

american
contemporary

ROUSSAKIS EPHEMERIS

CRI
471
STEREO



ΑΡΧΙΟ
F. Joubert

NICOLAS ROUSSAKIS
EPHEMERIS (1979)

Morning
Afternoon
Evening
Night

The Group for Contemporary Music String Quartet (Benjamin Hudson and Carol Zeavin, violinists; Janet Lyman Hill, violist; Eric Bartlett, cellist)

NICOLAS ROUSSAKIS was born June 10, 1934, in Athens, Greece. His father was from Heralikion, Crete, and his mother from Estonia, where he was taken as an infant. His father died when he was four years old. At the outbreak of World War II, the family fled to Florence, Italy, and resided there for five years. Toward the end of the war, the family again was forced to escape, this time to Switzerland. After a five-year stay in Switzerland, Roussakis came to America and became a U.S. citizen. He studied at Columbia University where he obtained a doctorate and taught for nine years. He also studied with Philipp Jarnach in Germany on a Fulbright Grant and at the International Courses for Modern Music in Darmstadt. In 1960, he received an Award from the National Institute for Arts and Letters. He has been Executive Director of the Group for Contemporary Music in New York since 1971 and was President of the American Composers Alliance from 1979-1981. In 1976 Roussakis was one of the co-founders of the American Composers Orchestra. He is presently (1982) teaching at Rutgers University and is working on an orchestral piece commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts.

EPHEMERIS, the Greek word for "journal, diary or astronomical calendar," refers to a thing which lasts only one day. The title is also an allusion to the transient nature of music and of our very own life. The piece is dedicated to the memory of Aristoxenos of Tarentum, a pupil of Aristotle, who flourished in the fourth century B.C. He opposed the Pythagoreans, who taught that numbers constituted the true nature of things; Aristoxenos proposed that in musical matters the ear should be the final judge. In his Elements of Harmony he said, "Our method rests on two things, the faculty of hearing and the intellect."

EPHEMERIS consists of four tone poems which describe the times of the day: Morning, Afternoon, Evening and Night—specifically, a hot, late summer day in the Eastern Mediterranean. Both outer events and inner states of being are portrayed by the music.

Morning, the opening measures are a representation of Aurora, Homer's "lovely-fingered Dawn." After the sun has risen, the music proceeds to describe the vigorous activity of the early hours of the day; a strong beat characterizes this central portion. The climax of the movement is an intensely animated conversation of four instruments, in which the irregular pulse of the morning's work gives way to a more fluid, speech-like rhythm. At the end, drowsiness sets in and there is a return to the music of the very beginning.



(Nicolaiou Photo)

Afternoon. The movement opens with one single tone which subtly changes in color as it passes from instrument to instrument. This sets the mood for the musical painting of a hot, lazy and erotic afternoon. Rapid arpeggios of harmonics, tension-laden tremolos and squaring glissandos unfold over long-held tones. Despite the very active surface, the musical material develops very slowly. The whole can be perceived as one long phrase, in which the tone row takes the duration of the entire movement to appear and then to dissolve.

Evening. This is a portrayal of a village feast, in which three dances take place. During the opening Prelude, the imaginary musicians are tuning their instruments. Each of the dances is based on a rhythm consisting of beats of unequal length. This long-short subdivision is known to us through the classic poetic meters and can be traced back to the Greek language of the time of Homer. It has survived in the folk music of the region and is exact proportions (in the ratio of 3:2) were first given by Aristoxenos in his Elements of Rhythmics. The dances here do not correspond to any specific mood, but are freely invented by the composer. The first is in 9/8 time (counted 2+2+2+3), an interlude separates it from the second which is in 8/8 (counted 3+3+2) and the third is in 12/8 time (counted 7+5 or 2+2+2+2+3); the movement ends with a brief Coda.

Night. The fourth movement begins with the slow and dark music of sleep. This is interrupted by a quick, brilliant tune—the theme from the first movement of Haydn's Sonata No. 6, "Le Matin," which appears as a dream, enveloped in shimmering clouds of harmonic glissandos. After a further descent into the regions of profound sleep, there is a quotation of the great Byzantine hymn "Psycho mou, psycho mou, anastasi" by Romanos (V-VI centuries) as transcribed by Egon Wellesz:

Ψυχὴ μου, ψυχὴ μου,
ἀνάστα, εὖ ἀνάστα·
εὖ ἀνάστα ἄγγελε,
καὶ μέλλεαι θηρῆσαι·

My soul, my soul, arise!
Why are you sleeping?
The end is coming
and you will be much confused
by the tumult.

At that point, the music breaks loose, frantically quoting fragments from earlier sections of the composition. This frenzied, chaotic music is gradually replaced by very placid chords, which become longer and longer. The tumult disappears. The serenity of the final harmonies brings the praise of God which passes all understanding ("Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians IV, 7).

EPHEMERIS is based on a network of all-interval sets, whose original statement is the first movement in D# A# G# F# G# F# — C# D# F# D# A#. The harmonies of the composition are constructed mainly from the superposition of thirds and sixths. In that sense, the music is a fusion of serial ideas and the more traditional notion of consonance and dissonance.

The piece was composed during 1977-79 for the Columbia Quartet, which gave it its first complete performance at the Grand Teton Music Festival in Wyoming on July 25, 1979.

Notes by Nicolas Roussakis

THE GROUP FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC STRING QUARTET has appeared on the regular series of concerts by the Group for Contemporary Music in New York City and in various residences, including Princeton and Rutgers Universities and Montclair State College in New Jersey. The members individually are prominent performers in the New York metropolitan area.

This recording employed hand-made ribbon microphones in pairs, spaced as feet apart, in the best available acoustical environment. This output was fed to a 30 SPB Storer A-80 tape recorder, slightly modified for constant velocity record-playback characteristics. In this way the need for conventional (and troublesome) noise reduction devices was eliminated. Lacquer masters were cut from the original tapes, employing an Orton transfer system with minimal feedback. To minimize groove echo, the lacquer masters were processed within twelve hours using the latest European equipment and techniques. Strict quality control pressings were made of the purest available vinyl.

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EPHEMERIS—ACA (SAC), 37' 33"

Morning 10' 43"
Afternoon 7' 27"
Evening 7' 36"
Night 10' 52"

Recorded by David Hancock, New York, June 1981

Produced by Carter Haman
Associate Producer: Carolyn Sachs
Art Director: Judith Lerner
Cover concept: Nicolas Roussakis
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