

## MELINDA WAGNER

David C F Wright, DMus

Melinda Wagner was born in 1957 of a musical family living in Philadelphia. She learned to play the piano at an early age and became quite proficient. She studied at Hamilton College where she received her BA. At the University of Chicago she received her masters' degree and her doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania. Among her tutors for composition were Ralph Shapey, Richard Wernick, Shulamit Ran, Jay Reise and George Crumb. She has since taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, Syracuse University and at New York University.

She has received many prodigious awards and honours including a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Howard Foundation from Brown University. She has obtained grants from Arts Councils in Illinois and New York. Her work, *Presages*, won an ASCAP prize in 1986. She had already been honoured with three ASCAP Young Composer Awards. Commissions have come from various trusts and foundations and her music has been performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the American Composers Orchestra, the Chamber Music Group of the Lincoln Centre and other organisations.

She is the third woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for music. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich won it in 1983 for her *Symphony no. 1 (Three Movements for Orchestra)*, Shulamit Ran won it in 1991 for her *Symphony* and Wagner won it in 1999 for her *Concerto for flute, string orchestra and percussion*.

This prize has been won by many famous American composers such as Samuel Barber, William Bolcom, Elliot Carter, Aaron Copland, George Crumb, Karel Husa, Norman Dello Joio, Leon Kirchner, George Perle, Walter Piston, Quincy Porter, Roger Sessions, William Schuman, Gunther Schuller and Robert Ward.

Five thousand dollars was awarded to Wagner for her *Flute Concerto* premiered on May 30, 1998 by the Westchester Philharmonic in Purchase, New York. The composer made a paradoxical remark when she said the concerto tells a story but has no programme. Three years earlier Paul Dunkel had conducted Wagner's *Falling Angels* of 1992. He asked for the flute concerto and raised the money for it. Dunkel was the flautist in the premiere.

*Falling Angels* was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and performed by them in 1995. Her *Sextet* for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello and piano lasts about fifteen minutes and is in four movements. The opening movement alternates in tempi and the music is spaced and often seemingly dysfunctional. The second movement opens with a lyrical cello solo but the music still feels dysfunctional but, nonetheless, it is held together by clear lines. The next movement lasts under a minute and has been described as a collection of whispers. The finale is a set of variations. Her music has melody and dissonance and many mood changes.

She has been the Composer-in Residence at the University of Texas in Austin and at the Bravo Vail Valley Festival

She is a composer to watch. Her music is colourful and seems to come from the heart. Of her major works and, in addition to those already mentioned, is *Dash* for orchestra, *Extremity of Sky*, *Trombone Concerto*, *Harpsichord Concerto*, *Little Moonhead* for violin and small orchestra and a *Piano Concerto*.