

Robert Martin

Four Wind Quintets Volume 2

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The North/South Winds
Lisa Hansen, *Flute* Jillian Honn, *Oboe*
Matthew Goodman, *Clarinet* Atao Liu, *Bassoon*
Noah Fotis, *French Horn*
Max Lifchitz, *conductor*

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Program notes by Peter G. I. Alexander



Mike Strizic, music critic for the Canadian website MyEntertainmentWorld.ca, observed: “Other modern composers have been content to let dissonance do their work for them, with little thought to resolving that dissonance into a cohesive whole. Martin, by contrast, appears to firmly grasp the summative nature of his work - he refuses to shoehorn his material into formulae that do not enhance its essentially expressionist nature, and for that I applaud him.”

Robert Martin (born 1952 in Hagerstown, MD) began composing music when he was asked to write a march for his high school graduation. He earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees in music composition from the Peabody Conservatory. After his education, he held various jobs, including an apprenticeship in pipe organ restoration.

In 1976, the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded him the Charles Ives Scholarship for outstanding composition in music. Subsequently, he received a Fulbright Scholarship that took him to Vienna, Eastern Europe, and Israel.

In 1980, Martin returned to New York and chose not to pursue an academic career. Instead, he began working on Wall Street, eventually advancing to Senior Vice President in investment banking at a leading firm. In addition to providing financial assistance to hospitals and universities, Martin served as a financial advisor to the City of New York. After his retirement, he traveled extensively throughout Asia as the recipient of the Japan-US Creative Artist Fellowship.

Robert Martin's music is commonly described as fresh and visionary, yet approachable and welcoming to listeners. It is deeply rooted in the greatest traditions of the past. His work explores the human reaction to the fleeting nature of reality, acknowledging that all things will eventually fade away.

“From my early days as a student at the Peabody Conservatory, I sensed there was untapped potential in the wind quintet,” says composer Robert Martin, who has written ten wind quintets. This recording, titled *Four Wind Quintets Volume II*, features Wind Quintets Nos. 1, 2, 6, and 9 presented in reverse chronological order. These quintets complement Nos. 4, 5, 7, and 10, which were included in the first volume of Martin's Quintets, released in 2018.

Is there a common theme among the works on this CD? One notable similarity is the vividness of the composer's “voice” throughout. His approach to pitch language is distinctly twentieth-century, featuring post-World War II pan chromaticism in Quintets 1 and 2, a blend of diatonic modes and free chromaticism in Quintet 6, and the application of pure diatonic modes in Quintet 9—though these are used in a serialist manner reminiscent of the earlier quintets.

One of the many aspects we can appreciate here is that Mr. Martin's imagination knows no bounds when it comes to pitch organization. He takes an adventurous approach in applying different pitch systems and tonalities, offering us a diverse array of moods and textures with each quintet.

The composer's grasp of the wind quintet is

exceptional. Each instrument exhibits unique tonal qualities that vary based on the tessitura, or the range of high and low notes. Additionally, the composer achieves a distinct and varied emotional impact in each piece while maintaining the listener's interest throughout the duration of the work. This level of expertise is characteristic of the finest modern classical compositions.

These pieces were composed at different stages of the artist's development, with the earliest dating back to 1971 and the most recent completed in 2008. Mr. Martin's blend of craftsmanship, creativity, versatility, and skill has resulted in an exceptional collection of wind quintet literature. This body of work will undoubtedly serve as a model for future composers interested in the wind quintet for generations to come.

WIND QUINTET NO. 9 - ARCADIA

The word “Arcadia” carries profound literary meaning and represents an idealized, pastoral, and tranquil world. Mr. Martin was affected by a 2008 zeitgeist in which the attainment of a problem-free world seemed achievable. It was with this ideal—and the myth that Arcadians did not include music in their society—that the composer invited himself to write a programmatic,

three-movement *Wind Quintet Number 9*.

Upon first hearing, the listener is immediately struck by the piece's rich sonority. Constructed of triadic chords (versus free chromaticism of the other quintets on this recording), the likeness to conventional Western music is understandable. Initially, one could think that Wagner had written the quintet himself! But the piece's structural underpinnings suggest otherwise.

Mr. Martin offers this insight: "I began to imagine a perfect place where sun-drenched music was integrated seamlessly into the lives of the enlightened inhabitants. What would the music be like?" Via his own statistical research, the composer concluded that sections of the work ought to be related by soft intervals, specifically, thirds. "Naturally, there would be no sudden dissonances, only those that are well oiled and slide by easily."

Movement 1 is a brisk, melodious movement in which sanguine, contented lines—often outlining chord tones—move in upward sweeps. These are often coupled with a parallel line, lowered or raised by just enough to enrich the line and fill out the harmony. Tonalities are adhered to for the duration of a phrase if it is played by one instrument, but as the statement is handed off to another player, it may change tonality. There are no moments of conspicuous silence, cadential or declamatory; the movement is, by and large, sonically continuous.

Movement 2 is more gesturally dynamic. It

begins with subtly beat-agnostic counterpoint: a theme is assigned to the horn and varied by bassoon, with slower-moving sustained counter-melodies by the other players. As the work unfolds, a bassoon motif is stated on each down-beat, propelling the piece forward. It recoils with a quick cadence, and another build-up leads us to the climactic end; flute is given wide berth to play a theme, its texture reminiscent of a soprano aria in an opera. The other four instruments play rhythmically terse, detailed fragments—the same notes and rhythms—in unison against the flute's soaring, operatic line. Repose is then heard by low, sustained tones given to bassoon, horn, and clarinet.

The inspiration for Movement 3 came from an Arcadian nightfall ritual which included bird-song. How did the composer express nightfall, birdsong, and the elation of Arcadians over their stress-free environment? The movement starts with a tiny four-note twitter from bassoon and oboe. When the clarinet (the ersatz nightbird) enters, it repeats the twitter but with two additional notes, each repetition in close succession, and rhythimized. As this unfolds, the other players enter with long, sustained tones, creating denser harmonies around the clarinet's "night-bird" theme. An orchestrational buildup culminates in a dramatic cadential rupture, in which all members of the quintet deliver a declamatory statement (the same birdsong in immediate succession) at full volume and in unison.

WIND QUINTET NO. 6 – POSTCARDS FROM KYOTO

Wind Quintet Number 6 is a very interesting work not only because it departs from Schönbergian pan-chromaticism but because its effect is the opposite of the emotion-saturated, heartfelt lyricism of the European tradition. Subtitled "Postcards from Kyoto", these six two-minute movements are impressions of fine Japanese landmarks (mostly gardens) and convey an abstraction of the impression the composer had after visiting each landmark. Here, "Postcard" is meant as a "vignette," to be sure. But it also means that, as works of art, they are "objects of interest" (rather than emotionally stirring pieces), similar to the effect that large stones in a Zen garden have.

Here, the composer uses Japanese "cho", specifically from the Gagaku imperial court. A cho is not a plain scale or an unordered pitch collection. Rather, it is a pattern that dictates specific melodic behavior, ornamentation, and musical tension. Each movement has its own cho; 3 movements are assigned a major (Ionian) mode cho, the other 3 like the minor (Aeolian) mode.

How they are cast in the quintet is novel; the cho is set against more freely chromatic counterpoint. In the first movement, Sentō Gosho, for example, we see the flute and clarinet state a variant of the cho, while the other instruments play more sustained, slowly unfolding phrases that coexist with the cho and its tonality. The

juxtaposition of Japanese-tradition-rooted melody and twentieth-century classical chromaticism merges here, thus abstracting the piece's "Japanese-ness."

How are these movements "Postcards," exactly? In Sentō Gosho, a short, chordal opening idea precedes melodic drive, interjects twice, and concludes the movement, evoking in us the custom of reverent bowing when Japanese royalty greet. In Katsura, the cho's tertiary rhythm and meter permeate the movement, giving it a rounded, unagitated flow (perhaps illustrative of the vast ponds, brooks and rivers that flow through these gardens).

One of the most dramatic moments is a rise to a searing climax near the end of Kōtō-in. After the oboe's initial statement, the clarinet takes over with a sequential variant of the statement, then hands it to the flute. The flute cascades the now-tension-filled statement downward for several beats and magically resolves the tension to full resolution over a satisfying cadence; a waterfall, perhaps?

In the final movement, Nijō-jō, the cho takes the form of an intricate tune motorized by a constant iteration of code-like patterns. Beneath that is a similarly intricate, code-like variant. One hears an interlocking of these ideas, playful enough to conjure the decorative latticework (kumiko) of Nijō-jō castle, the landmark on which this movement is based.

These movements are so evocative and so nu-

anced that one would be moved to visit Japan and see the same iconic sites that inspired this composition!

WIND QUINTET NO. 2 - VARIATIONS

Wind Quintet Number 2 (subtitled “Variations”) was written while Mr. Martin was a 23-year-old graduate student (1975). He is now much more experienced, having written a flute trio and a string trio since *Wind Quintet*

- Theme: *Risoluto* (firm, decisive)
- Variation 1 & 2: *Misterioso* (mysteriously)
- Variation 3: *Leggiero* (lightly, nimbly, and gracefully)
- Variation 4: *Brillante*
- Variation 5: *Sonoro* (with a rich tone)
- Variation 6: *Agitato*
- Variation 7: *Sussurando* (whispering, murmuring)
- Variation 8: *Misterioso*
- Conclusion: *Risoluto*

Number 1. The confidence with which Mr. Martin wrote *Wind Quintet Number 2* is immediately evident, likely due to his familiarity with the medium. One senses a ready fluidity of execution, giving the composer room for musical expression and a focus on abstract notions of pitch organization, thematic construction, form, coherence, and sound for sound’s sake.

Structurally, the work is eight variations on a theme, with indications as follows:

The composer offers this thought: “The variations are not obvious or immediately audible as in traditional variation form. Rather, the structure presents steady growth as it proceeds from one variation section to the next.”

Here, the composer finds opportunities to unify the variations through continuous development while preserving some semblance of distinctiveness from variation to variation. For example, the contrasting variations—*Brillante*, with its brief, quick, rhythmically detailed clusters; *Sonoro*, where held tones dominate; and *Agitato*, in which pulse is upended through a fluid and elastic treatment of rhythm—are each conspicuously distinct. We see greater organic development from Variation 6 onward when the momentum from *Sussurando*—where “motorized” passagework generates a pulse—to Variation 8 (*Misterioso*)—in which a sequence of upward-directed scale-like motifs is distributed among the players; each motivic statement is higher than the last and reaches climactic heights and driving momentum to Conclusion (*Risoluto*) in which the initial theme is restated followed by a grand, chordal close.

It is no surprise that this work advanced Mr. Martin’s standing as a composer. He fully transcends the medium, and his compositional ‘vision’ is both deep and imaginative. Praise for this piece came not only from the faculty at the Peabody Conservatory but also from distinguished composer Hugo Weisgall, among others.

WIND QUINTET NO. 1 – LEFT BEHIND

Wind Quintet No. 1 (subtitled “Left Behind”), completed in 1971, was written by the composer while he was an undergraduate student at the Peabody Conservatory. While it is an early work (the composer was 19 at the time) it is far from naïve. Quite the opposite! By 1971, Mr. Martin had been composing for 9 years, and this quintet demonstrates the confidence and professionalism of a fully seasoned composer. A first impression might relate this piece to Schönberg’s classicist period: clearly etched themes, clear pulse, and overarching symmetry. It is no surprise, then, that the piece is in 3 movements—Allegro, Andante, and Allegro—and employs many of the same attributes from Schönberg in it.

The first movement starts with a bold, dry theme, the first four notes of which are an easily recognizable, jagged 4 note starting fragment. The theme is answered by a more “singing,” linear, 4-note response, of course, derived from the starting fragment. As the movement unfolds, the same “call and response” idea is left intact, but in different transpositions, permutations, and instrumental assignments. The insertion of new textures (chordal build-up, free counterpoint, solo passages, etc.) keeps the movement interesting via surprise; we are left with the perfect balance of variety and consistency.

The second movement shares a similar propensity to contrasting “call and answer”

phrasing, but in which the “answer”—this time a short, fast, and detailed fragment—answers a linear and soaring horn theme. The movement unfolds with this sequence subtly interjected by rich, sonorous “stacking” of notes by the members of the quintet, an idea that sensuously ends the movement. Among the more striking aspects of this movement is the way the pitches, which are serialized, sound so “right.” At no point is there a sense that the tonality created by the notes is out of step with their rhythmic, phraseological, or structural underpinnings.

The third movement—both the shortest and the fastest of the three movements—is structured as follows: statement, variation, extreme variation, recapitulation. Here, the bassoon and

horn are often used to anchor flute, oboe, and clarinet micro fragments, playing low and at half the rate of the pulse of the movement, thus becoming the ersatz bass line. The effect is both grounding and exciting, allowing the upper instruments to revel in contrapuntal ecstasy. One particularly affective move is the approach to the recapitulation in which the bassoon or horn play low offbeats over the flute’s soaring triplets; the texture is repeated but in descending sequence, driving momentum inexorably toward the recapitulation. Gestures like these remind us that Mr. Martin’s musical vision—even at this early stage—demonstrates a musical maturity rarely found in the modern repertoire.



Flutist **Lisa Hansen**’s critically acclaimed EMI/Angel recording of Joaquín Rodrigo’s *Concierto Pastoral* with the London Royal Philharmonic Orchestra has been broadcast worldwide. The *New York Times* described her playing as “irresistibly lyrical” while *Fanfare* proclaimed: “One might well prefer Hansen to Galway.” A graduate of The Juilliard School, Ms. Hansen is now the flute professor at Kean University.

Oboist **Jillian Honn** did her undergraduate work at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, before moving on to earn her master’s from Yale University. At twenty, she won the Principal Oboe position with Syracuse’s *Symphoria*, which she occupied for five seasons. “Contemporary music is a passion of mine,” she says. “It’s exciting to work with living, breathing art. It makes me happy!”

Matthew Goodman, clarinet, made his Carnegie Recital Hall debut in 1986 as the winner of the Artists International Competition. He has since performed as a soloist in Japan and Hong Kong under the auspices of the U.S. State Department, with the National Orchestra of El Salvador, the Israel Sinfonietta, and at international music festivals, including the Scotia Festival, the Jerusalem Music Festival, and at the Teatro Nuovo in Spoleto, Italy. In addition to music, he enjoys cross-country skiing and long-distance bicycle touring.

Bassoonist **Atao Liu** has performed with the American Symphony Orchestra and the American Ballet Theater. She has toured with the NCPA Orchestra of China and collaborated with the Beijing Symphony. She completed her bachelor’s degree at Manhattan School of Music, a master’s degree from The Juilliard School, and a doctoral degree from Stony Brook University.

Noah Fotis, French Horn, trained at the Virginia Commonwealth University and the Hartt College of Music before earning a doctorate in music performance from Stony Brook University. Active as a recitalist and chamber music performer, Fotis is a much-sought-after freelancer in the New York City area.

Max Lifchitz—conductor and pianist—was awarded first prize in the 1976 International Gaudeamus Competition for Performers of Twentieth Century Music held in Holland. The *San Francisco Chronicle* described him as “a young composer of brilliant imagination and a stunning, ultra-sensitive pianist.” The *New York Times* praised him for his “clean, measured and sensitive performances” and that he “conducted a strong performance.” The *American Record Guide* observed: “Mr. Lifchitz is as good on the podium as he is behind the piano.”

CREDITS

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(Alexander is a composer and percussionist who earned a doctorate at Harvard University)

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