

WALLINGFORD RIEGGER

Canon and Fugue in D Minor, Op. 33 (1941)

JOHN J. BECKER

Concerto Arabesque for Piano and Orchestra (1930)

Jan Henrik Kayser with members of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra — William Strickland, conductor

CHARLES IVES Thanksgiving (1904) (No. 4 of New England Holidays)

Iceland Symphony Orchestra and Iceland State Radio Chorus — William Strickland, conductor

IF THE DECADE 1910-1920 can be described as the heroic era of musical modernism in Europe (the period when Schoenberg and his Viennese disciples were emancipating the dissonance and the young Stravinsky was breaking the rhythmic shackles from European music), its counterpart on the American musical scene would appear to be the 1920-30 decade.

For twenty years prior to this Charles Ives (1874-1954) had been busy, after long working hours in his insurance business, achieving in his own peculiarly individualistic American way many of the same objectives of Schoenberg and Stravinsky—but in almost complete isolation from the professional musical community at large, which was then wholly committed to the tenets of German academicism. The first meaningful discovery of Ives and his work and the clearing of the way for a music both 20th century and American in spirit was in large measure the work of four men who together with Ives have sometimes been likened to The Five of 19th century Russia.

Henry Cowell (b. 1897), Wallingford Riegger (1885-1961), Carl Ruggles (b. 1876), John J. Becker (1886-1961), and Ives himself were untiring in their efforts as creators, performers, and idealistic propagandists to bring about acceptance by the profession and by the public of an *American* contemporary music independent of European academic clichés: and though recognition of their own creative work came late, they all have lived to see their efforts achieve substantial success during the post World War II era.

Wallingford Riegger was still creating with undiminished vitality at the time of his unexpected death at the age of 75. Since the *Dichotomy* of 1931-32 for chamber orchestra, he had been using serial techniques in his composition, but in a context of rhythm and sonority far removed from those of *Mitteleuropa*. At the same time, he felt no compulsion to work exclusively in a pan-tonal, ultra-chromatic style, especially when writing works for performance by school orchestras (i.e. the *Romanza* from the Suite for Younger Orchestras recorded on CRI 117).

Though Riegger's fame has been as a stylistic radical, his training both in America and in Germany had been in the strict classic tradition, with the result that when he set about to write a piece in traditional classic style, he did so as a real master. Such an essay is the Canon and Fugue recorded here, composed in 1941 and based, said Riegger, on a student exercise. Its first performance was at the 1942 ISCM Festival at Berkeley, California. The composer later re-scored the music for full orchestra. Richard Franko Goldman in his *Musical Quarterly* article of January 1950 describes the Canon and Fugue as "a noble work that succeeds in evoking the atmosphere of the 17th century." Its layout is simple enough: an opening 3/4 *sostenuto* episode in

canonic texture; a fugue (*allegro non troppo* 4/4) straightforward in substance (derived from the basic *sostenuto* theme), but richly elaborate in device; then a return to the opening *sostenuto* with two additional bars by way of coda.

LIKE GEORGIA-BORN WALLINGFORD RIEGGER, John J. Becker (b. January 22, 1886, Henderson, Kentucky, not far from Evansville, Indiana) came of German forebears. Again, like Riegger, he was fortunate in having parents who encouraged his musical proclivities. His training too was German in character, though obtained wholly in this country—under Alexander von Fielitz in Chicago and under the renowned organist and contrapuntist, Wilhelm Middelschulte. It was Middelschulte who stimulated his pupil's interest in the music of Palestrina and his contemporaries, a foundation from which Becker developed his own dissonant-textured tonal language.

Rather than settle in a major center of professional musical activity such as New York, Boston, or Chicago, Becker chose to make his day-to-day professional living as teacher and choral director at various midwest Catholic colleges, including Notre Dame, St. Scholastica, St. Thomas College at St. Paul, and Barat College of the Sacred Heart in Lake Forest, Ill. In 1939, he was also Director of Federal Music Projects for the State of Minnesota. From these seemingly unpromising bases of operation, Becker not only produced more than half-a-hundred works of his own in a wide range of forms and media, but he also waged an unceasing one-man campaign for the kind of contemporary music in which he believed. Thus we find him conducting in 1933 a program for a Minneapolis Convention of the National Federation of Music Clubs with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra offering Henry Cowell's *Polyphonica*, *In the Night* from Charles Ives' *Theatre Set*, a *Scherzo* by Wallingford Riegger, *Lilacs* from Carl Ruggles' *Men and Mountains*, and his own *Concerto Arabesque*. It was during this period that Becker also orchestrated the accompaniment for Ives' celebrated song, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*.

For all the composer's wide ranging activity through the midwest, John J. Becker's music has remained something of a mystery, at least as compared with that of Ives, Riegger, Ruggles, and Cowell, all of whom have achieved a respectable measure of representation on LP discs. It is something of a shock to realize that, save for the *Credo* from the *Missa Symphonica* which was recorded on the New Music Quarterly label back in the early 1930's, not a single Becker work has found its way onto commercial discs until now. Hopes ran high for awhile after Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic had performed Becker's Third Symphony' (*Symphonia brevis*) and Ruggles' *Men and Mountains* in the fall of 1958, but no LP disc was forthcoming. With the exception of a 1952 broadcast from Oklahoma City of a suite from music written for Alfred Kreymborg's dance play *When the Willow Nods*, performances of Becker's work seem to have been restricted almost wholly to collegiate and specialized modern music circles.

Becker's music is not Americanistic in the Ivesian sense; and though much of it bears such programmatic subtitles as *Symphony of Democracy* (Symphony No. 6 — 1942), *Etude Primitive* (Symphony No. 1 — 1912-15), and *Fantasia tragica* (Symphony No. 2 — 1920), such titles are more a reflection of Becker's profound moral sensibilities than of the substance of the music itself. Other major works in the Becker catalog include a Horn Concerto (1933), a Violin Concerto (1948), the *Concerto Arabesque* (1930) recorded here, a dozen stage works of both incidental music and dance character, and some eight "Soundpieces" (*sonata* in the generic sense) for a variety of combinations — piano, and strings, piano quintet, string quartet, piano, etc.

It was in the course of discussing a performance of the Horn Concerto in the July 1953 *Musical Quarterly* that Henry Cowell summed up the essence of Becker's compositional method: "As a composer, Becker has worked out his own way of applying the principles of 16th-century counterpoint to modern atonal dissonance. He arrived at a style related to that of Hindemith,

Riegger, Berg, and Ruggles, but his music is rather more serene, even gentle, and it is devoid of voluptuous elements.” This commentary applies in a general sense to the *Concerto Arabesque*.

Completed in November of 1930 and performed for the first time on December 7, 1931 at St. Thomas College in St. Paul with Elsie Wolf Campbell as soloist and the composer conducting, the *Concerto Arabesque* is scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, horn, trumpet, and strings. A note on the face of the score indicates that performance may be either with small orchestra or with 12 solo instruments. The sonic conception of the piece, as it turns out, is that of chamber music, but it is chamber music sonority of a special kind — akin to the sharply separated tonal colorations that emerge from a small baroque organ with a wealth of mixture stops. Certainly Becker’s thoughts on orchestration as set forth in an article published in the February 1950 issue of *Musical America* point to a very thorough understanding of the manner in which the combination tones arising out of secundal harmonies can produce timbres of extraordinary brilliant and penetrating quality. He was also acutely aware of the possibilities of the pure percussion orchestra, as witness the 20-minute dance work *Abongo*, dating from 1933 and scored for 29 percussion instruments.

From a formal standpoint, the 9-minute span of Becker’s *Concerto Arabesque* arises out of two contrasting themes — the first enunciated by the trumpet (*mp* — *moderato*) at the very beginning — romantic in its contour, but decidedly non-romantic in the harmonic texture with which it is enveloped. The solo piano enters with 18 bars of commentary and extension, following which the first violin, with other strings entering close behind, sets forth the contrasting second theme — stepwise-chromatic in character with strong iambic meter. Here the nature of the piano commentary makes superfluous any explanation of the “arabesque” designation in the music’s title. Dialogue development between piano and ensemble dominates the work as a whole; but there are two brilliant cadenza episodes — a brief one in running sixteenths early in the music, and toward the end a glittering episode worthy of an *avant-garde* Liszt.

According to Henry and Sydney Cowell in their book, *Charles Ives and his Music* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1955), *Thanksgiving* — or more properly *Thanksgiving and/or Forefathers’ Day* — had its origin in an organ postlude that he played for a Thanksgiving Service at New Haven’s Center Church back in 1897, where he was organist during his student days at Yale. Ives in his later years considered this to be his first good piece composed “away from the rule book.” The Cowells paraphrase Ives’ own description of the work as follows:

“The Postlude starts with C-minor and D-minor together, and later major and minor chords together, a tone apart. This was to represent the sternness and strength and austerity of the Puritan character, and it seemed that any of the major, minor or diminished chords used alone gave a feeling of bodily ease which the Puritan did not give in to. There is also in this some free counterpoint in different keys, and rhythms going together. There is a scythe or reaping harvest theme which is a kind of off-beat, off-key counterpoint. Six or eight years later (sometime before we left 65 Central Park West in the fall of 1906), these 2 pieces were arranged as a single movement for orchestra.”

By 1913 Ives had completed three other orchestral pieces evocative of his memories of patriotic holidays from his Danbury, Connecticut boyhood — *Washington’s Birthday* (1909 — recorded on CRI 163), *Decoration Day* (1912), and *The Fourth of July* (1912-13 — recorded on CRI 180) and the four scores were placed in a brown cardboard folder bearing the notation “4 N.E. Holidays”. The Ives catalog as noted by the Cowells designates the collection as *A Symphony: Holidays* — “Recollections of a boy’s holidays in a Connecticut country town . . . These movements may be played as separate pieces. . . . These pieces may be lumped together as a symphony.”

Thanksgiving bears one of Ives' very rare personal dedications — in this instance to his brother-in-law, Edward Carrington Twichell. The actual title page in ms. reads, “*Thanksgiving and Forefathers Day* — IV movement N.E. Holidays — This is a nice piece of turkey — Eddy! . . . & dedicated to E.C.T. — Center Church New Haven Thanksgiving 1897 — put in this piece Aug. 1904.”

In essence Ives has given us in *Thanksgiving* a powerful hymn-tune fantasia, into which a half-dozen or more melodies are woven in simultaneously mixed keys and meters. An atmosphere of stern solemnity dominates the opening section; but after an excited climax marked by extraordinarily dense and complex polyphonic texture, there ensues a highly poetic meditative episode on one of the chief hymn-tune melodies. The shimmering sound of distant bells (a typical Ives trademark) is heard. This soon becomes transformed into a quasi-barn-dance, but then re-assumes its meditative quality. Anyone hearing this particular section of *Thanksgiving* without knowing its composer would assume it to be the work of a folk-oriented American composer of the late 1930's, so fully does Ives exploit the devices that were to become the common currency of American art-music at that period.

The final section of *Thanksgiving* reverts to the solemn mood of the opening pages, but with less complexity of texture. A slow but inexorable build-up of dynamics leads to the entry of the chorus (singing chiefly in octaves and unison) with the celebrated Thanksgiving/Forefathers' Day hymn-tune, *Duke Street*, the words being familiar to every American Protestant churchgoer:

*God! Beneath Thy guiding hand
Our exiled fathers crossed the sea;
And as they trod the wintry strand,
With prayer and praise they worshipped Thee.*

NOTES BY D.H.

JAN HENRIK KAYSER, soloist in the Becker *Concerto Arabesque*, is one of the most gifted of Norway's younger pianists. Born near Bergen, he made his debut as soloist with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra in 1953 and has since been heard with most of the major orchestras of Scandinavia, as well as on the European continent.

WILLIAM STRICKLAND during the 1962-63 music season added Iceland to his long roster of recording locales for CRI, also having done major American repertoire for the catalog from such varied bases of operation as Tokyo, Goteborg, and Oslo. In his capacity as conductor of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Mr. Strickland enabled that relatively young organization, established in the late 1940's, to make its first recordings exclusively for the CRI label.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)