

KIM MORTON FELDMAN
KASHKASHIAN

SARAH ERIK SATIE
ROTHENBERG

STEVEN JOHN CAGE
SCHICK

HOUSTON
CHAMBER
CHOIR

ECM NEW SERIES

ROBERT
SIMPSON

ROTHKO CHAPEL

Rothko Chapel

Kim Kashkashian viola

Sarah Rothenberg piano, celeste

Steven Schick percussion

Houston Chamber Choir

Robert Simpson conductor

Untitled, 1967







Untitled, 1969



Morton Feldman (1926–1987)

1 **Rothko Chapel** (1971) 26:21

Kim Kashkashian viola
Steven Schick percussion
Sarah Rothenberg celeste
Lauren Snouffer soprano
Sonja Bruzauskas mezzo-soprano

Houston Chamber Choir
Robert Simpson conductor

Erik Satie (1866–1925)

2 **Gnossienne No. 4** (1891) 3:36

Sarah Rothenberg piano

John Cage (1912–1992)

3 **Four**² (1990) 6:28

Houston Chamber Choir

Erik Satie

4 **Ogive No. 1** (1886) 3:04

Sarah Rothenberg piano

John Cage

5 **ear for EAR (Antiphonies)** (1983) 4:09

L. Wayne Ashley tenor
Houston Chamber Choir
Robert Simpson conductor

Erik Satie

6 **Ogive No. 2** (1886) 3:07

7 **Gnossienne No. 1** (1890) 5:16

Sarah Rothenberg piano

John Cage

8 **Five** (1988) 5:07

Houston Chamber Choir

Erik Satie

9 **Gnossienne No. 3** (1890) 3:30

Sarah Rothenberg piano

John Cage

10 **In a Landscape** (1948) 9:42

Sarah Rothenberg piano









Morton Feldman and Dominique de Menil
(Photo courtesy of the Menil Collection)

Music for Rothko

In the mid-1960's the visionary art collectors John and Dominique de Menil had the idea of commissioning the painter Mark Rothko to create murals for a non-denominational chapel in Houston, Texas: a place of contemplation and spirituality in which the visitor would be surrounded by the painter's work – would actually inhabit the paintings from the inside. Rothko had increasingly been making large canvases – not, he said, in search of grandiose statements but of their opposite, something “human and intimate.” To paint a small picture, the artist explained, “is to place yourself outside your experience. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it.”

Tragically, the painter did not live to see the completed project, in which the specifically designed octagonal building would house fourteen of his canvases. When the chapel's opening ceremonies took place in 1971, the composer Morton Feldman was among the guests. In another inspired act, Dominique and John de Menil invited Feldman to compose a musical work as a tribute to his friend. *Rothko Chapel*, a twentieth-century masterpiece, was premiered in Houston's Rothko Chapel one year later.

Stillness, silence, contemplation. These are the characteristics of Rothko's paintings and of the chapel that was created for his work. If Jackson Pollock's art is marked by rhythmic energy, by action made visible, the paintings of Mark Rothko hold the opposite – colors seem to float “as though they were breathed onto the canvas.” Yet both painters reached beyond the physical edge of the canvas to a point where there would be, as Pollock put it, “no beginning and no end.”

The same is true of the musical works heard on this recording. Tracing a trajectory of the avant-garde that spans a century, the

music corresponds to the Chapel's environment of timeless reflection. The works of Americans John Cage and Morton Feldman, without text or program, interweave with the ruminative piano works of their spiritual predecessor from 19th century Paris, Erik Satie.

Erik Satie (1866–1925), John Cage (1912–1992) and Morton Feldman (1926–1987) form a triumvirate of original creators who were each closely tied to the visual art of their time. And beginning with the eccentric Erik Satie, these composers share an interest in creating music that stretches time, that even stops time; music without a beginning or an end.

“Stasis, as it is utilized in painting, is not traditionally part of the apparatus of music,” writes Morton Feldman. “Music can achieve aspects of immobility, or the illusion of it: the Magritte-like world Satie evokes...The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or a Guston, were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting. For me, stasis, scale, and pattern have put the whole question of symmetry and asymmetry in abeyance...”

“... Now what happens when something so simple is repeated for such a long time?” asks Cage in regard to Satie's music. “What happens is the subtle falling away from the norm, a constant flux with regard to such things as speed and accent, all the things in fact which we could connect with rhythm. The most subtle things become evident that would not be evident in a more complex rhythmic situation...” Cage believed that Satie's contemplative works expressed the spirit of Zen Buddhism, a philosophy that Cage embraced in the 1940's. The concepts of Zen are what the composer claimed had saved him from his complete disinterest in harmony, the backbone

of traditional western composition. It was Cage's lack of harmonic talent, by his own reports, that had brought an end to his studies in California with Arnold Schoenberg. Cage may have been the only composer of his generation to idolize both Erik Satie and Arnold Schoenberg. In comparing these two singular figures, Cage observes that, in contrast to Schoenberg, “in Satie, the structures have to do with time, not pitch.” Satie's non-developmental structures and use of repetition became an inspiration. Cage also felt a connection between the Dadaist art movement at the beginning of the century – the art movement associated with Satie – and the lessons of Zen. A spirit of acceptance rather than a spirit of control, an embrace of the irrational that is, in Buddhism, at peace with the environment. From the continuum of *In a Landscape* (1948) to the late number pieces, *Five* (1988) and *Four*² (1990) – named for the number of voices involved and composed of overlapping fragments defined by time brackets – this particular spiritual and philosophical foundation for an evolving sound world is explored and sustained.

Satie, like Cage, did not thrive in his formal composition lessons, and after lackluster studies at the Paris conservatoire he fled to the café-cabarets of Montmartre, announced himself as a “gymnopédiste” and adopted an ascetic uniform of linen tunic and sandals, which was eventually exchanged for a daily attire of black velvet suit and bowler hat. Satie composed his haunting *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes* several years before Brahms completed his last piano pieces in Vienna. Exhibiting transparent textures, modal harmonies, and inflected with the vernacular of French chanson, Satie's groundbreaking works emerged as a much sought-after alternative to the

intoxicating influence of Wagnerian chromaticism. The young Claude Debussy was among the first to recognize the path which Satie had opened up. But Satie's deeper experimentalism went beyond the Parisian charm with which we identify him and his Montmartre surroundings; he also opened the door to a modern spirituality that looks back to the ancient Greek world and early liturgical music. The *Ogives* for piano of 1886, based on plain chant and written without bar lines, take their name from the architectural name for the Gothic arch of a vaulted cathedral ceiling – according to Satie's brother, specifically that of Notre Dame de Paris. Here they frame Cage's own ear for *EAR (Antiphonies)*.

The essential strangeness of Satie remains remarkably present. The little annotations to the pianist written on the *Gnossienne* scores “seul, pendant un instant” (alone, for a moment), “de manière à obtenir un creux” (in order to make a hollow), “très perdu” (very lost), “ouvrez la tête” (open your head) are like private whisperings in our ear, continually surprising us and somehow catching us off-guard. Because of their surface simplicity, these works have been absent from the conservatory canon, and one hopes they maintain their marginal stature – these pieces are far too intimate to be taught, one must discover them alone.

Although influenced by Cage as well as Satie, the cigar-smoking, corpulent Morton Feldman, with his New York accent and irreverent humor, was far from Buddhist in his approach to life. Yet it was his famous encounter with Cage that liberated Feldman. The two composers met in the lobby of Carnegie Hall in 1949, following a performance of Anton Webern's Symphony. The relationship that followed

had a lasting effect on the 24-year-old Feldman, who was soon renting a loft a few floors below Cage's in a tenement building on New York's lower east side. It was through Cage that Feldman met the painters Robert Rauschenberg and Philip Guston, and friendships with artists Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline soon followed. But it was Cage's example of independent musical thought that allowed Feldman to dare to follow his own inner voice, resulting in a music of intense delicacy, sensitivity to color and immaterial weightlessness in surprising contrast to the outward man.

The composer offers his own thoughts on *Rothko Chapel*: “To a large degree, my choice of instruments (in terms of forces used, balance and timbre) was affected by the space of the chapel as well as the paintings. Rothko's imagery goes right to the edge of his canvas, and I wanted the same effect with the music – that it should permeate the whole octagonal-shaped room and not be heard from a certain distance...”

The total rhythm of the paintings as Rothko arranged them created an unbroken continuity. While it was possible with the paintings to reiterate color and scale and still retain dramatic interest, I felt that the music called for a series of highly contrasted merging sections. I envisioned an immobile procession not unlike the friezes on Greek temples.

These sections could be characterized as follows: 1. a longish declamatory opening; 2. a more stationary “abstract” section for chorus and chimes; 3. motivic interlude for soprano, viola and tympani; 4. a lyric ending for viola with vibraphone accompaniment, later joined by the chorus in a collage effect.

There are a few personal references in *Rothko Chapel*. The soprano melody, for example, was written on the day of Stravinsky's funeral service in New York. The quasi-Hebraic melody played by the viola at the end was written when I was fifteen. Certain intervals throughout the work have the ring of the synagogue.

There were other references which I have now forgotten."

The ritualistic quality of *Rothko Chapel* is both wholly new and filled with echoes from the past; time is both measured and suspended from the first timpani rumblings that open the work. The wordless entrance of voices is gentle, tentative, like a Greek chorus commenting on the drama set up by the soulful viola and interjecting percussion. The timpani's alternating minor thirds in the following section recall Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. The choir's sustained tone clusters, shifting pitch incrementally against chimes to dizzying effect, float without pulse until we reach the surprising final section, where the ostinato of vibraphone and celeste emerges underneath a remembered tune.

Morton Feldman often recalled his visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Mark Rothko, where the abstract expressionist painter invariably led him towards the Antiquities galleries, and artist and composer would debate structure and scale in their own work while roaming among Greco-Roman art. The tension between present and past, ancient and modern, hovers over this album. Our own gaze backward changes with our present; the Greek friezes today speak to us of Rothko.

It makes me think, in a different sense, of Morton Feldman on the character of sound. "The attack of sound is not its character," he

said. "Actually, what we hear is the attack and not the sound. Decay, however, this departing landscape, *this* expresses where the sound exists in our hearing – leaving us rather than coming toward us." Perhaps it is from this departing landscape that comes the shared sense of melancholy in these works. And perhaps it is only now that we can hear the leaving.

Sarah Rothenberg

Da Camera was founded in Houston, Texas in 1987. Under the leadership of pianist Sarah Rothenberg since 1994, *Da Camera* presents an annual series of thematically curated chamber music and jazz concerts performed by an international roster of musicians. *Da Camera*'s original interdisciplinary productions connecting music to literature and visual art have been presented by Great Performers at Lincoln Center (New York), Kennedy Center (Washington, D.C.), De Ijsbreker (Amsterdam), Barbican Centre (London) and major venues across the United States. It has commissioned over 25 new works from such composers as Kaija Saariaho, Charles Wuorinen, Vijay Iyer, Jason Moran, David Lang, Tobias Picker and George Tsontakis. Beyond the concert hall, its Education and Community Initiatives reach thousands of schoolchildren and city residents, and the *Da Camera* Young Artist Program is nationally recognized for its career development and mentorship of outstanding emerging professional musicians. A member of Houston's downtown Theater District, *Da Camera* also has a residency at the Menil Collection, and special projects have included such events as the 40th Anniversary Concert at Rothko Chapel in 2011, for which the program on this CD was originally curated and performed.

www.dacamera.com

Untitled, 1953





Houston Chamber Choir

soprano

Lisa Borik, Penelope Campbell, Stephanie Handal,
Briana Kruse, Hallie Reed, Lynelle Rowley,
Kelli Shircliffe, Stacey Weber

alto

Sonja Bruzauskas, Gerald Caliendo, Daria Myers,
Marianna Parnas-Simpson, Laurie Robertson,
Ryan Stickney

tenor

L. Wayne Ashley, Dominick DiOrio, Francisco Espinoza,
Benjamin Geier, Mark Mummert, Jeffrey Ragsdale,
Eduardo Tercero, Jason Watt, Andrew Willits

bass

Felipe Gasper, Mark Marotto, Jeffrey Van Hal,
Randolph Wagner, Michael Walsh, Joshua Wilson,

Robert Simpson, artistic director

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Rothko Chapel

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