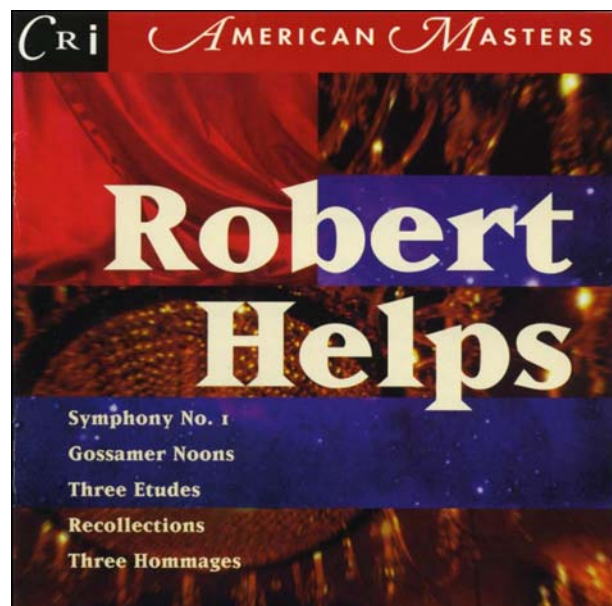


Robert Helps



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| Symphony No. 1 (1955) | (21:55) |
| 1. Energico e marcato | (5:34) |
| 2. Adagio | (8:59) |
| 3. Allegro con moto | (7:22) |
| Columbia Symphony Orchestra; Zoltan Rozsnyai, conductor | |
| <i>Gossamer Noons</i> for soprano and orchestra (1974) ... | (19:21) |
| Poems by James Purdy | |
| 4. March ("Let all footed hearts then parade") | (6:10) |

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| 5. Moderato: a bit clumsily ("Wicked sounds haunt the glen tonight") | (2:10) |
| 6. Fast ("All along the meadow & all along the stream") | (2:15) |
| 7. Slow but flowing ("Over green leaves that stretch to the sea") | (8:46) |
| Bethany Beardslee, soprano; American Composers Orchestra; Gunther Schuller, conductor | |

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|----------------------------------|--------|
| <i>Three Etudes</i> (1956) | (5:33) |
| 8. Etude One | (1:12) |
| 9. Etude Two | (3:09) |
| 10. Etude Three | (1:12) |
| David Del Tredici, piano | |

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| <i>Recollections</i> (1959) | (14:37) |
| 11. In Memoriam | |
| 12. Interlude | |
| 13. Epilogue | |
| William Masselos, piano | |

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|---------------------------------------|--------|
| <i>Three Hommages</i> | |
| 14. Hommage à Fauré (1972) | (3:55) |
| 15. Hommage à Rachmaninov(1972) | (2:17) |
| 16. Hommage à Ravel (1972) | (4:33) |
| Robert Helps, piano | |

Total Playing Time: 72:10

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Notes

Although it has been said that the once well-known figure of the composer/performer has largely disappeared, **Robert Helps** (1928-2001) is a prominent exception. A major pianist of traditional and new music, he has also achieved an important body of creative work that is notable for its intensity as well as its mastery of form. Helps's music belongs to a category that might be called American expressionism. It traces back to Carl Ruggles and Varèse, the influence of Arnold Schoenberg, and the personality of Roger Sessions, who was Helps's principal teacher.

Robert Helps was born in Passaic, New Jersey, on September 23, 1928. He studied piano at the Juilliard School of Music and with Abby Whiteside, and composition and theory with Roger Sessions at the University of California, Berkeley, and privately. He has been professor of piano or artist-in-residence at the New England Conservatory, San Francisco Conservatory, Princeton, Stanford, University of California at Berkeley and at Davis, Manhattan School of Music, and the University of South Florida, Tampa. He has a long list of awards and commissions from the Guggenheim, Naumburg, Ford, and Fromm foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has toured extensively as a solo and chamber music perform-

er, specializing in new music, and he appears as a pianist and/or composer on RCA, Columbia (Sony), Deutsche Grammophon, New World, Desto, Son Nova, Argo and, of course, CRI.

The focal point of Helps's Symphony No. 1 is its Adagio. This powerful movement, the longest and most complex of the symphony, was written first in 1953 and titled *Adagio for Orchestra*. It received a Fromm Foundation award and was performed by the Symphony of the Air (the old NBC Symphony and predecessor to the American Symphony Orchestra) under Leopold Stokowski. It is the most tonal of the three movements, opening and closing in B-flat Minor, and the most symmetrical in structure with a so-called *Bogenform* (also called mirror or arch) that rises to its inevitable climax and falls away. Shortly after completing this central piece, Helps added two movements: a dramatic sonata-form opening and a finale in hemiola, that is, alternating between two-beat (6/8) and three-beat (3/4) measures of the same length. This last movement is a modified sonata containing a development section in the form of variations, a recapitulation with the main themes in reverse order, and a coda built on the second theme or themes. In the end, the dance-like 3/4 wins out over the 6/8. The Symphony

No. 1, completed in 1955, received the Walter W. Naumburg Award, which made possible this recording, originally released on Columbia and first reissued by CRI in 1980.

Gossamer Noons was written in 1974 on a commission from the National Endowment for the Arts. The texts are by James Purdy, the novelist, poet, and long-time resident of Brooklyn Heights where Helps lived for a number of years. The four poems, taken from two of the poet's collections, have a William Blake-like intensity in the way that they read the signs and portents of the natural world. This quality is mirrored in the highly vivid, almost pictorial settings. The first is a march of the beasts, a parade of animate creation in the noon sunshine. The second is a nocturne, full of the sounds of night. The text to song number three is a kind of sonnet, complete with rhyming couplets and quatrains, and the setting puts us back in the sunshine with the birds and the fish. Finally, the last song, the longest and most reflective of the set, evokes an image of nature as a green sea, expressed in the long lines of the setting. The work was written especially for Bethany Beardslee, a major interpreter of new vocal music who often performed with the composer. Not surprisingly, Helps has composed a significant body of piano music, for himself and for other outstanding pianists of his generation.

His *Three Etudes* of 1956 were composed for and dedicated to Bernhard Abramowitsch, who passed them on to David Del Tredici, his very gifted student at the University of California, Berkeley. Del Tredici, who was only seventeen when he first took on these fiendishly difficult pieces, is today better known as a composer, but, as this recording demonstrates, his pianistic gifts are considerable. These studies, arranged in a fast-slow-fast sequence, exploit traditional piano virtuosity at its outer limits. Helps himself wrote of this performance: "[Del Tredici] learned them and played them spectacularly. Neither Bernhard nor, to my knowledge, anyone else has been able or willing to face them, certainly not me. They are criminally difficult." A handful of other pianists have taken them on since, but they remain among the top challenges of the repertoire.

Recollections is one of the composer's longest and most intense works. Like a major graphic work by a visual artist, this is a big statement in a black and white medium. Consisting of three movements titled "In Memoriam," "Interlude," and "Epilogue," it uses a very rich pianistic vocabulary laid out on a large scale with a very complex formal structure. The great pianist tradition is constantly evoked but never literally; there is the sense of deep and private thoughts and moods overheard. The composer has

written about the piece and its performance as follows: "While reclining in my bathtub I thought of the title...It was premiered in 1960 in Hartford, Connecticut, by William Masselos, another extremely fortunate choice of performer for me. Masselos has a very special warmth and expressivity as well as a wonderful and quite rare ability to feel out the long-line shape of a piece and to project that shape. He often comes up with, for example, his own dynamic solutions that are quite different from my indications. He almost never fails to convince me!"

The three *Hommages—Hommage à Fauré, Hommage à Rachmaninov, and Hommage à Ravel*—were composed in 1972 with the idea of evoking times past without any literal imitation of the styles of the composers named (the first two were named after the fact; only the third, written to complement the others, was actually composed with a specific composer in mind). According to the composer, the first of these was written when "I was a bit out of my mind—a temperature of 104 drove me to the writing table. A 'tune' which normally would have been instantly suppressed took over with extreme consequences." No. 2, the Rachmaninov *Hommage*, is literally a reworking of the left hand of a piece he had written in the 1950s as a piano etude for himself to play; the right hand, with what the composer calls its "pianistically irritating" inner trill, was maintained almost intact. Finally, the Ravel, the only one of the three intended as an homage from the start, was added on. The composer tells of trying out the three pieces for a group of friends. Half of them felt they were the best things the composer had ever written while the other half, outraged by the impermissible historical anachronisms, thought they should be burned. Undecided, he played them for Aaron Copland, who suggested a visit, not to the psychiatrist, but to the publisher; they have since become among his most popular and often-performed works.

Helps has written movingly about the continuing ability of solo piano performance to project "a range of dynamics and a potential variety of expressivity that is colossal...one personality with one instrument projecting musical canvases of tremendously varied sizes, shapes and periods." He has described piano performance as a kind of contest, "one-to-one combat—a scene that still after all these years is able to produce in me a sensation, an anticipation, unlike any other musical situation." Helps's piano music grows directly out of his concepts of piano performance.

—Eric Salzman

Production Notes

From SD 411: *Symphony No. 1*:

Produced by Carter Harman, Recorded by David Hancock, Boston, March 1979, Published by Associated music Publishing

Original recordings made possible by the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation, Inc., which brought about the original recording on Columbia Records; CBS Records, which licensed the recordings to CRI as part of CRI's continuing program of reissuing valuable withdrawn recordings; and the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, which funded the production.

From SD 384: *Gossamer Noons*: Produced by Carter Harman, Published by C.F. Peters Corporation

Recorded at The Church of Holy Trinity, May 14, 1978

Original recordings made possible by grants from the Jerome Foundation, The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and the American Composers Orchestra.

From Desto Records DC 7122: *Three Etudes; Recollections*: Recorded by David Jones, Published by C.F. Peters Corporation

From CRI CD 649: *Three Hommages*

Recorded 1989, Morrissound Recording, Inc., Tampa, Florida, Recording engineer: Rick Miller, Published by C.F. Peters Corp.

Nocturne: Recorded 1988, Sender Freies Berlin, Recording engineer: Wolfgang Hoff, Publisher: American Composers Alliance (BMI)

Original recordings made possible by Michael Davis, Spectrum Concerts Berlin, Chamber Music West, The Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Digitally remastered by Joseph R. Dalton and Robert Wolff, engineer at Sony Music Studios, NYC

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