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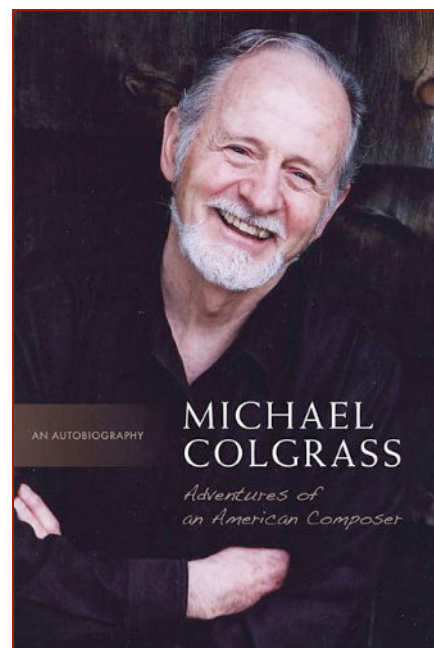
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MICHAEL COLGRASS: ADVENTURES OF AN AMERICAN COMPOSER. By Michael Colgrass. Galesville, Maryland: Meredith Music Publications, 2010. 221 pp. Paper. 19 b&w plates. \$19.95

Michael Colgrass holds the unique distinction among prominent classical composers in North America as the only one whose music is well known equally on both sides of the Canadian-American border. His career has divided neatly into two nearly equal halves, first in the United States, then in Canada, where he has lived since 1974. At the age of 78, and with an extensive, eclectic catalog of compositions behind him, Colgrass now qualifies as a Grand Old Man of music. For more than half of those 78 years, he has been in that elite class of composers who make a living exclusively from composing. Major commissioned works have been played by the Boston Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, Toronto Symphony, and many other renowned ensembles and musicians. Colgrass is known to be as articulate in words as he is in notes (an earlier volume plus numerous articles and workshops attest to this), so perhaps an



Michael Colgrass: Adventures of an American Composer (Meredith Music Resource)
PAPERBACK

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autobiography was in the making?

Not quite. At least not the standard kind. Colgrass had another idea. The words “an autobiography” are on the cover, but instead of a continuous chronological narrative, he has written a collection of 89 anecdotes that collectively give the reader the insight to recognize just what a fascinating mind and creative spirit Colgrass has. “I wanted to write about incidents that were key to my musical development, especially if they were funny, ironic, or moving,” he said in an interview. “Most autobiographies for me seem uneven—you need to work your way through the mundane biographical stuff to get to the exciting and pivotal events. Somebody said a good movie shows the interesting parts of people’s lives with the boring stuff left out. That was my goal.”

Colgrass has achieved that goal with flying colors. Few of those 89 little stories will leave the reader unmoved. Some border on the incredible: writing a new 20-minute piece for the Joffrey Ballet on 12 hours’ notice when lawyers yanked a Ravel score from the music stands for copyright reasons; recording *The Rite of Spring* for Columbia Records (Colgrass was a percussionist in his early years) with an inebriated Stravinsky conducting, hopelessly out of sync with the orchestra; saving Leonard Bernstein from assault by an angered percussionist; and being accused of spying in Prague. True to his word, Colgrass indeed cuts to the good stuff! Right from the first sentence one is hooked: “I was conceived on the kitchen floor of a brown brick bungalow in Brookfield, Illinois.”

Just some of the titles alone stimulate instant curiosity: “Spitball Symphony,” “Jazz and Drugs,” “The Stripper and West Side Story,” “Absinthe-Minded Composer.” “Stop, Thief!” is as good as it sounds: Colgrass actually chased a bank robber until the latter collapsed from exhaustion. When Colgrass’s father asked him, “What if he’d had a gun?” he replied, “I knew he didn’t.” “How did you know?” asked the father. “Because he didn’t use it,” replied Michael. Whew! It’s repartee like this that makes *Adventures of an American Composer* such compulsive reading.

Yet the book is not all barbs and wit. There is much practical advice and wisdom here as well. Colgrass cautions prizewinners not to be too proud of their good luck, for that’s all it is—one change in the constitution of the jury could easily have produced a different winner. (Colgrass won a Pulitzer in 1978.) He warns about the life of the professional automaton, the musician for whom music has become so stale it no longer

has any meaning. (“Incident on West Fifty-Seventh Street”). There’s a touching coming-of-age story (“Who’s Rousseau?”) and a vignette about life in Bali.

Despite the episodic nature of the book, by the end one has come to know Colgrass well—his truculence as a high school student, his deep love of jazz, his insights into character, his brushes with the high and mighty (Elizabeth Taylor, Danny Kaye, and Dizzy Gillespie among them), the exciting life of a busy freelancer in New York during the 1950s and 1960s, and those intensely personal moments that make life worth living. One sees him in all his guises—as jazz artist, classical percussionist, composer, dancer, mime, philosopher, neuro-linguistic programmer, father, even child psychologist, for if there is a theme that runs unspoken throughout these pages, it is the inspiring tale of a man who has questioned his goals in life but once having chosen them, strove mightily to achieve them and succeeded brilliantly. Bravo, Michael! For excerpts from the book and two priceless video clips, go to colgrassadventures.com. **Robert Markow**

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