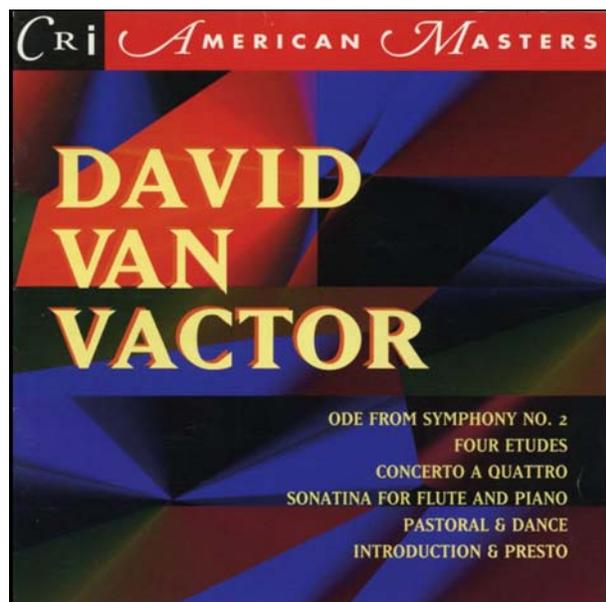


David Van Vactor



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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Ode</i> (From Symphony No. 2) (1943) (10:06)
Adagio quasi andante
Hessian Symphony Orchestra;
David Van Vactor, conductor Four Etudes for Winds & Percussion (1968) (14:35) 2. I. Lento-Allegro (4:04) 3. II. Adagio lugubre (4:25) 4. III. Scherzetto—con allegria (3:01) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. IV. Allegro moderato e giusto (3:05)
Hessian Symphony Orchestra;
David Van Vactor, conductor <i>Concerto a Quattro</i> for Three Flutes &
Harp (1935) (16:14) 6. I. Andante sostenuto – (without pause) II. Adagio (11:45) 7. III. Allegro giocoso (4:29)
Hessian Symphony Orchestra; Willy Schmidt,
Werner Peschke, Karl-Hermann Seyfried,
flutes; Charlotte Cassedanne-Haase, harp,
David Van Vactor, conductor <i>Sonatina</i> for Flute & Piano (1945) (8:00) 8. I. Allegro moderato (2:06) 9. II. Adagio (2:35) 10. III. Allegro giocoso (2:29)
Keith Bryan, flute; Karen Keyes, piano 11. <i>Pastoral & Dance</i> (1947) (11:13)
I. Largo (without pause) II. Allegro moderato e giocoso
David Van Vactor, flute; Hessian Symphony
Orchestra; David Van Vactor, conductor 12. <i>Introduction & Presto</i> (1947) (8:14)
Hessian Symphony Orchestra; David Van Vactor,
conductor |
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- Total playing time: 69:00
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Notes

Creativity within the Walls of Academe: David Van Vactor and the American Musical Ideal.

In the late twentieth century, condemnation of the “academic” composer became commonplace to the point of cliché. Nevertheless in the United States, with the exception of a few glamorous figures, most concert music of the twentieth century was produced by composers who lived and worked in universities. The academic American has tended to have more free time, greater longevity, and ultimately more aesthetic stimulation than the “starving artist.” It is thus not surprising that academics have proven to be more productive, and more successful, too.

One of the most prolific and continually serious composers of the generation that came of age during the 1930s and ‘40s was **David Van Vactor** (*b* Plymouth, IN, 8 May 1906; *d* Los Angeles, 24 March 1994. An artist who spent most of his long career in an academic environment, Van Vactor thrived and flourished as founder and chair of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. There he also served as music director of the Knoxville Symphony, from 1947 to 1972; he also served on the faculty of the Kansas City Conservatory, and was assistant conductor of that city’s Philharmonic Orchestra. The opportunities he gained through teaching and conducting fostered a substantial

compositional achievement, which is only now being appreciated for its full worth.

Unlike the artists of his generation who gravitated toward the French axis—pupils of Nadia Boulanger such as Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, and Walter Piston—Van Vactor belonged to a group that paid more attention to Schoenberg, Franz Schmidt, and other members of what we might call an Austro-Germanic sphere of influence. Back in America, at mid-century the disciples of these composers had to fight harder for recognition in a nation that found Stravinsky’s Franco-Russian aesthetic more digestible than, say, Schoenberg’s unflinching atonality or Schmidt’s expressionist post-Romanticism.

Today our outlook is different: at the turn of the century we now hear composers such as Schmidt, Zemlinsky, and Schoenberg as the basis of many of the twentieth century’s genuinely progressive tendencies. Yet because these tendencies were always threatening to social fabric, they could often be sustained only in academic environments, where rigorous art was encouraged and nurtured, and did not always have to justify itself through sales. This is not to say that Van Vactor’s music is austere or unapproachable: like the work of his Austrian forbears, his art is principally concerned with casting new light on traditional forms and gestures.

Van Vactor's beginnings were indeed traditional enough—but they contained the seeds of an ingenuity that would continue to grow throughout his life. Born in Plymouth, Indiana, on May 8, 1906, he was raised in nearby Argos and in Evanston, Illinois, where his parents moved in the early 1920s in order to enable him to attend Northwestern University.

At Northwestern he entertained the idea of a career in medicine, but he showed such musical promise that the dean of music convinced him that he might indeed make a profession of music—subsequently advising him to seek out the best instruction that Europe had to offer. In 1928, when he was still a student, his *Chaconne* for String Orchestra received its premiere by Howard Hanson and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. Lyrical and tautly structured, it was an auspicious start.

Van Vactor continued his education in Vienna, where during the early 1930s he studied flute with Josef Niedermayer, harmony with Schoenberg, and composition with Schmidt. Later he spent five months in France, where he studied with the flutist Marcel Moyse and with Paul Dukas. Returning to the U.S., in the fall of 1931, he joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in which he played in the flute section for thirteen seasons. He also began to study conducting with the orchestra's music director, Frederick Stock.

During the 1930s his compositions began to attract more attention. In 1939 he conducted the premiere of his First Symphony with the New York Philharmonic, and its success in New York brought about subsequent performances in Cleveland and Chicago. (The Symphony is available on CRI CD 702.) He won numerous awards and prizes, such as that from the Society for the Publication of American Music (for the Quintet for Flute and String Quartet, 1932). During the 1940s he made four tours of South America for the U.S. State Department, conducting and playing his own works (with, for example, the American Woodwind Quintet). From the '40s through the '60s he received many commissions, including those from the Ford Foundation and others, and performances of his works (such as *Trojan Women*, 1957) brought his music to worldwide prominence. In 1977 the state legislature of Tennessee named him Composer Laureate of the State.

Van Vactor's catalog lists more than 100 works including seven numbered symphonies (and numerous other orchestral compositions); cantatas and liturgical music; solo concertos for flute, viola, violin, trumpet; concertos for multiple instruments; two string quartets; chamber and small-scale vocal works; and large pieces for symphonic band.

In 1957 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to spend several months in Germany, during which period he recorded several of his works from the 1930s to '40s with the Frankfurt and Hessian Radio Symphony Orchestras. To these sessions with the Hessian ensemble we owe all but one of the

recordings on the present disc—the one exception being the Sonata for the Flute and Piano, originally released on an Orion disc titled *American Music for Flute and Piano*.

The year 1957 also saw a commission from the Louisville Orchestra, which resulted in the *Fantasia*, *Chaconne*, and *Allegro* (recorded by Columbia). And that year was also when Van Vactor took up twelve-tone composition in earnest, composing such works as the Suite for Woodwind Quintet (1959); the *Sinfonia Breve* (1963, also on CRI CD 702); and the rigorous and richly hued Four Etudes for Winds and Percussion heard on this disc.

The six pieces on the present disc present a wide spectrum of Van Vactor's gifts as composer, conductor, and flutist. The *Ode* from Symphony No. 2 is the plaintive and passionate *Adagio quasi andante* from the composers three-movement Second Symphony, commissioned by the United States Marine Corps in 1942 and first performed by the Indianapolis Symphony the following year. (What a different time and place indeed – when the U.S. Marines commissioned symphonies!) The Four Etudes for Winds and Percussion from 1968 were commissioned by W.J. Julian for the University of Tennessee Bands; they were first performed by the school's Concert Band in 1969.

Van Vactor's identity as world-class flute virtuoso comes to the fore in the next three works. The *Concerto A Quattro*, first performed in 1935 by the Chicago Symphony, features solo parts for harp and three flutes, acting separately and in tandem. Divided into three movements, it immediately strikes the listener as one of the most liltily carefree concertos by an American—an “ensemble concerto” that certainly deserves more attention than it has received.

The subtly shaded Sonata for Flute and Piano belongs to one of the composer's South American journeys, and was first performed in 1945 by the composer and René Amengual in Santiago, Chile. The Pastoral and Dance for Flute and Strings was the result of a commission from Roy Harris's summer festival at Colorado Springs College, where it received its premiere in 1947. Van Vactor himself serves as soloist in this recording.

The *Introduction and Presto* for strings proves a fitting close to this intriguing disc. First performed in Kansas City in 1947, with the composer conducting the Allied Arts Orchestra (an ensemble he himself had founded in the 1940s), the work is truly Schoenbergian in its forceful sense of phrase and gesture, which is never mitigated by an avoidance of strong tonal centers (at least until the major chord at the end). With the lugubrious intensity of its introduction and the fervent post-war urgency, it represents a modernist spirit that is constantly infused with the energy of a sheer love for music.

—Paul J. Horsely

Production Notes

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