

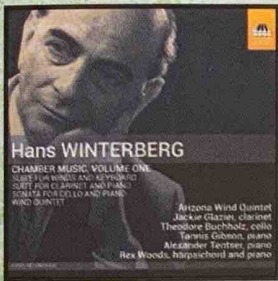
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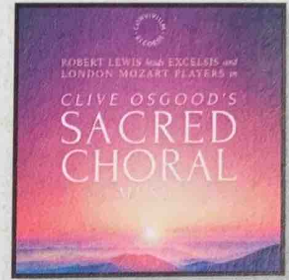
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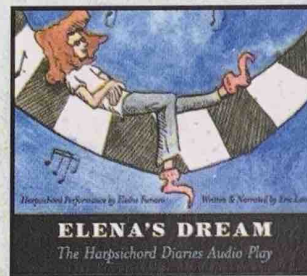
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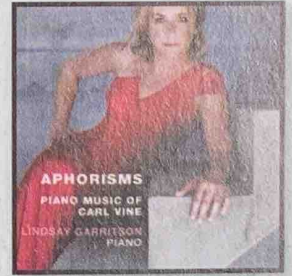
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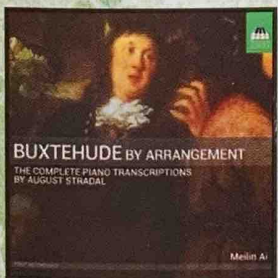
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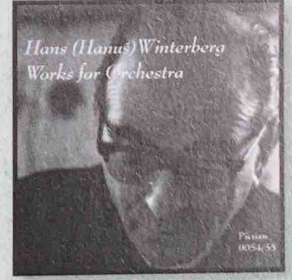
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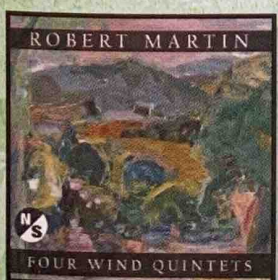
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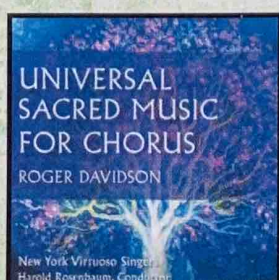
PEN Trio



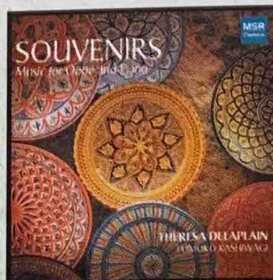
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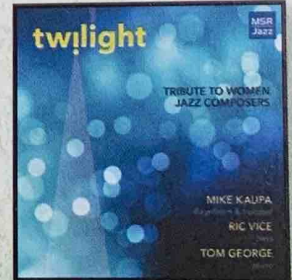
Robert Martin



Roger Davidson



Theresa Delaplain



Tom George

up on several tracks is similarly anonymous (we hear two versions of *The Peace of God*, one with piano and one, which concludes the disc, with orchestra).

There is much beauty on this disc. Fans of choral music in sumptuous sonics should not hesitate. Colin Clarke

A Penchant for New Music: A Talk with Phillip O. Paglialonga of the PEN Trio

BY DAVID DEBOOR CANFIELD

Reed ensembles drawn from the woodwind family seem to be an increasingly popular genre, and various ensembles so constituted have been commissioning, performing, and recording works by numerous contemporary composers. I therefore welcomed the opportunity to speak with Phillip Paglialonga, clarinetist of the PEN Trio, in early 2020 about his group and the music they perform.

Phil, it's nice to make your acquaintance, even if only by email! Let me begin by querying you about the origin of the name of your ensemble. Am I correct in guessing that it comes from the initials of the first names of its three performers?

You are indeed correct! Our name comes from the first initial of each of our names, Phil, Eric, and Nora. When we came together as a group in 2010 we had to quickly find a name for our group in order to submit a program and decided on PEN.

How did the three of you meet? What led the members of your group to form it? Were you colleagues at a university somewhere?

We have actually never lived in the same place before. When we formed I was living in Florida, Nora in Kansas, and Eric in Michigan. Eric and I had been friends long before we started PEN, having met at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara and then were both at the University of Michigan, doing graduate work at the same time. Nora and I met at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Michigan a few summers before the Trio. In 2010, we were all playing at the International Double Reed Society Conference in Oklahoma (with two different groups) and thought it might be fun to explore some of the traditional French repertoire for this combination. So we booked a string of concerts in the Midwest and began our journey as our group. We had a great experience working together and decided we should continue. We soon met many composers interested in writing new works for us, and we were excited to expand the repertoire through performance and print publication. Fast forward 10 years and the PEN Trio has literally performed around the world, performing throughout the United States and in more than a dozen countries.

I became aware of the reed ensemble genre some years ago after having become exposed to the fine music-making of the Calefax Reed Quintet in the Netherlands, and shortly thereafter being commissioned by the Arundo Donax Reed Quintet for a work. Does the reed trio antedate the reed quintet? If so, who invented the genre?

The term *trio d'anches* was coined by bassoonist Fernand Oubradous in the 1920s to describe the now legendary ensemble Trio d'Anches de Paris. People say this group came together to explore the unique blend of oboe, clarinet, and bassoon, the orchestral wind instruments that create sound from a reed. For Oubradous, the *trio d'anches* had "une parfaite homogénéité," with the capacity to create a wide palette of colors. The Trio d'Anches de Paris was discovered by Louise Dyer-Hanson, an Australian patron of the arts and founder of the publishing company Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre. She fell in love with the sound of the ensemble and helped commission a number of new works for the group from several leading French composers, such as Bozza, Ibert, Milhaud, and Tomasi. The PEN Trio has played a goodly amount of the repertoire written for this group, and also has aspired to continue the work they began. In many ways this new recording showcases the works that we have helped add to the repertoire.

What do you think sets reed chamber ensembles apart from the traditional woodwind quintet genre, which of course includes the non-reed instruments of flute and horn?

Honestly, I think the two are just very different experiences for both the performer and listener. We of course love them both, but we are somewhat partial to the *trio d'anches*. The trio is capable of a much more unified sound, which lends itself to a bit more nuance and range of expression. The quintet has a greater variety of timbres, which in some respects makes it easier to create contrast, but it is also impossible to truly blend in a way that each instrument's individuality is lost.

The works on the present CD seem to have been written especially for your group. How did you come to know (about) the four composers herein represented?

The works on our CD were indeed specifically written for, or presented to, our ensemble. We were fortunate to meet each of these composers through a variety of contexts, which include touring, conference performances, and other personal connections, and we were thrilled by their interest in writing for our ensemble.

Did you work with any or all of the composers in preparing their works for performance and/or recording?

Yes, we were so grateful to collaborate with each of the composers prior to the premiere of each work and to help edit and prepare the works for print publication.

In this era of declining CD sales, you and your colleagues obviously see a benefit for issuing these performances in that medium as opposed to a download. What are the reasons you decided to make them available in this format?

I think more than anything else we wanted to share this music with people. We really love each of the pieces on this disc and believe they deserve to be played and heard. Plus, I think we each wanted to have something to share with those who ask us about the music the PEN Trio plays, especially when we meet people throughout the world, many of whom share their music with us. And of course, our recording is also available digitally, through Apple Music, Spotify, and Amazon Music.

From the differing venues of the premieres of the works in this recital, it would appear that PEN Trio does a fair amount of touring. How many concerts do you typically give "on the road" each year?

Up until October of this past year, the group would typically give five week-long tours each year, as well as a few other performances here and there. We have performed at many universities throughout the United States as well as on four continents. In 2019 we performed in France, Malaysia, and Thailand, and gave quite a few concerts in the United States.

October was a tragic month for the PEN Trio, when at the end of our Malaysia/Thailand tour our bassoonist, Eric Varner, passed away unexpectedly. It was a major loss for both Nora and myself, and we are still somewhat in shock over everything that happened. Consequently, our group cancelled all of its upcoming engagements except for two concerts this spring, at Lawrence University's Conservatory of Music, in Wisconsin, and at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. We will play those concerts in Eric's memory with Jeffrey Lyman, who teaches bassoon at the University of Michigan.

What a shocking and tragic development! It makes the release of the present CD rather bitter-sweet, although I'm sure that you and others will consider it as a memorial to your departed colleague. Will the PEN Trio continue without Eric?

Right now it's hard to say anything with certainty. I think both Nora and I feel like without Eric the group just is not the same. Eric was such a wonderful person and musician, and in many ways was the glue that held our group together. We have commissioned so many works as a group and I can't imagine playing those pieces with another bassoonist. In your first question, you asked about the origin of our name, PEN. Of course, there is a possible risk when naming a group for specific individuals that one of them would depart for one reason or another. I think our name speaks directly to our identity at the time we came together as an ensemble. At that time, working together meant so much to us, and we had no idea how this ensemble would grow, we never considered having a trio without Eric. We are now forced to reassess that identity and our trajectory moving forward.

At this time we are not booking any concerts for this group and are taking time to heal, but I would not be surprised if down the road we found a way to continue the PEN Trio either with another bassoonist, or as an entirely new kind of group altogether.

I do hope you'll be able to continue, and I strongly suspect that Eric would want you to.

W. BRADBURY 5.4.3 (except after C). J. BRANDON Found Objects: On the Beach. STERNFELD-DUNN Oblique Strategies. HUNDLEY In Threes

The present recital affords the listener an opportunity to become acquainted with fine works by four outstanding exponents of the new American school of composition. I define that school as, basically, "Write anything you like." I'm glad that musical trends have gone in the direction of judging a piece of music on its intrinsic merits rather than how well it fits into the Procrustean bed of a trend *du jour*.

The recital opens with William Bradbury's intriguingly entitled *5.4.3 (except after C)*, obviously drawing its name from the old mnemonic device for English students, "I before E, except after C" (a device I had to forfeit as counterfeit when I discovered the surfeit of exceptions to it). The composer explains his title further: "I would compose strictly pentatonic music with the caveat that I could insert the note C (which is not in the original scale) when it felt right. After any C the piece could go wherever it needed and use the full chromatic scale for a time." After a quiet and languid opening, the piece assumes a rather Francaix-like spirit, full of verve and good cheer, although its five movements do have their quiet movements. Altogether, it forms a most enjoyable freely tonal essay, given to only occasional dissonances.

Jenni Brandon's *Found Objects: On the Beach* gives testimony to her fondness for taking walks in various natural settings. In a stroll on the beach, she became interested in the stories that various objects she spotted—things such as a black feather, a tumbled stone, or a sea shell—might have had in their "journey" to the spot where she'd seen them. Thus, the piece seeks to depict these through musical representations of rolling waves, ebbing tides, and soaring flight, employing many types of figuration, parallel motion among the instruments, contrapuntal techniques, trills, quickly tongued passages, extended mournful solos and the like, all assembled with considerable skill to produce a most ingratiating work. Much of the tonality has a modal flavor.

Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn is the one composer whose music I'd heard prior to auditioning this CD. The title, *Oblique Strategies*, of his work offered here refers to the fact that the work is constructed along the lines of a theme and variations. The theme here is entitled "Go outside. Shut the door." I have no idea if this is some obscure American folk song, as I've never heard of it, but it's not the sort of tune that someone is going to whistle while he works. The five variations that follow each also have titles, e.g., "What are you thinking right now?" or "Do we need holes?" The composer doesn't explain in his notes what, if any, meaning is portrayed from these variations, which are mostly rather far removed from the theme. That doesn't matter, because the piece is most enjoyable on musical grounds divorced from any meaning that may be behind them. Sternfeld-Dunn's musical language is no more dissonant than Hindemith at his most radical, but sounds like Sternfeld-Dunn and not Hindemith. There is a lot of parallel motion on 7ths and 9ths at times, sometimes highly syncopated, giving the music a distinctive character. The piece stylistically also provides a nice contrast to the more tonal aesthetic of the first two works, although I would by no means consider it atonal.

The disc wraps up with M. Shawn Hundley's *In Threes*. It doesn't take too much ingenuity to figure out that the title is meant to convey something about a reed trio, of course. But the composer in his notes leaves it "to the discretion of the listener" to figure out what the less-than-obvious ties of the title to the work itself are—a bit of dirty pool perhaps, but I enjoyed the piece very much regardless. It's a good bookend for the opening work of the recital, given its highly syncopated character and *joie de vivre* outlook. Quite amusing is a bassoon solo beginning around the seven-minute mark, its humor being brought out well by bassoonist, Eric Van der Veer Varner, whose loss in October 2019 was a devastating blow to the ensemble. Oboist Nora A. Lewis and clarinetist Phillip O. Paglialonga (interviewed above) are likewise extremely gifted exponents of their instruments, both of whom produce the most pleasing warm and natural sound conceivable on their respective instruments. Indeed, the blend, ensemble, and musicianship of all three players is most impressive, and a better performance by them in any of the parameters of music-making is impossible for me to imagine. Consequently, the combination of the artistry on display here and the very worthwhile music makes this disc a fitting tribute to the legacy of Varner, as well as to the ongoing one of Lewis and Paglialonga. I can and do give a very high recommendation of the CD as an essential acquisition for

enthusiasts of well-crafted and accessible contemporary chamber music. **David DeBoor Canfield**

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The PEN Trio is a reed trio of oboe, clarinet, and bassoon. One doesn't hear this combination often, and the sound is uniquely attractive. All the music on this disc was written for or premiered by them, and their identification with it is total.

The odd title *5.4.3 (except after C)* is explained by composer William Bradbury in a way that sounds dense and complicated, but the listening experience is anything but. He writes that "a number of years ago I wrote a piece for flute, piano and bass entitled *5.4.3* (five notes for three players) that used only five pitches. I found it to be an interesting compositional challenge. In writing this new piece [in 2013] for the PEN Trio, I revised the idea and began composing with a different set of five notes (the pentatonic scale is presented at the beginning and end of the piece and is used extensively throughout). As the composition unfolded, however, I felt somewhat limited by this constraint, so I added a new 'rule'; I would compose strictly pentatonic music with the caveat that I could insert the note C ... when it felt right. After any C the piece could go wherever it needed and use the full chromatic scale for a time. Then it returns to the pentatonic music." I was not aware, on hearing Bradbury's piece, of any rigorous system constraining the composer; the music has charm, wit, and beauty.

The longest work on the disc, Jenni Brandon's *Found Objects: On the Beach*, composed also in 2013, is mainly pastoral and gentle, with long-breathed melodies and delicate textures. The composer writes of her inspiration from a variety of objects found while taking walks in Long Beach, California. Her attention lingered on driftwood, sea glass, seashells, and like objects. While I would not have made these association (or needed to make them) as a listener, I could in fact get the connection once I was aware of it. This turned out to be my favorite music on the disc.

The shortest work on the disc at 7:34, *Oblique Strategies* by Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn, also composed in 2013, was the toughest nut for me to crack. Sternfeld-Dunn is an American composer, born in 1980, who draws his inspiration from a card-based method for promoting creativity, also titled *Oblique Strategies*, created by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. The composer writes that each variation (there are five) was created by pulling a different card from the deck and following the instructions printed on it. The resulting music seemed to me to wander without direction or focus.

In Threes was composed in 2011 by M. Shawn Hundley and is music of rhythmic vitality and wit. The score alternates tutti sections with solos, and this variety of texture allows it to capture and hold the listener's attention.

All the performances are terrific. These are three skilled players who work very well together as an ensemble; they really listen to each other and interact in an ideal chamber-music manner. The recorded sound is neither too close nor too distant. Excellent notes by each composer are included.
Henry Fogel

* * *

It is not often one finds a compositional strategy built into the title of a piece, but that is precisely what happens with William Bradbury's *5.4.3 (except after C)*. The piece, written for the PEN Trio, was originally going to be entirely pentatonic (we hear the pentatonic scale at the beginning and end), but the composer found that a little restrictive so added a new rule that the note "C" could be inserted (the note was not a part of the original set). If it all sounds a bit involved, worry not: This remains fresh and chock full of *joie de vivre*, as if the music itself is relishing its own explorations. Virtuoso performances, too; the humor of Eric Van der Veer Varner's bassoon at the opening of the final movement, marked *Forceful, dynamic*, is particularly appealing.

Untold stories form the substance of Jenni Brandon's *Found Objects*; objects found while strolling on Long Beach, California. How stones' intrinsic qualities are adjusted by years of exposure to the ocean; how driftwood has a lonely existence; imagined stories behind a found bird feather. Although brief, the movements each have a specific quality of their own. Nature seems to inspire Brandon: Her *Five Frogs* appeared on an Albany disc entitled *American Breeze* which was considered by multiple reviewers in *Fanfare* 36:4; sadly, I was not one of them. The keyword for Brandon's

music is fluency. The music clearly trips off her pen, and there is an outdoorsy quality that is most appealing. I was, incidentally, similarly charmed by Brandon's *Spider Suite* for winds performed by Ceora Winds on a Phoenix disc reviewed in *Fanfare* 38:5.

A set of variations, Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn's *Oblique Strategies* is based on aphorism cards of the same name by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. Each movement was determined by the pull of a card from the deck (one might posit some tarot-like predestination here, the right card emerging at the right time for the composer, sparking off just the right thoughts). Some of the phrases on the cards (which in fact form the movement tiles) are metaphysical ("Do we need bodies?"; "Listen to the Quiet Voice" for example), some less so ("Go outside. Shut the door"). The clarinet, here the excellent Phillip O. Paglialonga, is the main protagonist, as a result of the loss of the composer's former composition teacher. In a sense, it is a pity that the individual variations are not separately tracked, as each concentrates on one aspect. In his review of an all Sternfeld-Dunn disc, David DeBoor Canfield referred to the composer's voice as "distinctive and solid," and I find no reason to argue (*Fanfare* 38:6). The sheer easy fluidity of the players' legato in this piece is remarkable, each one answering another with gentle waves of notes.

The name M. Shawn Hundley is new to me. The piece *In Threes* is well structured: A tutti, varied on each repetition, alternates with solo sections before a final section that references a fugue. The agile bassoon of Varner once more distinguishes itself, matched this time by the distinctive staccato of oboist Nora A. Lewis. This provides a splendid end to a refreshing disc, with plenty to enjoy from all four composers. **Colin Clarke**

* * *

Bassoon, clarinet, and oboe are seatmates in the orchestra, but this very engaging album is my first encounter with them as a chamber ensemble. The PEN Trio was founded in 2010 to follow in the tradition of the historic Trio d'Anches de Paris, which dates to 1927 and commissioned works from diverse composers as prominent as Ibert and Milhaud. "Reed trio" in fact was a term coined especially for them, and like their celebrated predecessors, the PEN Trio commissions and publishes new works by contemporary composers. (PEN is taken from the members' first names, Phillip Paglialonga, clarinet, Eric Van der Veer Varner, bassoon, and Nora Lewis, oboe.)

Before listening to these four new works I had my doubts about whether taking away two elements of the standard wind quintet, flute and French horn, might not diminish the possibilities for keeping the music interesting. But the individual players in the PEN Trio are of soloist quality, which in itself arrests the ear. In addition, the recorded sound is so lifelike that you hear every nuance of timbre from each instrumental voice. The composers in their own ways have exploited the use of solos quite effectively.

Having trained with a gamelan teacher in graduate school, William Bradbury became intrigued by the possibilities of the pentatonic scale and wrote a previous piece, *5.4.3*, whose punning title unpacks as "five for three," in other words a trio constrained solely by the five notes of the pentatonic scale. His follow-up, *5.4.3 (except after C)*, loosens up the original scheme. A new note, C, can appear, and when it does, the music that comes after it is chromatic. The overall impression is largely pentatonic, however, and the piece's five movements have no trouble being varied, beginning with an eloquent clarinet solo and proceeding through moods that can be stately, almost like a procession, or a scampering *Presto*. Bradbury also displays a good ear for instrumental color and impressively finds shifting hues in the three reeds.

The bassoon has a comical side, the oboe a poignant side, and the clarinet a songful side, but surprisingly, these qualities aren't explored in these works. Abstraction is more the order of the day, especially in Alexander Sternfeld-Dunn's *Oblique Strategies*. The title comes from a deck of cards created by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt in 1975, the purpose of which was to break creative blocks. The strategy is oblique, or indirect, in that each card, drawn from the deck at random, makes a suggestion about how to proceed, using a question or aphorism. Sternfeld-Dunn's six-movement theme and variations is based on six cards, which say gnomic things like "Go outside. Shut the door," "Do we need holes?" and "Listen to the Quiet Voice." Whatever these words did to inspire the composer,

the music remains cryptic and impenetrable, as the piece itself is more complex and Modernist than anything else on the program. For that reason, and simply because I responded to Sternfeld-Dun's musical imagination, I found this the most engaging work here.

The most traditional and lyrical music here is in *Found Objects: On the Beach* by Jennie Brandon, who uses a kind of synaesthesia, turning the visual impressions of objects she actually picked up on a beach—tumbled stones, sea glass, driftwood, sea shells—into sound. The evocative titles of the six movements, such as “Black Feather on the Sand,” aren't really matched by what we hear. This isn't Impressionism, but the music is enjoyable, flowing, and somewhat slight, at least as it affected me.

We end with M. Shawn Hundley's *In Threes*, whose underlying scheme falls on the ear without need of explanation. Fast-moving sections for all three instruments are interspersed with solos for each. The effect is chirpy and insouciant in the vein of Ibert. The work's 10-minute duration tested my taste for chirpiness, the best parts being the lingering, moody solos.

I can happily recommend this disc for its musicality and the impressive technique of the PEN Trio. I wish the composers had pushed them with more virtuosic challenges, but there is no doubt that the celebrated Trio d'Anches de Paris has found a suitable and very talented heir. **Huntley Dent**

Interview with Composer Michael Roth

BY KEN MELTZER

Composer Michael Roth's *The Web Opera* is a fascinating and compelling lyric drama exploring the toxicity and grievous harm caused by cyberbullying. I spoke with Michael Roth about this project and its mission.

The Web Opera is based upon a series of tragic, actual events. How did you and librettist Kate Gale decide to create an opera about this tragedy?

Kate Gale and I met when she was president of the American Composers Forum/LA chapter. I'd won an ACF competition for my chamber piece *Streich* (for flute, violin, viola, and cello). Kate is the managing editor of Red Hen Press, a progressive poetry press in Pasadena, and a poet and librettist—unusual for the head of a composer organization—so we continued to meet to develop a project.

Whenever I've met a writer over the past 10 years or so who's wanted to collaborate on an opera or music/theater piece, anything like that, even if the idea was a good one, I've always felt obliged to say what's almost obvious: It's hard, once you get going, to know if it will ever really exist as a fully produced thing. It's a lot of work and takes a lot of money—it might become a piece that just becomes workshopped endlessly through a series of readings, and you don't know where you might be heading or if you will ever have it onstage and fully realized—or sometimes just as important, get more than one performance or production. That's not a reason to *not* do something, just an assessment, and so I've often suggested as an alternative that making a film, especially nowadays, is very much possible. The means of production, so to speak, are well within reach, the amount of musical creation you can do digitally is pretty great, and an enormous new music/opera house does exist that's accessible to all: the internet. No matter what happens, the result can be posted online, sounding as one wishes it to sound, looking like what you might want it to be—to exist as we wish it to exist. And it's not a show that closes on Sunday afternoon. There might not be any “box office” to speak of, but the work will be posted as long as one cares to have it there, and that is in and of itself something.

With that, sometime during our talks about possible subjects, though I don't remember who talked about it first, we became aware of Tyler Clementi's tragic story—and over time it became very clear to me this was a profound event, a crime uniquely of our time impossible to happen or even imagine a generation before—in other words, there was a time when there was no cyber abuse because there was no cyber universe to be abusive in. When I was a student, or for that matter even when my stepchildren were students, to post something meant posting on a wall with a thumbtack, perhaps. It took a lot more effort, and that it might lead to a crime was hard to imagine. Now we take