

Peter Mennin: Symphony Nos. 8 & 9, Folk Overture
New World 80371-2

The 1930s and 40s, when Peter Mennin was coming of age as a composer, was a time of proud national identity for American music. During this period the federal government, through the Works Progress Administration, fostered the performance of an enormous quantity of American music, bringing the works of dozens of composers before the musical public. Many American composers, inspired by the ideal of democratizing the arts, began to forge a recognizably native musical language, accessible to the general listener. But this populist spirit was short-lived; by the late 1940s the federal government had curtailed its artistic involvement, and the notion of a broadly comprehensible musical language soon fell out of fashion.

During the following decades, the serial approach to composition was adopted by an avant-garde elite and was granted considerable status among influential academic circles. Many of the composers who had been associated with the populist approach now joined this internationalist movement, shaping what became the postwar American compositional mainstream. Others, still committed to a musical language based on indigenous materials, continued in the then unfashionable “Americana” vein.

For a third group, the populist approach had lost its appeal, but serialism appeared equally unattractive. These composers sought to develop distinctive personal styles by drawing upon aspects of traditional musical practice, resisting the pressure to conform to current trends. Some enjoyed high reputations, having attained them during the previous era. But their music was accorded little serious consideration, often receiving glib, peremptory dismissal from the critics. This body of music has remained one of the least known and least understood segments of the American repertoire.

Mennin is among the youngest and most notable members of this group of composers; his music brought him to national prominence during the mid-1940s, while he was still in his early twenties. Born in 1923 in Erie, Pennsylvania, Mennin (who shortened his name from Mennini, to distinguish himself from his older brother Louis, also a composer) began composing before he was seven years old. Independent-minded from the start, he preferred working on his own and later claimed to have been largely self-taught in composition. Entering the Oberlin College Conservatory in 1939, he worked under Normand Lockwood, whose aesthetics he found antithetical to his own. After a year or so he left to join the Army Air Force. In 1942, having completed a forty-five-minute Symphony No. 1 (now withdrawn), he entered the Eastman School of Music because of its policy of playing through students' orchestral works. There he studied with Bernard Rogers and Howard Hanson, earning a Ph.D. at the age of twenty-four, despite his self-described role as a renegade. By this time, he had completed two more symphonies, one of which had already been performed by the New York Philharmonic. Upon graduating, he was appointed to the composition faculty of the Juilliard School, where he remained until 1958, when he was named director of the Peabody Conservatory. In 1962 he became president of the Juilliard School, a position he held until his death in 1983.

Mennin's career as an administrator, compounded by his cool, businesslike manner and his well-tailored appearance, disguised a profound dedication to his own

creative work. As a composer, Mennin worked almost exclusively in large, abstract forms, completing barely thirty works, of which nine are symphonies. His music is never light, frivolous, or sentimental, but it is not dispassionately intellectual, either. Rather, it is an attempt to convey the inner drama of his own soul by means of the finest craftsmanship of which he was capable.

Although he acknowledged no conscious musical influences other than the polyphonic techniques of the Renaissance, his earlier work (pre- 1960) calls to mind both the loft grandeur of the Vaughn Williams symphonies and the contrapuntal energy of Hindemith. Yet there is no mistaking Mennin's individual stamp, which is apparent from his earliest works to his last despite the considerable evolution that his style underwent.

Mennin's pieces from the 1940's, characterized by a brash assertiveness, strongly rooted in diatonic modality, and propelled by lively, syncopated rhythms, are linked to the American mainstream of their time. The most salient characteristic of Mennin's mature style is already evident in the early *Folk Overture*, composed in 1945 while he was still an Eastman student. It presents a continuous unfolding through imitative counterpoint- as was practiced by the composers of the Renaissance- rather than through the more conventional dialectic between contrasting materials. This bustling undercurrent of rapid contrapuntal activity, vastly different in effect from the calm spirituality of the sixteenth-century masters, proceeds with unswerving determination, creating a constant sense of nervous energy, balanced somewhat by a full-breathed modal lyricism.

By the early 1950's, with the appearance of the String Quartet No. 2, the Concertato for Orchestra ("Moby Dick"), and the Symphony No. 6, Mennin's music began to take on a new grimness and sobriety, with contrapuntal activity that became almost compulsive in its unremitting agitation and frenzy. These and subsequent works reveal a bold vision conflict, escalating in intensity toward cataclysmic explosions of almost manic brutality. The slow movements provide oases for solemn contemplation, featuring long-spun melodies that unfold polyphonically with Bach-like dignity. The harmonic language is harsher in these works and there is greater chromatic freedom, although strong tonal centers are asserted at major structural junctures.

Through the 1960's, Mennin's works remained remarkably consistent in style, tone, and scope, despite a gradual increase in concentration and complexity- harmonic, contrapuntal, and rhythmic- that produced an overall intensification of effect. The output of works became like an inexorable linear succession, each entry grimmer, harsher, and more severe than the last. The high points of the 1960's are the Symphony No. 7 (New World Records 80258) and a starkly unsentimental cantata based on *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*.

From 1970 until his death in 1983 at the age of 60, Mennin completed only five works, but these reveal some significant evolutionary developments, substantive modifications of a musical language that hitherto had been remarkable for its consistency. The philosophical and emotional content remained unchanged, but the syntax had become far more terse and uncompromising.

These new developments are apparent in the Symphony No. 8, completed in 1973. Unlike those in most of Mennin's other symphonies, each of its four movements bears an inscription, taken from the Bible, implying an expressive intent. The first movement, marked *In principio*, evokes a sense of stasis, perhaps suggestive of the

beginning of time. In this movement, the gradual compression of polyphony, first hinted at in the 1960s, has finally led to the “verticalization” of linear ideas into seething, cluster-like chordal structures, orchestrated with uncharacteristic attention to sonority and texture. In the second movement, *Dies irae*, typical Mennin motivic fragments swirl wildly in frantic instrumental byplay enhanced by plentiful use of percussion, leading to explosive eruptions. The third movement, *De profundis calamavi*, is characteristic of the composer in its focus on somber linear polyphony, though not in its markedly reduced feeling of tonal center. The fourth movement, *Laudate Dominum*, conveys a tremendous sense of agitation, which finally culminates in a decisive tonal affirmation.

The Symphony No. 9, commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra, was Mennin’s penultimate work, completed in 1981. The outer two of the work’s three movements are in much the same vein as the outer movements of the preceding symphony. The first, *Lento non troppo*, opens mysteriously, with tremulous textures, before building in power and rhythmic energy to massive climaxes which then subside, allowing the movement to end quietly. The third, *Presto tumultuoso* is a representative Mennin finale, unleashing itself in a paroxysm of fury before consolidating its energy for a resolute conclusion. The most remarkable movement of the symphony, however, is the second, marked *Adagio arioso*. With a pure, elegiac melody, in uncharacteristically homophonic relief, it imparts a more ardently Romantic quality than the composer ordinarily allowed to emerge, even in earlier works. Although composed before the onset of the fatal illness that was soon to end his life, it is the sort of movement, appearing in a final symphony and suggesting a sense of profound grief borne with dignified restraint, that annotators seize upon as having valedictory significance. Perhaps not inappropriately, this was the music performed at his memorial service.

-Walter Simmons

Walter Simmons is a music critic and a contributor to the New Grove Dictionary of American Music.

Christian Badea has been music director of the Columbus Symphony since 1983 and conducted the orchestra’s debut recording, of music of Roger Sessions (80345). Among the orchestras he has conducted are the Metropolitan Opera, the Pittsburgh and Detroit symphonies, the Santa Cecilia in Rome, the BBC Symphony, and the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique in Paris. From 1977 to 1986 he was music director of the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, and Charleston, South Carolina, and conducted the Spoleto Festival’s Grammy Award-winning recording of Samuel Barber’s *Antony and Cleopatra* for New World Records (800322, 80323, 80234).

The Columbus Symphony Orchestra celebrated its 38th season during 1988-89. Rapidly emerging as one of the finest regional orchestras in the United States, the CSO performs five regular concert series, as well as two outdoor summer series, each year. The orchestra’s debut recording of Roger Sessions’ *Symphony Nos. 4 and 5*, and *Rhapsody for Orchestra*, was critically acclaimed from New York to Tokyo, receiving the 1987 Opus Award for Repertoire Enhancement and a 1987 Grammy nomination.

Selected Bibliography

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Selected Discography

- Concertato, "Moby Dick."* American Recording Society Orchestra, Hans Swarowsky conducting. Desto 6416E.
- Five Pieces for Piano.* Lydia Walton Ignacio, piano. CRS 8528
- Symphony No. 3. New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting. CRI SD 278.
- Symphony No. 4. Camerata Singers and Orchestra, Abraham Kaplan conducting. Desto DC 7149.
- Symphony No. 7. Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Jean Martinon conducting. New World Records 80258.
- See also selected Bibliography and Discography, 80258.*

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