

OTTO LUENING:
SYMPHONIC FANTASIA
KENTUCKY RONDO

The Vienna Orchestra
F. Charles Adler, Conducting

GEORGE ANTHEIL
Serenade No. 1 for Strings

The Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra Alfredo Antonini, Conducting

MARY HOWE:

STARS; SAND

The Vienna Orchestra
William Strickland, Conducting

The ways and means of music are unlimited in fact, if not in what the academicians call theory, and the expressive range contained in this recording is a fair sample of the variety, hence vitality, that informs the polyglot American idiom.

Consider first Otto Luening, who was born in Milwaukee on the fifteenth of June in 1900.

Now, by the time a creative personality has become a household name he is normally subject to all the pigeonholing platitudes of annotative patois — the usual prerequisite to artistic eminence being a stylistic trademark or at least a corpus evidencing certain aspects of specialization.

Aside from a recent identification with the genesis of the tape recorder as a composing medium, Luening is a shining exception to this rule. In a lifetime of music-making he has embraced no doctrine, joined no school. And yet he is neither an eclectic nor an iconoclast. He simply practices what he has always preached, which is that a composer's job is to provide "music for use."

This is not to say that Luening merely turns out *Gebrauchsmusik* for various instruments in short supply of repertory; his concept of the composer's role in the social order is far more nearly complete: in the fulfillment of a commission, he considers not only the abilities and propensities of the performers but also the predictable tastes of the audience. So that the *Louisville Concerto*, for instance, was intended (a) to make its mark at once with unsophisticated listeners and (b) to afford musicians a lot of fun in playing it.

Nearly three decades separate the Luening works programmed herewith. The *Symphonic Fantasia No. 1* was sketched in 1922, shortly after the composer's return from five years of European study. It was completed in 1924, and heard in premiere the following season at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, Howard Hanson conducting. In plan the piece approximates a symphonic poem *sans* program. All elements of the symphony are in it too, but highly concentrated.

The score is monothematic. The opening five measures present all of the material, which is thenceforth transfigured continuously, with successive climaxes involving ever more intensity of orchestration. The closing section is signaled by a dance-like tune in the oboe that subsequently metamorphoses into a broad lyric statement by the entire orchestra. A review of the initial material brings the work to an end.

Nowadays known only as an entity, the *Kentucky Rondo* originally was the finale of Luening's 1951 *Louisville Concerto*. The composer himself conducted the first performance in that city. Three principal themes are disclosed: the piano submits a gay nineties ditty, an expansive diatonic melody ensues; then the massed brass blare out a festive song that had emerged earlier in brooding guise. A chromatic fourth subject is brought in now and then throughout. Each solo instrument and section has its turn. At the peroration all join in playing the several themes simultaneously.

Twenty-four days after Otto Luening's birth, a cosmic particle named George Antheil descended on this unprepared planet at Trenton, New Jersey. This was the self-styled "bad boy of music" who would soon gain fame for his *Ballet mécanique* — and why not, since its performance demanded eight pianos, an airplane propeller, and sirens among sundry other unorthodox instruments?

But that was in 1925. Two decades later, as he confessed in a charming autobiography, Antheil had come to writing strongly contrapuntal music "replete with canons, fugues, inversions, calculated and recalculated developments." The *avant-garde*, any one of whom was less advanced than Antheil had been a generation before, did not take kindly to this belated avowal of conservatism. At best, they were inclined to view it as a phase or a passing fancy. It has continued, however, to this day.

The *Serenade No. 1* for string orchestra was one of its first fine fruits. It is dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. The premiere took place on the eleventh of September in 1948 at Los Angeles. The Zimmler Sinfonietta brought the work east a year later, playing it with particular success at the 1949 Berkshire Festival.

Structurally traditional, the *Serenade* is in three fluently graceful and texturally transparent movements. The opening *Allegro*, despite a tricky three-within-four figure, is immediately appealing for its vaguely rustic humor. The *Andante molto* is notable for an affecting concertante exchange among the solo violin, viola, and cello. The final *Vivo*, in contrast, is a sort of stylized *furioso*, infectious alike in its rhythms and its surfeit of melody.

Mary Howe is the senior composer of this distinguished group. She was born in Richmond on the fourth of April in 1882, but began her creative career only when her children were grown and off to college. On the occasion of an all-Howe concert at Town Hall in 1953, John Briggs wrote in the *New York Times* that Mrs. Howe is a traditionalist who pays her respects to the past without, at the same time, being ignorant of what is going on today. Dissonances of the more hair-raising sort are used sparingly, and the musical structure has clarity and sound design throughout."

The miniature tone poems *Sand* and *Stars* are products of Mrs. Howe's most recent period. They were performed for the first time in Vienna on the fifteenth of February in 1955; William Strickland conducted the Wiener Symphoniker. Not quite a year later — February first, 1956— they were given their American première at Washington, D. C., by the National Symphony Orchestra under Howard Mitchell.

Both works proceed programmatically from the connotations of their respective titles: *Sand*, according to the composer, is an imaginative piece on the substance itself – its consistency, grains, bulk, grittiness, and its potential scattering quality; more or less what it appears to be when sifting through your fingers on the shore;” *Stars* was “inspired by the gradually overwhelming effect of the dome of a starry night – its peace, beauty, and space. The sonorous ensemble of the strings opens the work with the suggestion of the spreading immensity of the starry vault. As the music progresses one’s imagination is carried into the contemplation of the awesome depths of space and the sense of mystery with which man compares his insignificance to infinity.”

Notes by JAMES LYONS

(Original notes from CRI LP jacket)