

SAMPLE SCORE

LEROY JENKINS: IMPROVISING INNOVATOR

By David Wallace

About seven years ago, a wiry, energetic man stopped me on the street and asked, "Hey, are you that violist who lives on Prospect Place?" The man was prize-winning composer Leroy Jenkins, a pioneer of avant-garde jazz, and one of the only string players to enjoy lasting success through free improvisation. By some miraculous coincidence, I had just moved to Jenkins' block in Brooklyn.

My new neighbor extended the best invitation an improvising violist could hope to hear: "Come on over sometime, and I'll show you some tunes!" In the visits that followed, Jenkins has graciously shared his music, his compositional and improvisational approach, and his life.

Leroy Jenkins was born on March 11, 1932 in Chicago, and was exposed to gospel, jazz, and blues from an early age. When he was seven, Jenkins developed a keen interest in the violin after hearing one of his aunt's suitors perform Monti's *Czardás*. Jenkins soon began studying violin with O. W. "Fess" Frederick, who taught hour-long lessons twice a week for fifty cents a lesson. At the time, Frederick's violin studio included Ellis McDaniel (a.k.a. Bo Diddley) and future classical flute virtuoso Harold Jones.

Frederick's students performed for weekly services at the Ebenezer

Baptist Church and for various events around the community. In addition to teaching church music and standard violin repertoire, Frederick proudly taught his students the music of black composers such as William Grant Still, Clarence Cameron White, and Will Marion Cook.

At thirteen, Jenkins ventured beyond the violin by playing clarinet in the church marching band. The clarinet eventually became his ticket to the DuSable High School bands of the venerable Captain Walter H. Dyett, whose students included Nat King Cole and tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin. Throughout high school, Jenkins played clarinet in Dyett's marching band, bassoon in the concert band, and saxophone in the jazz band. On his own, Jenkins continued to study violin, which he played for money at teas and social events.

When Jenkins was a high school senior, Dr. William P. Foster of Florida A & M University came to Chicago and offered Jenkins a full



Photo by Larry Fink.

scholarship to play bassoon in his concert band. Jenkins accepted the offer, but decided to major in violin after hearing the university's violin professor, Bruce Hayden. Jenkins recalls, "Bruce was the first black violinist I heard who played with such authority. He was a genius. He taught and played classical violin, but he was also playing jazz like Stuff Smith and Eddie South."

After Hayden left the university, Jenkins continued his studies with Elwin Adams, who introduced Jenkins to J. S. Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas*. "Elwin was from



Photo by Linda Harris.

Cleveland, but he studied in Belgium with a student of Ysaÿe. The Queen of Belgium gave him a violin, but when he got back to America he couldn't do anything [because of racial barriers], so he took a job at Florida A & M."

Jenkins stayed in Florida for ten years, studying violin, viola, and cello at the university and playing saxophone in blues bands on the side. In 1961, Jenkins accepted a job in Alabama as strings instructor for the Mobile County schools. As an itinerant music teacher, Jenkins taught students at thirteen schools every week.

After four years, financial pressures and Mobile's social tensions caused Jenkins to return to Chicago where he taught band instruments in the Chicago public schools. Jenkins often composed and arranged new music for his students: "They didn't like the regular stuff they had in their study books, so I had to write some music that had a blues beat. They loved it!"

Meanwhile, Jenkins' former teacher Bruce Hayden had also moved back to Chicago to work as a free-lance musician. Hayden invited Jenkins to a concert presented by the newly formed Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, "a collective of musicians and composers dedicated to nurtur-

ing, performing, and recording serious, original music."¹ Jenkins remembers the concert vividly:

Roscoe Mitchell was playing saxophone with a band

that had two drummers, two bass players, tenor sax, and trumpet. They were playing works that had their heads [motifs], and they were just going from one thing to another to another and it was so beautiful. It wasn't like they were playing regular jazz. It felt classical.

After the concert, Hayden introduced Jenkins to Muhal Richard Abrams, founder of the AACM. Abrams invited Jenkins to hear an AACM rehearsal. After listening to the first half, Jenkins took out his violin and played for the rest of the rehearsal. From that point, Jenkins was a member, and he began performing exclusively on violin and viola.

According to Jenkins, the musicians of the AACM viewed themselves as modernists rather than traditional jazz musicians. Taking their inspiration from modern jazz innovators Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor as well as classical composers such as Anton Webern, Arnold Schoenberg, and Karlheinz Stockhausen- the AACM worked to create a new musical idiom that combined strict composition, modernist syntax, and free improvisation. At the same time, the AACM sought to "pay homage to the diverse styles of expression within the body of Black Music in the USA, Africa, and throughout the world."²

At the AACM, Jenkins began to explore ways to get unconventional and unprecedented timbres out of his violin and viola:

I was copying the saxophones, [Anthony] Braxton mostly. All the saxophonists were getting all these new sounds on their instruments, so I tried to do the same. I'd experiment more and more every day. I'd discover sounds as I played, but wouldn't know what they were unless it was recorded. By looking back on recordings, I'd figure out how I did it, then practice and try to extend it.

Jenkins formed a trio with fellow AACM musicians Anthony Braxton and trumpeter Leo Smith. After recording an album, the ensemble went to Paris in 1969 and stayed for a year. In Europe, the trio enjoyed critical and financial success and recorded several records for BYG. During this time, Jenkins met Ornette Coleman, Archie Schepp, and other modern jazz virtuosos.

In 1970, Jenkins moved to New York City where he and several other AACM members introduced the city to the innovations they had forged in Chicago. While the jazz establishment largely disowned Jenkins and his colleagues, New York's thriving new music scene enthusiastically embraced them. Jenkins in turn became one of the founders of *Meet The Composer* and the Artistic Director of *The Composers Forum*.

Jenkins continued to bolster his reputation through his dynamic solo concerts and his work with the

Revolutionary Ensemble (bassist Sirone and drummer/pianist Jerome Cooper). The ensemble performed, toured, and recorded extensively until 1977,³ after which Jenkins led several of his own ensembles, including his *Mixed Quintet*, the amplified ensemble *Sting*, and the trio *Equal Interest* with Myra Melford on piano and Joseph Jarman on winds.

Throughout the '80s and '90s, Jenkins increasingly turned his attention to composition. Jenkins received commissions and grants from numerous organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, Lincoln Center *Out of Doors*, The Brooklyn Philharmonic, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. Jenkins' major works and operas were presented by the Kronos Quartet, the Soldier String Quartet, electric violist Martha Mooke, New York City Opera, Houston Grand Opera, the Kennedy Center, and Carnegie Hall.

While some of Jenkins works are entirely composed, most of his works require improvisation on the part of the performer. Jenkins takes the following approach when teaching the improvisational aspect of his works:

Usually, I tell people that when I ask them to improvise, I'm not asking them to play jazz. I'm asking them to improvise in their own way. They have to think in terms of their own inner mechanisms, their own musicality, what they think would be great.

Now, you may not even know how to improvise; especially if you don't know, you have to practice.

Improvisation has to be practiced, just like anything else. That means you have to get with yourself and try to do something interesting from one point to another. It could be open-ended. . . it doesn't always have to have a motif. It could be just rambling at first, just to get used to being out there by yourself.

If you want to improvise, you have to have some kind of idea of what your improvisation will sound like, even if you can't do it. You have to get within yourself and your music and discover yourself. I had to do it. I was once not an improviser in the sense I am now. I used to go by chord changes and stuff like that. When I became freer- not free, but freer- I had to practice. I had to dig into my own musicality and bring out what I thought would be interesting- interesting to me- because if it's not interesting to me, it's not going to be interesting to the people who are listening to it. I have to be able to smile and say, 'Yeah!' to myself. I really have to. I've got to be just that egotistical and enjoy it.

If you don't enjoy it, it's not going to be good. And it's not going to be enjoyable at first, because just like anything, you've got to crawl before you walk. So you just have to keep doing it. That's what I did. I don't think that I would ask you to do anything less.

Though Jenkins gives his performers considerable improvisational latitude, he does insist on coherent, well-paced, and emotional solos that fit the context of a given piece:

The thing about playing free is actually it's not [totally] free- usually you have a place where you're coming from and a place where you're going. Between those two poles, you have to make it interesting, you have to build peaks- ups and downs. That's the challenge.

If you know where you're coming from, that's the springboard, and if you know where you're going, that's the destination. The destination is what keeps you going. The springboard will keep you going for a little while, but after a while, if you don't know where you're going, you'll start meandering.

Sometimes things will have to fall in order to get back up again. After all, you can't expect to wail right through everything at top speed in top form all the way. You'll need to come down and recoup: relax, take it easy, don't try to push anything, and let it flow. . . Usually, when you recoup, you sort of let go, and let it just kind of build on its own. After a while, a germ will come- something will happen. . . something interesting. It'll come every time, that's just the art of it all. It'll come, and when it comes, you just jump right on it. You say, 'That's it!' and you build from it, but you just have to take it easy until that happens.

"Making Ugly Beautiful"

One of the best ways to get to know the improvisational mindset of Leroy Jenkins is to study and perform his works. *Big Wood*, a staple of Jenkins' solo concerts, showcases his jazzy sensibilities, as well as his extended techniques and expanded viola timbres. The piece was originally composed as an

interdisciplinary collaboration with dancer / choreographer Felicia Norton who danced in reaction to the onstage Jenkins, who played the role of a viola-playing shaman. "Big Wood" is the nickname that Helene Kahn (wife of Jenkins' former manager) gave to Jenkins' distinctive 15 1/2-inch viola crafted by an anonymous maker.

For the opening passage, make a dramatic difference between the emotionally cool, sustained *subtone*

note and the darting string crossings.⁴ Let the open D and G strings resonate as you cross, and draw the audience in by holding your breath and freezing at the end of the passage. Relax when the whole note returns. Each repetition can build in intensity and volume.

The "Wolfin'" section, also repeated three times, alternates syncopated, repeated notes with smooth whole-tone scales. Like the opening whole note, the syncopated notes should

have an understated quality to them. The scales are fluid and legato, although for contrast, Jenkins occasionally plays them detaché or with swing when he repeats.

For the first solo section, Jenkins asks the violist to improvise "using spaces." Essentially, this solo should consist of brief gestures and phrases separated by short rests. When first learning to play this solo, it is best to improvise using the "wolfin'" rhythms and whole tone scales as your basic material. As you become more familiar with Jenkins' language and idiom (as well as your own improvisational language), you can depart from Jenkins' written material more freely. Jenkins tends to avoid a tonal center by emphasizing whole tone melodies and melodic contours that outline tritones.

The "Slow" section of *Big Wood* begins with one of Jenkins' more plaintive melodies. Play this tune forwards, backwards,⁵ then forwards again, finishing with intensity.

For the second solo, the performer must build "something interesting" out of two of Jenkins' signature extended techniques: scratch tones and "Jenkins' pizzicato."

In Jenkins' music, scratching is never about crushing the instrument. Jenkins explains his scratch technique and philosophy as follows:

With my scratch stuff, I can get a lot of overtones. I can hold the bow down and press it a certain amount, and a lot of stuff comes out. Notes just pop out like sparks- sometimes they make waves. Felicia hated it

Big Wood

Play 3x

sub tone

Leroy Jenkins

♩ = 96 Play 3x

Wolfin'

Free Time

Improvisation (space between each phrase)

Slow

Play 3x: first time forwards, second time retrograde, third time forwards. (Don't reiterate the first note on the repeats.)

Improvisation (short bow scratches, soft pizz.)

Y

© 1969 Jenkins Music Company (SESAC)

and said it was ugly. I said, 'You're right! It will always be ugly, but sometimes ugly can get very beautiful.' That's what I was trying to do: make ugly beautiful.

In Jenkins' pizzicato, you simultaneously pluck the strings with both hands, partially muting the strings at times with your palms. As Jenkins describes it, "Your fingers are fumbling; there's not much sound coming out. It's a pitter and a patter. People have to really lean forward and listen; you draw them in. It's a sexy thing."

During this solo, pizzicato and scratch tones can be played simultaneously or alternately. It's fine to play a few normal pizzicato tones or to bow an occasional note to add pitch. To really capture the essence of this solo, it's best to listen to how Jenkins does it. His mesmerizing effects are best experienced live, but the *Leroy Jenkins Solo* recording of "Big Wood" clearly conveys the idea.

To make this timbre improvisation work, be patient, build slowly, become absorbed with the unusual sounds, constantly project an emotion, and trust the audience to enter your world. When your solo subsides, bring the audience back with Jenkins' rhythmically free final melody. As he puts it, "Go out like a lamb!" B

A faculty member of the Juilliard School and the Mark O'Connor Strings Conference, Dr. David Wallace currently holds the New York Philharmonic's Halee and David Baldwin Teaching Artist Chair. His viola teachers include Karen Ritscher, Larry Wheeler, and Karen Tuttle, for whom he was Teaching Assistant from 1997-1998.

Select Discography:

Equal Interest, *Equal Interest*. OmniTone (12001), 2000.

Solo. Lovely Music Ltd. (LCD 3061), 1998.

Joseph Jarman-Leroy Jenkins, *Out of the Mist*. Ocean Records (OR 106), 1997.

Themes and Improvisations on the Blues. CRI (CD 663), 1994.
Leroy Jenkins' Sting!, *Urban Blues*. Black Saint (120083), 1984.

Leroy Jenkins Mixed Quintet. Black Saint (120060), 1983 (reissued 1997).

Leroy Jenkins featuring Muhal Richard Abrams, *Lifelong Ambitions*. Black Saint (120033-2), 1981 (reissued 1993).

Leroy Jenkins with Andrew Cyrille and Anthony Davis, *The Legend of Ai Glatson*. Black Saint (120022), 1978 (reissued 1993).

Rashied Ali and Leroy Jenkins, *Swift are the Winds of Life*. KnitClassics (3026), 1975 (reissued 2000).

Revolutionary Ensemble, *The Psyche*. Mutable Music (mutable 17514-2), 1975.

ENDNOTES

1. Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians History [webpage] (accessed June, 2004); available from <http://aacmchicago.org/history.html>.
2. *ibid*.
3. In 2004, the Revolutionary Ensemble reunited and released a new CD, *And Now...*, on Pi Recordings.
4. "Subtones" are soft, quasi-ponticello notes played on the surface of the string. Feel free to let the pitch split into its various overtones. Sometimes Jenkins begins the piece with the second bar for an arresting beginning.
5. When retrograding, begin the retrograde from the preceding note. In other words, once you get to the E natural at the end of the bar, start the retrograde with the preceding Eb; when you get back to the first E, play it only once. On his Solo recording, Jenkins omits the retrograde altogether.

DEALERS, MUSICIANS, COLLECTORS, MAKERS ...

Specialized Insurance Coverage for the Classical & Vintage Musical Instrument Trade

- The most comprehensive protection at reasonable cost.
- Underwritten by a financially sound A-rated company.
- Call Toll Free today for information and quotation.

ELLIS W. HERSHMAN
Heritage Insurance Services, Inc.
826 Bustleton Pike, Suite 203
Feasterville, PA 19053

800-289-8837
FAX: 215-322-5854

