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When Boston Ruled the Music World

Three recent recordings conjure the mid-20th-century moment when the city was a center of innovative composition.

By Anthony Tommasini | April 11, 2021



Gunther Schuller, a composer and administrator, conducting an orchestra at the New England Conservatory in 1972. Credit...New England Conservatory Archives

When I moved to Massachusetts in the mid-1970s to start a doctorate at Boston University, there was a specific professor I wanted to study with: the formidable pianist Leonard Shure.

But Shure was hardly the only renowned pedagogue in Boston. The city had at that point long been a hub of academic music, with distinguished programs at Harvard, Brandeis and Boston universities, the New England Conservatory, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Until I arrived, though, I didn't realize what a center the Boston area was for contemporary music; from afar, the city had seemed to me too staid and traditional for that. But in its own buttoned-up New England way, it was a modernist hotbed. Each of those institutions was like a little fief, with eminent composers on the faculty. Each maintained active student ensembles, including many devoted exclusively to new music.

If you wanted to be on the front lines of the battle between severe "uptown" music and rebellious "downtown" postmodernism, you headed to New York. If you were drawn to

mavericks and intrigued by non-Western cultures, especially Asian music, you probably found your way to Los Angeles or San Francisco.

But if you wanted a classic education, studying with a true master composer — and at that time, almost all the major university composers were white men — you went to Boston. But the music that emerged there in those decades has faded in favor of work from other American cities.

Not entirely, however. Keeping that legacy alive is part of the mission of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and its record label BMOP/sound. The ensemble champions modern and new music from all over. But according to its founder and artistic director, Gil Rose, 40 or 45 percent of its recordings have been of works by Boston-area composers.



Schuller in the late 1970s. His overlooked operatic collaboration with John Updike, “The Fisherman and His Wife,” has been recorded the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. Credit...Fletcher Drake

Several recent releases have brought me back to my first years in the city, when composers at those various academic institutions loomed large. Three recordings are especially exciting: Gunther Schuller’s overlooked opera “The Fisherman and His Wife” and albums of orchestral works by Leon Kirchner and Harold Shapero.

Schuller, who died in 2015 at 89, once described himself as a “high school dropout without a single earned degree.” Technically that was true. But he was a protean musician who in his late teens won the principal horn position at the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and then, two years later, moved on to the Metropolitan Opera, where he held the same post until 1959. Yet, he also played and recorded in jazz groups with the likes of Miles Davis.

When I moved to Boston, Schuller was in the final years of his transformative tenure as president of the New England Conservatory. There he had established the first degree-granting jazz program at a major American conservatory — bringing in the pianist Ran Blake to chair it as well as hiring giants to teach, including Jaki Byard and George Russell.

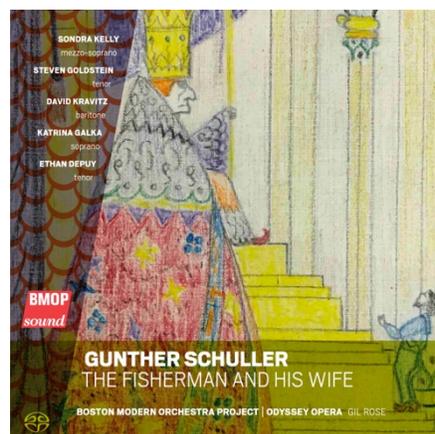
Anticipating by decades creative practices that are commonplace today, he had coined the term “third wave” to describe music that drew from both classical and jazz genres. Schuller, who as a composer was drawn to 12-tone idioms, though not in the strictest sense, also appointed the brilliant modernist Donald Martino to lead the composition faculty. He had all the bases covered. Schuller also taught for two decades at the Tanglewood Music Center, serving as artistic director for 15 of those years, until 1984.

For all his formidable skills and vision as a composer, Schuller may have been more consequential as a teacher, mentor, conductor and a tireless (sometimes shrill) agitator on behalf of contemporary music and living composers than as a writer of music himself. That perception has long seemed unfair, but it persists. Though fine pieces from his large catalog have been gaining attention, “The Fisherman and His Wife” has languished.

It was commissioned as a children’s opera by the Junior League of Boston, and first performed in 1970 by Sarah Caldwell’s Opera Company of Boston — though Caldwell had another composer in mind for the project when she found herself working with the imposing Schuller.

The 65-minute opera, based on a familiar story by the Grimm brothers, boasts a libretto by none other than John Updike. As the story unfolds, a lowly fisherman makes repeated trips back to the restless sea to summon a magical fish he has caught and released — the fish is actually an enchanted prince — and to ask for the granting of yet another of his wife’s increasingly grandiose wishes. Schuller inventively, yet subtly, organized the score like a theme and variations. Most boldly, he wrote whole stretches of the score in his trademark modernist language — steeped in, but not beholden to, the 12-tone approach, with some jazz chords folded in.

Yet Schuller was on to something. The story is full of darkness, strangeness, magic, evocations of a threatening sea and cloudy skies, bitter confrontations between the wife and husband. Why not convey it through flinty, atonal music? The voice lines are written with skill to make the words come through clearly. Updike introduced the character of a cat that both meowed and talked, a charming role that Schuller assigned to a high soprano. The orchestration, for a smaller ensemble, is alive with myriad sonorities and captivating colors.



Though released last year, the BMOP/sound recording was made in 2015 in collaboration with Odyssey Opera, founded by Rose, following a semi-staged concert performance. The commanding mezzo-soprano Sondra Kelly as the wife, the plaintive tenor Steven Goldstein as the fisherman and the sturdy baritone David Kravitz as the magic fish are excellent — and Rose draws glittering, swirling, mysterious playing from the orchestra. I could be wrong, but with a vivid staging, I think an audience of children would respond well to it.

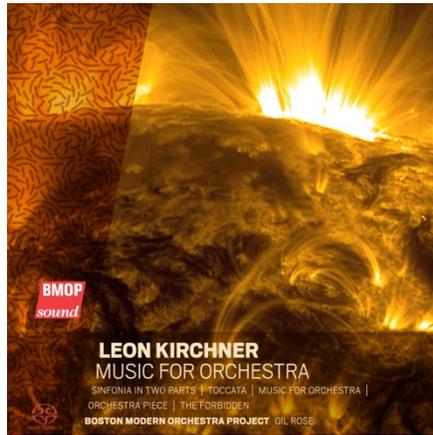
Schuller, an accomplished, exacting conductor, wrote a comprehensive book about conducting. Across the river in Cambridge, the respected composer and Harvard professor Leon Kirchner also had a following as a conductor back then, though he was not the most efficient technician. He was, however, a skilled pianist and a probing musician who understood how pieces were supposed to go.



Leon Kirchner, a composer and conductor based at Harvard, in 1982. Credit...John Goodman

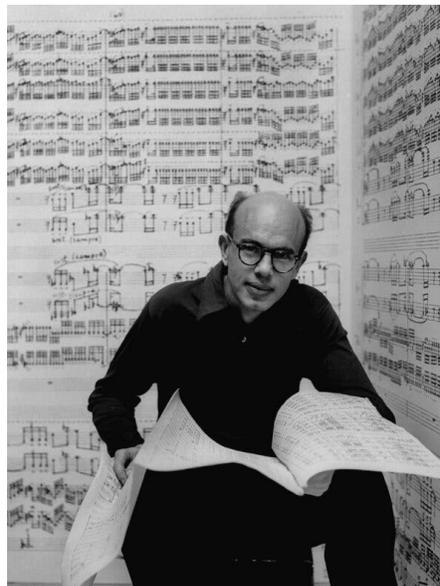
In 1978, with the support of a dean at Harvard, Kirchner founded the Harvard Chamber Orchestra, a professional ensemble of freelance players organized purely so that Kirchner could conduct free, routinely packed concerts. With those dedicated players, he led scores like Debussy's "La Mer" and Bruckner's Fourth Symphony as if he had written them. A remarkable 1984 account of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, with Peter Serkin as soloist, was issued recently on a Verdant World Records release, and it's just as exhilarating and profound as I remembered.

As a composer, Kirchner was powerfully influenced by his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. Like Schuller and others of their generation, Kirchner adopted the aesthetic and approach of 12-tone music but with freedom and flair, unbound by strict rules. I do remember him being narrow-minded about composers who stuck essentially to tonal harmonic languages — let alone to Minimalism, which he could not abide.



But I've always admired the depth, imagination and engrossing complexity of his music. Those qualities abound in five orchestral pieces on a riveting BMOP/sound recording from 2018 — particularly the 11-minute “Music for Orchestra,” from 1969. It's a transfixing score that feels subdued in a lying-in-wait way, as if at any moment pensive stretches of lyricism could break out. And sometimes do, through cascades of skittish riffs and teeming bursts.

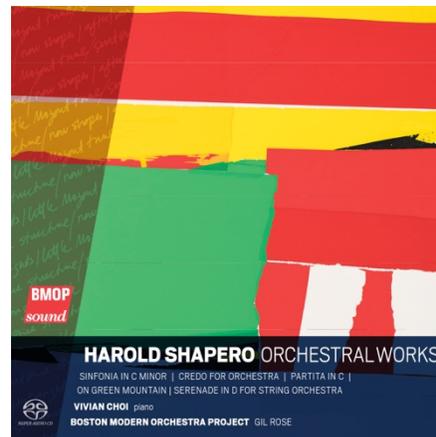
Harold Shapero, born in Lynn, Mass., in 1920, may have been the most precociously gifted American composer of his generation, which included his friend Leonard Bernstein. As a student at Tanglewood, Shapero deeply impressed Aaron Copland. He earned the attention of his idol, Stravinsky, when that composer came as a guest to Harvard, where Shapero was a student.



Harold Shapero, born in Lynn, Mass., in 1920, may have been the most precociously gifted American composer of his generation. Credit...Gordon Parks/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

Shapero set about adapting Stravinsky's Neo-Classical style, giving it a jolt of American spunk and unfettered intricacy. From 1940 to 1950, he produced a breakthrough series of ambitious works, including his daunting 45-minute Symphony for Classical Orchestra, composed in 1947. Bernstein adored the piece and led the premiere in 1948 with the

Boston Symphony Orchestra. He recorded it in 1953 on a single hectic day with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. Then the work disappeared until André Previn discovered it and led a triumphant performance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1986, and later recorded it. You could make a case for the piece as one of the great American symphonies.



The BMOP/sound album includes Shapero's Serenade for String Orchestra from 1945, a 35-minute, five-movement score that vividly demonstrates how Shapero, while writing in a Neo-Classical idiom, was attempting to make essentially tonal music modern and challenging. The first movement is an engrossing jangle of counterpoint, yet somehow transparent. The Menuetto is like a diatonic retort to Schoenberg's 12-tone minuets. The slow movement is weighty and searching, yet harmonically tart and suffused with tension. The finale is frenetic, pointillist and wonderfully jumpy.

In 1950, Shapero helped start the music program of the newly founded Brandeis. That department soon became the unofficial headquarters of the "Boston School" of composers, as it was called, which included Irving Fine (who died in 1962, at 47) and Arthur Berger. All three began as Stravinsky-influenced Neo-Classicalists. But over time, Fine and Berger slowly adopted their own brands of the 12-tone writing that was taking hold in universities, for better or worse, as the de facto language of modernism. Shapero, who died in 2013, explored the technique but never went along. He composed less and less, until he had a renewed burst of creativity running Brandeis's electronic music studio.

But he was a great mentor to countless student composers. And his life offered a lesson, a kind of warning: Stick to your guns; don't be intimidated; write the music you want to write. They were lessons eagerly learned in the explosion of creativity happening in Boston.