



Arthur Cunningham: Bridging Two Worlds

by John Ellis

Arthur Cunningham was born in Piermont, NY in 1928. He was an eclectic composer trained from childhood in both jazz and classical music. His early studies were at the Metropolitan Music School in New York City. While there, he studied classical composition with the school's director, Wallingford Riegger and jazz piano with Teddy Wilson and John Mehegan. Upon graduation, he went to Fisk University, an historic all-Black school in Nashville, Tennessee. His education there was made possible by a fund set up by a group including Kurt Weill, Langston Hughes, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers. At Fisk, he studied classical piano with the well-known accompanist William Duncan Allen, and theory and composition with

John Work. He studied further at The Juilliard School with Peter Mennin, Norman Lloyd, and Henry Brant. He earned a Masters Degree from Columbia Teachers College where he received the Distinguished Alumni Award in 1992. His work as a composer took flight in 1968 after a commission from Benjamin Steinberg and the Symphony of the New World. The piece he produced was the dissonant and rhythmically complex *Concentrics* for orchestra. It was given its premiere at Philharmonic Hall in Lincoln Center, NYC in February 1969. His most prolific period followed with works such as *Engrams*, *Harlem Suite* (including *Lullabye for a Jazz Baby* which was performed by the Alvin Ailey Dance Company), *Night Song*, *Eclatette* for solo cello or double bass, *The Walton Statement* for double bass and orchestra, and many other choral and instrumental pieces.

Following a period in the early 1980's where he focused on jazz piano playing, vocal coaching and teaching, he returned to composing in 1986 with a group of short piano pieces. A high point of this late period was his revision of *Concentrics* for a performance by the New York Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta in 1989. His compositional activities and jazz performing continued until his death. His work with cabaret artist, Kate Davidson (whom he would later marry) was a central creative activity in the last decade of his life. Together,

they performed throughout the U. S., Canada, and the Netherlands, and served as U. S. representatives at Expo '92 in Seville, Spain. Further evidence of Cunningham's wide-ranging activities was his work as music coordinator and narrator for the 1989 PBS documentary, *The Exiles*. He died after a long struggle with cancer in 1997, only a month after a concert in his honor produced by the Rockland Community College African-American History Month Committee. For this concert, he provided spoken commentary on his works before they were played. He then performed, for the final time, with his wife.

Harlem Suite was composed for piano in 1970. Arthur Cunningham had been writing piano pieces since the mid-1960's and there is an early version of *Lullabye for a Jazz Baby* in a workbook of piano pieces from this time. He had written *Engrams* in the previous year on commission for the 1971 recording *Natalie Hinderas Plays Music by Black Composers* (Desto 7102/3; re-released by CRI in 1992 as *Natalie Hinderas: Piano Music by African American Composers*- CD 629). A neat manuscript copy of the piano version of *Harlem Suite* was found after his death and was dedicated to Natalie Hinderas. Cunningham later was encouraged to recast many of the pieces in choral and orchestral form. After doing so, Theodore Presser Co. published the choral and instrumental works that came to make up the *Harlem Suite*. More specifically, *Lullabye for a Jazz Baby* and *Sugar Hill* were brought together, on the advice of conductor André Kostalanetz, to form the orchestral tone poem *Lullabye for a Jazz Baby*. This work was recorded on Desto by the Oakland Youth Symphony and featured a young John Faddis playing the jazz trumpet solo. It eventually received over a thousand performances throughout the 1970's and 1980's. *Apollo* became the choral work entitled *Harlem is my Home* accompanied by piano and orchestra. *Lenox* was rewritten as a work for chorus, narrator, and strings. *Convent* ('Peace') was given an arrangement for women's voices, strings, and harp and renamed *Sunday in de Evenin'*. *Mundy Man*, for chorus, orchestra, and harmonica, arose from *Mornin' side* ('*Harmonica Blues*') in the piano solo suite. And *Pataditas* ('*Little Kicks*') was recomposed as a piano concerto in one movement. The published version of *Harlem Suite* also included additional choral works unrelated to the original piano suite. Only one of the works, *Sugar Hill*, was known to me in piano form prior to Cunningham's passing, and this in a version dating from late 1969, a few months earlier than the version that was found in the copy from 1970. On this recording, I play the earlier version of *Sugar Hill*, as it is the one he coached me on for various concerts of his music in the 1980's and 1990's.

Notes by the composer on *Harlem Suite* (© 1970 by Arthur Cunningham. Reproduced with permission of Kate Davidson Cunningham and the Estate of Arthur Cunningham. A revised version of these notes appears in the published choral adaptations: © 1972, Text Reprinted by Permission of the Publisher, Theodore Presser Co.):

CHICKS AN CHOPS
RATS AN ROT

PULPITS AN POOL
HIPPIES AN FOOLS

BUSOMS AND BOOKIES
GOTS AN NOGOTS

ROACHES AN RENT
AN MONEY SPENT

YOUNG AN OLD
SOURCE AN SOUL

IS WHAT HARLEM IS

--ARTHUR CUNNINGHAM

***I HAVE WRITTEN THESE PIECES OUT OF GRATITUDE AND A DEEP PERSONAL FEELING.
MAY HARLEM CONTINUE TO BE AS IT HAS BEEN FOR ME, ONE OF THE GREAT SOURCE
PLACES OF THIS NATION.***



Places and days seem to be inseparable in Harlem. By naming the day you name the place. Occasionally, of course, where it's at is where it is.

WEDNESDAY starts the week with a salute to the Apollo Theatre's famous amateur night in Harlem. The first show I ever saw was at the Apollo with Fats Waller headlining. "**TOUCH THE TREE**" is for him and his swingin' left hand. Every contestant on amateur night had to touch the tree for luck before performing. I touched it when I was twelve.

THURSDAY is a gently bent lullabye for a very sophisticated jazz baby.

FRIDAY swings on "**SUGAR HILL**" near 155th and Amsterdam. Circa 1940.

SATURDAY is a "**LENOX**" sashay-strut right out of the ragtime twenties. This is 'let the good times roll' rent party music.

SUNDAY mornin', and church...what else for the good folk? This is the kind of 'collection piece' which was played right after the sermon when everybody was feelin' good. It was gospel and it was happy. (**CONVENT: COLLECTION PIECE**)

In the evenin' after prayer service the old folks would sit in rockin' chairs and be at peace with the Lord for havin' brought them safely through another week. (**CONVENT: PEACE**)

MONDAY means the blues and Monday in Harlem is no different. The mornin' piece is an old **HARMONICA BLUES**. Harmonica players came to Harlem from the south, where they used to go from town to town tellin' the news and playing the blues.

Monday night is somethin' else, the most 'soul' time of all. It's 'sessiontime' everywhere...everybody sittin' in, everybody cookin'. Mondays at Minton's, Small's, Basie's and the Baby Grand. **ALL THAT FUNK**...that easy funk, them **MONDAY BLUES**..... you'd think you was in heaven with all that soul.

TUESDAY bursts on the scene like a blazing Puerto Rican sun. From the El Barrio section of Spanish Harlem we have an explosive mix of cultures that made *Harlem jazz* go through some 'way out' changes. I call this piece "**PATADITAS**" which means 'little kicks', the name given to the kind of person who is the life of the party.

Engrams was composed in 1969 for Natalie Hinderas and is dedicated to her. It is published by Theodore Presser Co. and was recorded by Hinderas (see above). The word 'engram' is defined by *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1989) in two ways: in biological terms, it refers to "the durable mark caused by a stimulus upon a protoplasm," and in psychological usage, it is "a structural change in the nervous system effected by an experience considered to be the physical basis of memory." As can be heard in the interview excerpts at the end of this CD (track 20), this work became the site of his first major attempt to reconcile his jazz and classical musical languages. In *Engrams*, we hear the explosive collision of serial atonality with bebop and free jazz. As Cunningham writes in his Performance Note for *Engrams*, "The single-note passages should be played with a slight jazz feeling." In the interview excerpts he reveals the pivotal influence of Cecil Taylor and of bebop. When I asked him to write program notes for some of his works that I was performing for a concert, his program notes for *Engrams* simply referred to the piece as a "self-portrait." The work begins in the language of the Second Viennese School and evolves into a bebop excursion using the same 12-tone row that served as the foundation for the opening. These two musical styles ferociously tug at the same melodic and harmonic material in a dynamic interplay until the final modal cadence in A minor. Cunningham wrote that *Engrams* "progresses from the dark of my mind to the light of reality." (see the liner notes for CRI CD629 *Natalie Hinderas: Piano Music by African-American Composers*; notes by Dominique-Rene de Lerma) The relationship between the subconscious and reality finds, then, its analogy in the struggle between serial atonality and jazz that propels the drama in *Engrams*.

Phoenix was written in 1986 after a long period away from composition. The title refers to the beautiful bird from mythology that supposedly burned itself on a funeral pyre after a life of several hundred years, only to rise from the ashes, reborn into another life cycle. It too shows a merging of jazz and atonal procedures and materials, but this time, in place of the sense of struggle heard in *Engrams*, we hear a peaceful resolution. The connection to Cunningham's personal composition

history is made evident by the opening theme, which was taken from his seminal orchestral work, *Concentrics* (see above). *Phoenix* then starts from the bristling energy of that earlier period in his output. It then proceeds through a ruminative stage that gathers momentum leading up to a climactic dissonant outburst. After a brief pause, there is a soft cadence that ends on a bluesy D chord spread across the span of the keyboard.

Blue Bridge (1987) is a musical meditation upon a blue bridge that spans the Harlem River in New York City. Cunningham wrote the following poetic reflection upon *Blue Bridge* for a 1988 concert I gave at the Manhattan School of Music:

HEY BLUE BRIDGE
CROSSIN THAT MAGENTA SKY
WITH THOSE
CATEYE LIGHTS
DIAMOND TWINKLIN BY
COOL ON THE CURVE OF YOUR SPINE
FINE BLUE BRIDGE
YOU'RE SO FINE
HEY BRIDGE
SING YOUR BIG CITY
BLUE BRIDGE BLUES

Periwinkle

(courtesy of the Estate of Arthur Cunningham)

Handwritten musical score for 'Blue Bridge' in 2/4 time. The score is written on two staves, treble and bass clef. The first measure contains a treble clef, a 3/4 time signature, and a piano (p) dynamic marking. The second measure contains a 5/8 time signature, a piano (p) dynamic marking, and a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic marking. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and slurs. A '4' is written in the bottom right corner of the second staff.

Sille (1988) was composed for me. The title is my last name in reverse. The work is serial and uses elements of my name to create sonorities and cadences.

The rest of the music on the CD consists of pieces found in his studio after his death. *Blue Bending* (1988) is a short, slow mood piece. The score ends with a poem by the composer.

“Black rocks and sand
And
Cold summer water
Gulls calling the wind
To their wings
And I dreamed
Of someday things”

Evening Thistle (1990) was originally titled “*Thistle*” and has the word “*Evening*” handwritten above it. The performance direction at the beginning reads “Silent celebration.” At the end of the work, the composer writes that “the piece is never loud; soft as summer.”

Quarter Moon (1989) begins with a slow peaceful introduction that gives way to a lyrical character piece redolent of the intimate music of jazz pianist Bill Evans.

Shadows Under a Willow was originally composed in 1966 as part of the early book of piano character pieces that he wrote as he was searching for his compositional voice. He rewrote this piece in “fair copy” hand (when he was preparing a work to go to the publisher). There are some erasures on the score and therefore I have had to make some editorial judgments. The copyright on this updated version is 1979.

Moon Shadows (1966) derives from the same earlier collection and was also recopied and copyrighted by the composer in 1979. Its name in the 1966 collection was *Gaea*.

The last piece on the CD was found in Arthur Cunningham's studio after his death. The work was *untitled* and neither signed nor dated in its manuscript form. It is a jaunty, jazzy piece that has the exuberance of a Gershwin prelude with more modern harmonic and melodic language.

The Interview Excerpts:

While working on my doctoral dissertation on the life and music of Arthur Cunningham, I interviewed the composer from October through December, 1989, at his studio in Nyack, NY. I have selected excerpts from the many hours of taped conversations and placed them together. This offers the listener an introduction to the composer's life history, compositional attitudes relating to his jazz and classical studies, and his feelings about the effect of his African-American heritage on his composing. I also chose these excerpts because they show some of the charm, humor, and creative intensity of the man who was my piano teacher for four years and became my advisor and friend until his passing in 1997.

Notes on the Music by John Ellis except where noted.

Handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Plein". The score is written on two staves, treble and bass clef. The time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked "♩ = 66". The dynamics include "ff", "mp", "p", and "fp". The piece ends with a double bar line and a fermata over the final note. There are some handwritten annotations and markings above the staff, including a large "F" and some symbols.

Arthur Cunningham
December 18, 1986

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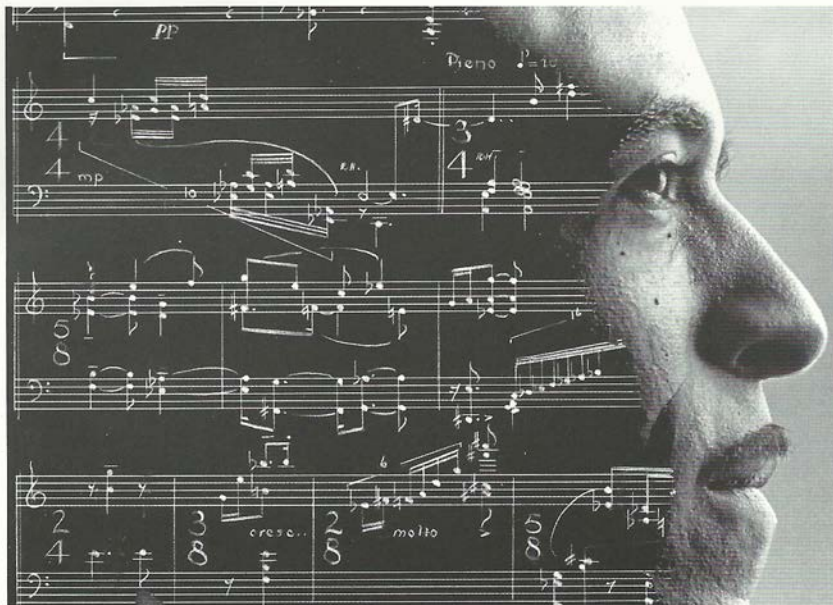
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Harlem Suite (1970) ASCAP	20:02
1. Wednesday: Apollo ('Touch the Tree': for Fats)	2:05
2. Thursday: Lullabye for a Jazz Baby	2:40
3. Friday: Sugar Hill	1:30
4. Saturday: Lenox ('Sashay Strut')	0:55
5. Sunday mornin': Convent ('Collection Piece')	1:16
6. Sunday evenin': Convent ('Peace')	2:54
7. Monday mornin': Mornin'side ('Harmonica Blues')	2:50
8. Monday evenin': Mornin'side ('Monday Blues: All that Funk')	3:14
9. Tuesday: Pataditas ('Little Kicks')	2:38
10. Engrams (1969) ASCAP	6:13
11. Phoenix (1986) ASCAP	1:43
12. Blue Bridge (1987) ASCAP	2:09
13. Sille (1988) ASCAP	3:49
14. Blue Bending (1988) ASCAP	1:45
15. Evening Thistle (1990) ASCAP	2:54
16. Quarter Moon (1989) ASCAP	2:49
17. Shadows Under A Willow (1966) ASCAP	1:43
18. Moon Shadows (1966) ASCAP	1:55
19. Untitled ASCAP	1:39
20. Excerpts from Interviews with Arthur Cunningham (John Ellis, interviewer)	13:05
Total Time:	61:01

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