

marsanes (2005) UA

ROBERT PHILLIPS

**Robert Phillips** is an active composer living in Buffalo, New York, U.S.A. Throughout his career he has explored the relationship of language to sound to text to music to expressivity. Often the semantic meaning of the words and phrases takes a subordinate role to the expressive power of the means of communication, similar to listening to the sound of someone's voice and not necessarily what they're saying. Playful freedom from linguistic purpose is pursued alongside a devoted study of sound relationships and musical connections, meanwhile Truth itself oscillates between text and music, escaping to one while we are situated in the other.

Robert Phillips has studied West African music in Ghana throughout his life as a composer, and has fed his investigation of words and sound with a variety of different musics, cultures and experiences. His original teachers were Chaya Czernowin and Steve Takasugi in San Diego, California. He now studies with David Felder as a Ph.D. student at SUNY Buffalo.



**Marsanes** is the title of an old Gnostic scripture that dates back to the third century. In this text, the prophet Marsanes articulates the reascent of the human soul and describes the soul's various shapes. These shapes he describes as diphthongs. Here is a sample of the text (spoken in the piece)- "But I am speaking to you concerning the three shapes of the soul. The third shape of the soul is a spherical one, put after it, from the simple vowels: eee, iii, ooo, uuu, ooo."

The text accompanies the playing. The general sound of the bassoon has been "pushed to the edges" to form an exploded vocabulary- a primitive language where the bassoon is reduced to assembling coherency out of isolated musical "phonemes". Often, you hear the bassoon sounds, and then the same sounds coupled with the simultaneous speaking of the Gnostic text. Thus the text, already fragmented from the decaying process of time, creates an interference with the bassoon playing, itself a fragmentary grammar of articulations and isolated sounds. Emergent is a confrontation with the sound of the soul, which happens only after a competition with the music has ended victoriously. The final message ends up sounding like an ancient Egyptian speaking exercise.

*Robert Phillips*