

Leo Sowerby: Piano Works
New World 80376-2

Leo Sowerby was one of the great composers who wrote music at the keyboard. Although he is better known for his organ and choral works, his piano music is some of the richest and most original of his output. During the 1920s and early '30s, Sowerby often appeared as piano soloist in his concertos. He had very large, strong hands, and his treatment of the piano is vital, harmonically rich, and quite distinctive. He was a master of counterpoint, and created an imposing body of piano works.

As one listens to this recording, Sowerby's personal style and approach to the piano become clear. He uses the entire tonal and dramatic resources of the instrument; the extensive use of octaves and long, sustained pedal points in the bass register add power to the coloring of his American-sounding harmonies. There is a surging quality to the writing in the middle register because of the regular, undulating use of quartal chords, shifting back and forth in half steps. The brilliant bell-like sounds he achieves in the upper register are tuneful and sometimes quite jazzy.

His piano music, classical in design, is always dramatic, virtuosic, and full of contrasts. His uncanny ability to weave sound lines and melodies together gives the music an inevitability and structural integrity.

Leo Sowerby was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on May 1, 1895, and began his musical education at an early age, studying theory with Arthur Olaf Anderson and piano with Calvin Lampert at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago.

In 1921 he received the first fellowship in musical composition awarded by the American Academy in Rome, where he remained for three years. On returning to the United States in 1924 he joined the faculty of the American Conservatory, where he eventually became head of the composition department. Three years later he accepted the position of organist and choirmaster at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. James, where he remained until June 1962. That same year he became founding director of the College of Church Musicians at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Since 1934, Sowerby had turned his performing skills almost exclusively to the organ. His interpretation of music from all periods was both idiomatic and beautifully realized. He accompanied his own anthems or major choral works, such as the great Lenten cantata, *Forsaken of Man*, playing the intricate and complex scores while simultaneously conducting a large chorus.

A member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters, Sowerby received many honors, including the degree of Doctor of Music from the University of Rochester in 1934, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for *Canticle of the Sun* (on the Matthew Arnold translation from St. Francis), for chorus and orchestra. He was presented to Queen Elizabeth II in 1963, and became the first American to receive the title Fellow of the Royal School of Church Music.

Sowerby wrote in many idioms in addition to his liturgical works, including even some jazz pieces for the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. He composed five symphonies, the third commissioned for the golden jubilee of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1941, conducted by Frederick Stock. Sowerby wrote a great many orchestral and chamber works that have been performed by the world's leading artists and orchestras; during the 1930s and '40s he was among America's most often performed symphonic composers.

Sowerby wrote his Sonata for Pianoforte between January 17 and 31, 1948, but set it aside unperformed. In December 1962 he sent the original manuscript to his friend Gail Quillman and gave her permission to copy out and perform the last movement only, since he was planning to revise the work. Quillman played the first performance of that fugue section in February 1963, in Chicago. Sowerby's 1963 revisions consisted entirely of cuts, reducing the first movement by one third, and the slow movement by one fourth. The first performance of the entire work was given on January 12, 1964, by Grace Nelson Weisert, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The manuscript of the Passacaglia is dated February 27, 1942, and is dedicated to the concert pianist Frank Mannheimer, a longtime friend. Although Mannheimer was a well-known recitalist and performed annually at the International Society of Contemporary Music concerts in Italy and England, there is no record of his, or for that matter anyone's, ever performing this work. The same holds true for the Suite, which was composed between January 11 and February 28, 1959. This work, as well as the revised version of the Sonata, is dedicated to Kevin Norris.

Leo Sowerby died on July 7, 1968.

-William Ferris, with the assistance of Francis Crociata and John Vorrasi

William Ferris, a composer, is founding director of the William Ferris Chorale, an ensemble dedicated to performing music by contemporary American composers.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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DISCOGRAPHY

All On a Summer's Day (1954). Louisville Orchestra, Robert Whitney conducting. Louisville LOU-56-6.

Classic Concerto for organ and string orchestra (1944). Rolf Karlsen, organ; Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, William Strickland conducting. SD/CRI SD 165.

From the Northland (1925). Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Dean Dixon conducting. Desto 6429.

Pop Goes the Weasel (1927). Westwood Wind Quintet. Crystal 101.

Prairie (1929). Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Dean Dixon conducting. Desto 6421.

Symphony in G Major (1930). David Mulbury, organ. Lyrichord 7306.

Gail Quillman began her music studies at the age of 4 and five years later began lessons with Grace Welsh at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. She has appeared frequently as a recitalist and as soloist with orchestras in the United States, Italy, Spain, Uruguay, Germany, and England, and has won numerous competitions and medals in those countries. She is a member of the trio La Musica Gioiosa.

This album is dedicated to the memory of George McMahon.

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Sonata for Pianoforte

1 I. Boldly; moderately fast (9:05)

2 II. Slowly with intensity of expression (8:05)

3 III. With verve; fairly fast (6:38)

Suite for Piano

4 Piccolino (2:33)

5 Maliconia (2:08)

6 Avanti (9:55)

7 Passacaglia (11:24)

Gail Quillman, piano

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