

robert sanders

symphony in a

knoxville symphony orchestra

david van vactor, conductor

ROBERT L. SANDERS believes that the body of Protestant hymn-tunes, particularly the folk-like ones, come close to being a primary source for musical idioms indigenous to the United States. Sanders has been active in the study of Protestant American hymn-tunes since 1934. He has lectured on hymnology and liturgical music, was a participating editor of *Hymns of the Spirit* (1937), and is now a member of the Commission appointed to produce an enlarged version of that book. He also was, for many years, the organist-director of the First Unitarian Church in Chicago. These interests appear to have been a very important influence in the majority of Sanders' works: for example, *Mississippi*, a suite for large orchestra (1928); the *Violin Sonata in C* (1928); *Saturday Night: a Barn Dance* (1933); the *Little Symphony in G* (1937); the *Trombone Sonata* (1945); and *Folk-song* from the *Suite for Brass Quartet* (1949). Some of his more recent works, the *Little Symphony No. 2* (1953), and the *Second Violin Sonata* (1961) contain other manipulations of the same musical inclinations. "They are by now very much a part of my expression," Sanders says.

Born in Chicago, July 2, 1906, Sanders had appeared publicly as a piano prodigy before he had reached the age of four. He also showed early evidence of a creative gift. At the age of nineteen he received a Mus.M. degree from the Bush Conservatory of Chicago, and was awarded a Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, where he studied composition with Ottorino Respighi. Later he continued piano study with Guy de Lioncourt in Paris. The acknowledged chief influences during his formative years were Respighi, de Lioncourt, Eric De Lamarter and Edgar Nelson of Chicago, and Walter Helfer, a fellow resident at the American Academy in Rome.

After his return to Chicago in 1929, Sanders entered upon a career in church music and teaching, with tutelage in conducting with De Lamarter. He taught at the Chicago Conservatory, the University of Chicago and the Meadville Theological School. He was also conductor of the Chicago Conservatory Symphony Orchestra and assistant conductor of the Chicago Civic Orchestra. From 1938 to 1947 he was Dean of the School of Music at Indiana University, and since 1947 has been Professor of Music at Brooklyn College.

Among Sanders' major works are: the *Little Symphony in G*, which won a New York Philharmonic Award in 1938; the ballet *L'Ag'ya*, which was first given in 1944 at the Hollywood Bowl, with Katherine Dunham, and later became part of "Tropical Review" in the Martha Graham Company repertoire; the *Symphony in B-flat* for Concert Band (1943), premiered by the Goldman Band in 1944; and the *Little Symphony No. 2*, commissioned and recorded by the Louisville Orchestra.

The *Symphony in A* was composed in the period from November 1954 to February 1955, during the composer's residence in Majorca while on a Guggenheim Fellowship. There is, according to the composer, "no conscious 'program', but a very conscious architecture." This concentration on architectural balance and contrast does nothing to disturb Sanders' normal hymn-tune background, and the various kinds of musical expressivity in the four movements flow with ease and craftsmanship.

The first movement (*Allegro*, 6/8) opens with bright *staccato* chords in the woodwinds which recede to accompany the principal theme, introduced by the first violins. The theme is characterized by prominent grace-notes, skips in fourths (both perfect and augmented), and a sprightly rhythm. Together with the *staccato* chords, this theme is developed extensively. After reaching a climax, the orchestra subsides quickly with a quiet statement by a single oboe over soft strings in the characteristic rising fourths. The cellos emerge from the accompaniment with a lyric interlude leading to the second theme (*Meno mosso, liberamente espressivo*) accompanied by silvery chords in three flutes doubled by the celesta. This is more lyric in character with a predominantly step-wise movement and an expressive rhythm achieved through the use of duplets in a 6/8 meter. After varied repetitions of this melody, the development section begins with a sudden resumption of the *staccato* chords joined to a new element: murmuring scale-passages in the strings and woodwinds. An *appassionata* version of the principal theme follows in the cellos, basses, and bassoons, subsequently developed in the entire orchestra to a brief climax which subsides in an interpolation by a single clarinet and a recall of the murmuring scales. Over an *ostinato* beat in the timpani the violins and violas introduce an inversion of the principal theme which leads to a much greater climax of bell-like brass fanfares fused with other elements. Gradual dissolution prepares the recapitulation in which only the second theme appears. A fleeting reminiscence of the *staccato* chords ushers in the coda which is built on elements of the principal theme and contains prominent use of the characteristic fourths. After another climax, the movement closes with a twofold statement of the rising fourth motif in the brasses followed by *tutti* chords.

The second movement (*Adagio*, 4/4, C-sharp minor) is essentially a long "aria" of rural character with three variations. This quietly powerful movement is eloquent testimony of the composer's belief in the Protestant hymn-tune as a source for his expression.

The third movement (*Presto*, 3/4, B-flat minor) is a scherzo with trio. Here Sanders interprets literally the term *scherzo*; in the composer's words, "fun and games for everyone." It opens with a "motto" fanfare first announced by the horns and accompanied by prominent repeated notes in the xylophone and trumpets. A virtuoso passage for the xylophone follows with a background of sudden pranks: pairs of woodwinds in minor seconds, a trumpet flutter-tongue passage, trombones in glissandi and tuba trills. The "motto" returns and the section closes with bassoons in octaves against low flutes and muted horns. The usual trio section begins with a tender melody in the unlikely doubling at three octaves of the tuba with piccolo. After development and a climax based on that melody, the scherzo abruptly returns.

The final movement (*Andante al recitativo*) opens with three cadenzas for solo violin recalling fragments of the first movement. The composer states that these interpolated cadenzas introduce the movement in order to "separate the experience of two fast tempos — a perennial formal problem." Each cadenza is in turn preceded by a brief orchestral introduction, which appears to be a stylized version of "taps." The principal movement follows the last cadenza, establishing immediately the basic character of the

movement (*Alla marcia vivace*). It is in fact an extensive variation of the first movement; both of its themes are transformations of corresponding ideas of the first movement. Through the march runs a chorale evolved from the cello theme of the first movement. After the final appearance of the chorale, combined with the principal theme in the high woodwinds, a terse coda concludes the work.

—Notes by *Chou Wen-chung*

DAVID VAN VACTOR'S professional accomplishments are three-fold. As a performer, he was flutist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and later toured in Latin America with a chamber ensemble. As a composer, performances of his own music have been both frequent and noteworthy. As a conductor he has led orchestras in Kansas City, South America, and Knoxville (Tenn.), where, since 1947, he has been permanently engaged. Recent guest appearances have taken him to Europe and its leading orchestras.

*In 1957 the Ford Foundation began a program in Humanities and the Arts. Among the initial grants was one designed to insure multiple regional performances of new symphonic scores. The grant was administered by the American Music Center, a clearing house for the advancement of serious American music here and abroad. Over a period of three years, each of six participating orchestras, coordinated by a national committee of the Center, commissioned one work annually and subsequently each orchestra performed its own commission as well as several of the others. Provision was also made for the recording of some of these works. The present recording has been produced in connection with that aspect of the grant.*

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)