historic instruments and playing techniques. With the re-publication of many long unavailable scores, guitarists are finally beginning the process of learning and assimilating this music into the active repertoire.

In his new DVD, Starobin performs on his adjustable action, 1923 Herman Hauser guitar, based on a 19th century design. His guitar collection includes Hausers, Gary Southwell A series guitars, a Ramirez and various 19th century instruments. Starobin favours the adjustable action of Hausers and Southwells.

'The present-day player is required to use the instrument in a wide variety of circumstances. We play in small and large halls, we play music spanning centuries of stylistic change, and we play solo, chamber and orchestral repertoire. The advantage of being able to instantaneously adjust action to achieve the ideal string height and sound quality is just too good a thing to resist. Guitars are also very sensitive to humidity and temperature changes. An adjustable action is a perfect way to compensate for these changes. A number of builders, including Greg Smallman, have recently begun to include this feature as part of their design.'

Starobin is equally dedicated to the commissioning of new works for guitar by various contemporary composers, including Elliott Carter, George Crumb, Milton Babbitt, Jorge Morel, Poul Ruders, Simon Bainbridge, Colin Matthews and Robert Saxton, to name a small handful. At first this might seem like a puzzling contradiction that one artist would cover such polar opposites within the musical spectrum but clearly, Starobin's quest is to hear new structures within both older, traditional pieces and those contemporary pieces that ultimately lead to challenging and expanding the technical demands and repertoire for the guitar.

'Sometime in 1963 or 1964, a friend played me recordings of music by Edgard Varèse. Now that was a life-changing experience. Varèse's music seemed so liberated from convention. Its



David Starobin and Julian Bream, New York City, April, 1995.





Elliott Carter and David Starobin in the recording studio, New York City.

violence and colours were the perfect lure for a teenager surrounded by the sounds of rock and it opened up a new world of sound to me,' Starobin says. 'All of a sudden, Stravinsky, Messiaen and Elliott Carter joined the Beatles, Hendrix and John Coltrane as influences. While I was in high school, a few of my composer-friends wrote pieces for me. Those were my first experiences of the problems and joys of creating a performance of a new work.'

'As sometimes happens, the genius of the composer spurs new ways of approaching the instrument. The famous example is the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto*, at first deemed 'unplayable' and now, fodder for all serious young violinists,' Starobin points out. 'In the case of both Carter and Ruders, the compositions grew my technique up. And they weren't the only composers to have this effect on my playing either. I'd wager that most serious performers would agree that coming to grips with the musical demands of given compositions often results in technical breakthrough.'

Starobin also explains that the collaborative process between composer and artist will vary in approach and according to personality.'

'Each composer is different. Some collaborate easily and actively seek player input. Others carry very fixed ideas and find it difficult to accept suggestions. The best composers seem to find a way of accommodating the practical without interrupting musical flow.'

This past July, Starobin performed Poul Ruders's first guitar concerto, *Psalmodies* at the Tanglewood Festival and in November, he will be performing the American premiere of Ruders's second concerto, *Paganini Variations* with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra with conductor Justin Brown at the Alys Stephens Center in Birmingham, Alabama.

'Poul doesn't play guitar but he writes for the instrument with a lot of knowledge, technique and experience,' Starobin says. 'These are pieces that require a big technique and present a wide range of musical styles. His scores rarely require the input of an editor. Everything one

needs to interpret his music is already on the page. It amazes me that an intricately contrapuntal guitar piece the likes of his *Ricercare* could be conceived so perfectly by a non-player.

'What makes these two concertos of his unique is that, for one thing, their *tessitura* almost demands a more modern instrument. Poul composes extensively for the region of the fingerboard above the 12th fret. At times the music lives up there with extreme velocity. Guitars with elevated fingerboards, like Tom Humphrey's guitars, work well. Even better is a guitar with an elevated fingerboard and cut-away, like the Southwell A guitars.'

In the recording of the first concerto, *Psalmodies*, Starobin used a Humphrey with a raised fingerboard and on *Paganini Variations*, he used a Gary Southwell 'A'. 'Both instruments,' he says, 'made coping with the technical demands a much more practical task.'

In 2001, Starobin performed on and produced the CD, *Star-Child*, featuring works by composer George Crumb. The CD received a Grammy for Best Recording of a Contemporary Composition. Starobin's new album *Newdance*, which includes Elliott Carter's *Shard*, landed an 'Indie Award' in 1999 from the Association for Independent Music, in addition to a Grammy nomination for Best Classical Solo Recording. Starobin details his ongoing work with both of these composers:

'George is virtually family. I've known him since my student days and we have a very close working relationship. In addition to the pieces he has written for me, I've been working with him for many years on producing a complete recorded edition of his music. I regard this as a very important task, as he has extremely specific goals in mind for the realization of these highly detailed scores. Although George's notation is brilliantly executed, it is still not always able to convey the precise sound of some of the effects he wants. Recording the works with his collaboration has answered a number of questions that performers of his music have struggled with.



David Starobin and George Crumb clowning, Colorado, 2006.



In recent years, Starobin has been touring with George Crumb, performing *Mundis Canis*, a suite of miniatures for guitar and percussion that musically describe the personalities of Crumb's various dogs owned by his family. 'After *Mundis Canis*, we formed what has become known as the George Crumb Ensemble with soprano Tony Arnold and pianist Robert Shannon. We've been playing all-Crumb concerts and have been having a great time on the road.'

Starobin first met the now 97-year old Elliott Carter in 1969 or 1970 during a visit Carter had made to Peabody Conservatory. 'At that time, I was playing his only guitar music, the little Shakespeare setting of 1938, *Tell Me Where is Fancy Bred*. A few years later I had the opportunity to perform the beautiful solo guitar part of his cantata, *Syringa*. At that time, we discussed a solo piece and in 1983 he composed *Changes*. During the 80s and 90s I'm sure I gave several hundred performances of *Changes* and I recorded it twice. *Shard* is a short 'dance' piece, his contribution to my *Newdance* CD. It's a fiery little curtain-raiser that I've programmed to begin many of my concerts.

'Over the years, Elliott and his wife, Helen, became good friends. When my wife and I formed a record company, it seemed logical to record Elliott's music, and to date we have made and issued recordings of perhaps forty of his compositions. My work with Elliott has taught me invaluable lessons about balance, pacing and attention to detail.'

Starobin oversees record production at Bridge Records, a company he founded in 1981. Bridge's catalogue has been awarded many of the recording industry's highest honours including a Grammy in 2001, and 12 Grammy nominations.

'I was always an electronics and communications brat,' he says. 'I grew up with radio and recordings, operated a ham radio station, and made my first recording when I was 13, in 1964. It was a cheesy 45 rpm single of two songs that I wrote and recorded in a friend's basement. We handed out a few copies to family and, as I recall, girl friends. I think I've always been fascinated by the recording process, and certainly jumped in without much knowledge.'

'Bridge Records has grown slowly but steadily. We currently issue 35 to 40 titles a year, ranging from solo to orchestral music, with a little bit of jazz, folk and world music thrown in. In addition to new productions, we are in the midst of a 20-year agreement with the Library of Congress to restore and issue historical recordings from the Library of Congress' Concert Archive. This archive houses many unreleased concert recordings made at the Library from 1937 on, and includes many great artists of the 20th Century.'

'Many were very well known- Leopold Stokowski, Nathan Milstein, Samuel Barber, George Szell, Leontyne Price, Zino Francescatti,



*Poul Ruders and David Starobin, Copenhagen.*

Henryk Szeryng, and in a strange twist of fate, the same group I mentioned earlier, the Budapest String Quartet, considered by many to be one of the finest of 20th century string quartets. The Budapests played more than 450 concerts at the Library and many were recorded. At this point, we've restored and released fifteen or sixteen discs of the group's performances.

When asked if he is still in touch at all with any of the original performers of these sound recordings, Starobin says, 'The Budapest Quartet's cellist, Mischa Schneider, produced my first recording at Marlboro, and was a wonderful grandfatherly figure during my summers there. And we did meet Edgar Ortenberg, one of the quartet's 2nd violinists. Edgar was 95 at the time, and was delighted to hear the performances we brought him to listen to. We've just released some of Gary Graffman's recordings and are regularly in touch with him. Most of the performers are long gone, but we communicate with their families.'

When asked about the importance of the Grammy awards and other honours, Starobin replied, 'It's very nice to be recognised by one's peers and, in the case of well-publicised awards like the Grammys, it gives a nice boost to sales. However, awards are ephemeral, and in the larger scheme of things, without musical meaning. When musicians allow themselves the occasional party to pat each other on the back for work well-done, it is just that—a party. When we wake up the next day it's back to practicing and trying to deepen our art.'

Besides commissioning new works, performing, teaching, recording and maintaining an independently owned record company, Starobin also manages his own publishing company, Editions New Rochelle.

'Editions New Rochelle initially issued guitar scores but recently it has expanded to include some piano and chamber music. It's very much a family enterprise. My wife Becky is the Director of Bridge and its allied artist management company. She oversees our employees and is a superb businesswoman. I've learned a



David Russell and David Starobin in Spain.

great deal from her wisdom, patience and knowledge of human nature.

'Our son Rob was born a year or two before the company was founded and has been working for us since he was a toddler. His college degree was in medieval history, but he came back to work for us bringing a wife and brother-in-law along as graphic designers.

Speaking of family, Starobin's brother Michael has composed a number of pieces for him over the years, including *Chase*, for guitar and tape; *Joshua Variations* for guitar and *Four Stevens* for voice and guitar.

'One of my favorites,' he says, 'is an arrangement of a group of songs from Stephen Sondheim's show *Sunday in the Park with George*. Mike had just orchestrated the show for Broadway and we both twisted Stephen's arm enough to allow us the liberty. Sondheim was pleased enough with the results that he made some revisions and came to the recording sessions.'

'Working on music I love with people I love is an unbeatable combination.'

**DAVID STAROBIN: A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY  
(ALL WORKS FOR SOLO GUITAR UNLESS  
OTHERWISE NOTATED)**

**18TH AND 19TH CENTURY MUSIC**

**DVD**

**STAROBIN PLAYS SOR AND GIULIANI: MEL BAY RECORDS, MB21218DVD**

**CDs**

**LUIGI BOCCHERINI:** Quintet No. 5, in D major, for guitar and strings, G. 449; Quintet No. 7 in e minor, for guitar and strings, G. 451; **SONY 47298**

**MAURO GIULIANI, SOLO GUITAR MUSIC, VOL. 1:** Grande Overture, Op. 61; Three Pieces from Lecons Progressives, Op. 51; Variations, Op. 20; Two Preludes, Op. 83; Two Rondos, Op. 14; Three Flowers, Op. 46; Minuetto, Op. 73, No. 9; Etude, Op. 100, No. 13; Variations, Op. 101 **BRIDGE 9029**

**NAPOLÉON COSTE:** Caprice sur l'ai espagnol "La Cachucha" Op. 13; La Romanesca; Fernando Sor: Menuet, Op. 11, No. 12; Etude, Op. 6, No. 9; Septième fantasia et variations brillantes, Op. 30; Larghetto, Op.

35, No. 3; Andantino Op. 31, No. 13; Souvenirs d'une soirée à Berlin, Op. 56; Giulio Regondi: Introduction et caprice, Op. 23 **GHA 126.022**

**GIULIO REGONDI: TEN ETUDES BRIDGE 9039**

**GIULIO REGONDI:** Introduction et caprice, Op. 23; Réverie, Op. 19 **BRIDGE 9055**

**FERNANDO SOR:** Lecon, Op. 60, No. 20. Andante, Op. 45, No. 5. Minuet, Op. 11, No. 5. Minuet, Op. 24, No. 1. Galop, op. 32, No. 6; Fantaisie, Op. 58; Six Lessons, Op. 31 Mauro Giuliani: Garyowen, Op. 125, No. 6; Twelve Waltzes, Op. 57; The Blue Bells of Scotland **BRIDGE 9107**

**FERNANDO SOR: STUDIOS,** Op. 29, No. 23, Op. 29, No. 17, Op. 6 No. 12, Op. 6, No. 2; Fantaisie villageoise, Op. 52, Cantabile, Op. 47, No. 5; Andante, Op. 47, No. 1; Lesson, Op. 31, No. 13; Menuet, Op. 24, No. 6; Andantino, Op. 44, No. 22; Roneau, Op. 48, No. 6; Introduction et Thème Varié, Op. 20; Andantino, Op. 60, No. 23 **BRIDGE 9166**

**20TH & 21ST CENTURY MUSIC**

**STEPHEN SONDHEIM:** Sunday Song Set (baritone and guitar); Elliott Carter: Changes; Toru Takemitsu: **Toward the Sea** (guitar and alto flute); Hans Werner Henze: Carillon, Récitatif, Masque (guitar, harp and mandolin); John Anthony Lennon: Another's Pandango; Barbara Kolb: Three Lullabies; William Bland: A Fantasy-Homage to Tomás Luis de Victoria; Milton Babbitt: Composition for Guitar **BRIDGE 9009**

**MICHAEL STAROBIN:** Chase (guitar and electronics); Humphrey Scarle: Two Practical Cats (narrator flute/piccolo, guitar, cello); Robert Saxton: Night Dance; Barbara Kolb: Umbrian Colors (violin and guitar); Ronald Roxbury: Two Songs of Walt Whitman (baritone, flute and guitar); Tod Machover: Bug-Mudra (two guitars, percussion and live computer electronics) **BRIDGE 9022**

**JOHN ANTHONY LENNON:** Zingari (guitar and orchestra); Mel Powell: Setting; Milton Babbitt: Soli e Duetini (flute and guitar); Mario Davidovsky: Synchronisms #10 (guitar and tape) **BRIDGE 9042**

**MILTON BABBITT:** Soli e Duettini for flute and guitar **NAXOS 8559259**

**STEPHEN JAFFE:** Spinoff; Jorge Morel: Reflexiones Latinas; Elliott Carter: Shard; Mario Lavista: Natarayah; William Bland: Rag Nouveau; Bent Sørensen: Angelus Waltz; John Anthony Lennon: Gigolo; Steve Mackey: San Francisco Shuffle; Richard Wernick: Da'ase; Apostolos Paraskevas: Chase Dance; John Duarte: Valse en Rondeau; Milton Babbitt: Danci; Michael Starobin: The Snoid Trucks Up Broadway; Jonathan Harvey: Sufi Dance; Per Nørgard: Serenita; Poul Ruders: Chaconne; Paul Lansky: Crooked Courante; Bryan Johanson: Open Up Your Ears **BRIDGE 9084**

**POUL RUDERS:** Psalmodies (Guitar Concerto No. 1); Etude and Ricercare; Chaconne; Paganini Variations (Guitar Concerto No. 2) **BRIDGE 9136**

**MICHAEL STAROBIN:** Joshua Variations; George Crumb: Mundus Canis (guitar and percussion); David Liptak: Forlane; Melinda Wagner: Arabesque; Richard Wernick: Trochaic Trot; Gunther Schuller: Fantasy-Suite; Paul Lansky: Shameless Sarabande; Elliott Carter: Luimen (mandolin, guitar, harp, vibraphone, trumpet, trombone) **BRIDGE 9144**