

“We’re at an important time right now—an exciting time,” says William Anderson, founder and director of the **Cygnus Ensemble**. The New York-based group has been performing and commissioning new music for more than two decades, in an ongoing process of exploring and helping to shape the contemporary music scene.

Rather than adhering to the Pierrot formation that dominates so much of the past century’s chamber music, Cygnus takes as its model the Elizabethan “broken consort”—a pair each of plucked strings (Anderson and Oren Fader on classical and electric guitars, mandolins and banjos), bowed strings (Calvin Wiersma on violin and Susannah Chapman on cello) and winds (Tara Helen O’Connor on flute and Robert Ingliss, oboe). “We’re aiming for the transparency of Baroque music,” Anderson explains. “It’s a lighter sound that involves

lifting the bows. We’re trying to play new music with early-music performing ideas.”

As Anderson sees it, contemporary music of the past few decades has been an arena for two opposing forces: the hard-line modernists of the mid-20th century, and the minimalists who have come to the fore more recently. Some composers, he says, have found ways to combine modernist practices with the accessibility of minimalist music. “It’s important to help shape that moment,” Anderson says. “What’s going to happen to modernist ideals in this century? How are they going to be reshaped?”

“We were all born in the ‘60s,” Anderson says of himself and his Cygnus colleagues. “We grew up with modernist values—we weren’t *afraid* of modernism. We wholeheartedly embraced the minimalist revolution. But we never gave up on the modernists.”

One eminent modernist that Cygnus embraced was Milton Babbitt, who in 2003

composed his *Swan Song #1* for the ensemble. (The title was a pun on the ensemble’s name, not an announcement of retirement: the then 87-year-old composer still had some major works ahead of him.) The ensemble’s most recent CD, *Ab Nou Cor*, is dedicated to the works of one of Babbitt’s students, Frank Brickle, whose lucid, approachable music embodies the generational shifts at the core of the Cygnus endeavor.

“What we’re seeing now is a group of composers who are allowing the new accessibility to influence them, while trying to salvage the profusion of techniques that erupted in the 20th century,” Anderson says. “They’re allowing adapting to the audience’s demand for clarity and simplicity without giving up the things they hold dear. They’re creating 21st-century music—and we’re participating in the transformation.” ■  
[www.cygnusensemble.com](http://www.cygnusensemble.com)

Cygnus (l to r): Tara Helen Connor, Robert Ingliss, William Anderson, Oren Fader, Calvin Wiersma, Susannah Chapman



## Transformative Moment