

A NEW PANTHEON

Check out this engaging sampler of the finest in modern music, by U.S. composers who just happen to be gay

by Bob Roehr



Clockwise from left: Chester Biscardi, Robert Maggio, Conrad Cummings, David Del Tredici and Ned Rorem (center)

Your eye is caught by the packaging of nubile, half-naked young men à la *Out Classics* or Frank Browning's book jackets. But the music inside this CD is much deeper than the photos might imply, and, in its own way, more enjoyable.

Out Classics scoured the serious music pantheon of dead guys to throw together cuts composed by those who probably were, might have

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been, or whom somebody wishes were homosexual. There is no such ambivalence with *Gay American Composers*: all eleven of these men are very much contemporaries and attest to their taste in bed partners.

The 20 cuts on the disc share little else. They are akin to what used to be called a "sampler," a compilation of excerpts from new releases that a company would assemble to entice you to buy the full recording. In this instance the selections are both old and new, instrumental and vocal. They share an accessibility, a fealty to lyricism in the mainstream tradition of western music, while at the same time nudging it along with late-20th-century sensibilities.

I was particularly taken by selections from Lou Harrison's String Quartet Set. It represents

the best of Northern Californian music in a composition by the septuagenarian composer and a superb performance by the Kronos Quartet.

Then there is Chester Biscardi's sensuous *Incitation to Desire: Tango*, and Robert Maggio's *Desire-Movement*.

Those who enjoy compositions for voice will find plenty to sample. Soprano Phylliss Brynjulson beautifully sings four of Ned Rorem's art songs. Conrad Cummings offers a duet: "In the Department of Love." Chris DeBlasio and Lee Hoiby both turn to Walt Whitman for stirring songs of manly love.

A 23-page booklet allows ample room for discussion of the composers' work and lives. "I personally feel there is no artistic difference between 'gay' music (music written by gay composers) versus 'straight' music (music written by, presumably, 'straight' composers)," offers composer Robert Helps. That thought is echoed by others in insightful notes on music, homosexuality and the creative process.

Aurally and in print, *Gay American Composers* is a wonderful primer to some of the finest contemporary music; the composers just happen to be gay and American. In the best tradition of a sampler, the CD is leading me to purchase others by several of the composers.

Gay American Composers, CRI; \$15.99 CD.

CRI, Composers Recordings Inc., is a nonprofit organization that for four decades has championed the recording of contemporary music.

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