CR741

Peter Mennin (1923–1983)

Symphonies Nos. 3 & 7, Piano Concerto

Symphony No. 3 (1946) .... (22:14)
1. I – Allegro robusto .... (5:14)
2. II – Andante moderato .... (9:06)
3. III – Allegro assai .... (7:55)

New York Philharmonic; Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

Piano Concerto (1958) .... (25:48)
4. I – Maestoso .... (11:15)
5. II – Adagio Religioso .... (8:33)
6. III – Allegro Vivace .... (5:59)

John Ogdon, piano; Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; Igor Buketoff, conductor

Symphony No. 7 "Variation Symphony" (1963) .... (26:31)
7. I – Adagio .... (7:29)
8. II – Allegro .... (4:58)
9. III – Andante .... (7:50)
10. IV – Moderato .... (3:36)
11. V – Allegro Vivace .... (2:48)

Chicago Symphony Orchestra; Jean Martinon, conductor

Total Playing Time: 74:47

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Notes

During the years immediately following World War II, when American composers were generally divided among the nationalist-populists, the Romantic traditionalists, and several camps of the avant-garde, **Peter Mennin** preferred to chart his own course, drawing from the principles and techniques—both old and new—that might serve his personal artistic vision. Born in 1923 in Erie, Pennsylvania, Mennin (who shortened his name from Mennini) began composing before he was seven years old. Independent-minded from the start, he preferred working on his own and later described himself as largely self taught in composition. Entering the Oberlin College Conservatory in 1940, he worked under Normand Lockwood, whose aesthetics he found antithetical to his own. After a year or so he left to join the Air Force.

In 1942, having completed a forty-five minute Symphony No. 1, Mennin entered the Eastman School, attracted by its policy of presenting readings of 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 "renegade." By this time he had completed two more symphonies. The latter of these, the Symphony No. 3, was Mennin's doctoral dissertation, and was completed on his twenty-third birthday. Its first performance, by the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Walter Hendl, took place before the work was actually accepted by the doctoral committee, much to their annoyance. This work and its auspicious premiere quickly brought Mennin to national prominence.

Upon receiving his degree, Mennin was appointed to the composition faculty of the Juilliard School. He remained there until 1958, when he accepted a potion as director of the Peabody Conservatory, choosing administration instead of teaching which, he felt, was a greater drain on his creative energy. In 1962 he became president of the Juilliard School, a position he held until his death in 1983.

Mennin's career as a musical administrator, compounded by his cool, business-like manner and his well-tailored appearance, belied for many his profound dedication to his own creative work. Indeed, during his years as president of Juilliard, his works at times received glib, peremptory dismissal from critics whose comments revealed blatant misconceptions and distortions. (For example, one critic described his symphonies as "tasteful, three-piece-suit commissions.") In fact, Mennin's music is single-minded in its concern with powerful abstract drama, realized through the most meticulous craftsmanship. It is never light, frivolous, or sentimental, nor is it dispassionately intellectual either. His output of barely thirty works comprises large, absolute forms almost exclusively, of which nine are symphonies.

Although Mennin acknowledged no conscious musical influences other than the polyphonic techniques of the Renaissance, his earlier work calls to mind both the lofty, robust grandeur of the Vaughan Williams symphonies (the Fourth, in particular) and the contrapuntal energy of Hindemith. In some ways, Mennin's music also bears affinity to two European symphonists who charted their creative courses similarly independent of trends and fashions: Edmund

Rubbra of England and Vagn Holmboe of Denmark, although Mennin himself was not aware of their work. Yet despite these affinities, there is no mistaking Mennin's own individual stamp, which is apparent throughout his body of work.

The most salient characteristic of Mennin's mature symphonic style is the approach he adapted from renaissance choral music: a continuous unfolding through imitative counterpoint, rather than the more conventional dialectical opposition and integration of contrasting themes. His music emphasizes counterpoint above all other elements, with much use of imitation, canon, ground bass, stretto, cantus firmus, and the like.

All this creates a bustling undercurrent of rapid activity—vastly different in effect from the calm spirituality of the sixteenth-century masters—proceeding with unswerving determination and creating a constant sense of nervous energy, balanced somewhat by a noble, full-breathed lyricism. Over the years, the linear aspect of Mennin's music became increasingly chromatic, the harmony increasingly dissonant, and the rhythm increasingly irregular. His body of work thus stands as an inexorable progression, each entry grimmer, harsher, and more severe than the last. Yet the essential characteristics, discernable in the earliest works, remain present throughout.

Mennin's music from the 1940s exudes a brash, assertive self-confidence, with diatonic melodic lines often based on the darker modes—the Phrygian and sometimes even the rarely used Locrian—propelled by vigorous, strongly accented, syncopated rhythms, linking them somewhat to the American mainstream of the time. This can all be heard clearly in the three-movement Symphony No. 3. The first movement, Allegro robusto, quickly introduces three motifs, through subtle organic metamorphoses, that serve as the thematic basis of the entire work. Richard Franko Goldman wrote in the *Musical Quarterly* that Mennin's Third "sounds almost too ingenious when analyzed, yet the symphony has not the slightest sound of paper music…One feels spontaneity and life in the music rather than the cleverness."

By the early 1950s, the tone of Mennin's music began to take on a new grimness and sobriety, while the contrapuntal activity became almost compulsive in its unremitting agitation and frenzy. The works from this period reveal a bold vision of wild, massive forces in ceaseless turbulence and violent conflict, escalating in intensity toward cataclysmic explosions of almost manic brutality—all articulated through clear musical logic. The slow movements loom as solemn oases of grave contemplation, featuring long-sung 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. Paul Snook, writing in *Fanfare*, characterized Mennin's works from this period as "unsurpassed for their seriousness of argument, compactness of form, and ferocious kinetic charge."

A representative work is Mennin's Piano Concerto, composed in 1957 and premiered the following year by Eunice Podis with the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by George Szell. (Mennin was perhaps the only American composer whose music was consistently championed by this notoriously demanding conductor.) Like the Third symphony in its regular organic growth from intervallic embryos, his Piano Concerto requires great virtuosity of an unusual kind. Rather than following the heroic Romantic concept of a concerto, it is more a Baroque concerto gone wild. After a solemn presentation of the main motif, the first movement plunges the soloist headlong into a toccata-like flood of rapid passagework intricately interwoven motivically, but presented in alternation with the orchestra in the manner of a ritornello. The movement proceeds through ever-increasing levels of intensity that peak, recede, then start anew. The second movement, marked *Adagio religioso*, further develops the material with hushed eloquence, in what is one of the composer's most beautiful slow movements. The third movement returns to the character of the first until it reaches a peroration of unequivocal finality.

During the 1960s, Mennin's works maintained their remarkable consistency of style, tone, and scope, despite a gradual increase in concentration add complexity—formal, harmonic, and rhythmic—leading to a further intensification of effect. One of the high points of this decade is the Symphony No. 7, generally regarded as among the composer's greatest works. "Here," writes Harvey E. Philips, "in one movement divided into five sections, serenity abuts violence, the calmly beautiful is interrupted by frenetic agitation, the dramatic is brushed aside by ethereal repose." Subtitled "Variation-Symphony," the work was completed in 1963 and received its first performance also by the Cleveland Orchestra under Szell's direction. The entire symphony is based on a twelve-tone theme roughly shaped to outline a symmetrical wedge-like sequence of expanding, then contracting, intervals. The work develops melodic fragments of this theme, as well as the wedge-shaped idea itself. Its five connected sections achieve unprecedented expressive intensity and conceptual unity, despite their starkly contrasting characters. Mennin himself commented about this symphony, "In my work there has always been some element of violence and the element of contrast. Here they come out with a vengeance."

—Walter Simmons

Production Notes

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Symphony No. 3: Originally released in 1965. Published by Hargail (ASCAP)
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Piano Concerto: Originally released by RCA: LSC 3243, in 1971. Re-released by CRI; SD 399 in 1980, funding provided by the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University and G. Schirmer, Inc. Published by Carl Fischer (ASCAP)