

ERNST BACON

Sonata for 'Cello and Piano (1948)

BERNARD GREENHOUSE — MENAHEM PRESSLER

GORDON BINKERD

Sonata for Piano (1955)

STANLEY FLETCHER

ERNST BACON (b. Chicago, 1898) has been active for more than forty years as composer, pianist, conductor, and music educator. He has been director of the School of Music at Syracuse University and Dean of the Music School at Converse College, Spartanburg, South Carolina. As conductor and administrator he organized in 1934 the Bach Festival at Carmel, California and from 1935 to 1937 was supervisor of the Federal Music Project in San Francisco.

Mr. Bacon's early studies were in and around his native Chicago—at the Lewis Institute, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago. Alexander Raab and Glenn Dillard Gunn were his chief mentors in piano, while his composition and theory studies were pursued under Karl Weigl in Vienna and Ernest Bloch in this country. His training as conductor was under Eugene Goossens.

As composer, Ernst Bacon's chief fame with the public and among his colleagues has been as a creator of extraordinarily apt settings of the American language, ranging from the poems of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson to the vivid American vernacular setting done by Paul Horgan for the 1942 music-play *A Tree on the Plains*. This latter work made a great impression when first performed at Spartanburg, being called a counterpart in terms of rural Americana to what Marc Blitzstein was then doing for the urban vernacular in theater pieces like *The Cradle Will Rock*. Besides his nearly two hundred songs, two other operas, and choral works, Mr. Bacon has composed three symphonies (the First won him a Pulitzer traveling scholarship in 1932), two orchestral suites steeped in the lore of Americana — *Ford's Theater* (recorded on Desto 6415/415), *From these States*, as well as a delightful score for Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (recorded in the Louisville Commissioning Series as *The Enchanted Island* — LOU 545-11). Recordings of Mr. Bacon's Emily Dickinson settings are included on Desto 7411/2; 411/2, and on Music Library 7096. The latter disc also offers the Five Hymns for chorus.

Chief among Mr. Bacon's chamber works are the Quintet for Piano and Strings and the 'Cello Sonata recorded here. There are numerous short piano pieces in the Bacon catalog, some of them boasting such picturesque titles as *Pigtown Fling* or *Burr Frolic*.

Ernst Bacon has also written two books of pertinent commentary dealing with both the art and craft of music in creation and performance and the contemporary milieu in which it must subsist: *Words on Music* (Syracuse University Press, 1960) and *Notes on the Piano* (Syracuse University Press, 1963).

As can be seen, it is American lore, poetic, musical, mythic, and folk that has served as a basic source of nourishment for Mr. Bacon's creative work. Virgil Thomson, who is himself a singularly skilled practitioner of musical Americana, summed up in singularly apt fashion for *The New York Herald Tribune* the essence of Bacon's music as he heard it in a concert devoted wholly to the composer's work in 1946:

"Since Mr. Bacon is a very good composer indeed, one of America's best, last night's concert was both an interesting and a pleasant experience. . . .

"The mood and temper of Mr. Bacon's work are chiefly a meditation on nineteenth-century rural America. He is full of our Scotch-Irish folklore, knows it from the inside, speaks and writes it as his own musical language. Mr. Bacon also has a modern musician's knowledge of American speech cadences. . . .

"Mr. Bacon's work is remarkably pure in its expressive intent. It communicates its meaning with a straightforward and touching humanity. It is not got up with chromium-plated cadenzas or lace-curtainlike instrumental figurations, and it poses no passionate attitude. But it is full of melody and variety . . . it at least looks backward toward an ideal and primitive America without snobbery, self-deception, or truculence. It is honest and skillful and beautiful."

Although Mr. Thomson's remarks were directed mainly toward Mr. Bacon's songs and piano pieces, they could be applied with equal aptness to the 'Cello Sonata which was completed in 1948, and subsequently performed with great critical success in New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. The world premiere took place at Syracuse University on December 5, 1948 with Anake Camp and the composer at the piano. The score bears a dedication to Prof. A. P. Saunders of Hamilton College, Clinton, N.Y.

The title page of the Sonata in its revised version bears a further inscription: "With homage to Walt Whitman", and this is borne out further by the evocative citations from Whitman's poetry scattered throughout the body of the music. "*I know the amplitude of time*"—appears at the beginning of the slow introduction to the first movement. "*How dare you place anything before a man?*" stands before the virile *risoluto* that follows; and the expansive fanfarelike theme that signals the *allegro* main body of the movement carries over it the inscription, "*Warlike flag of the great idea*" (referring to Whitman's apostrophe to Democracy in *By Blue Ontario's Shore*). "*I draw you close to me, you women*"—bespeaks a lyrical transitional episode, and the assertive aspect of the movement returns with "*What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?*" "*Tenderly, — be not impatient*"—"Unborn deeds, things soon to be"—"*World, take good notice*"—constitute the Whitmanesque verbal summation of the first movement's course.

The second movement is an elegant and charming folk song-and-dance evocation bearing the one all-embracing epigraph: "*Sonic of the younger men dance to the sound of the banjo or fiddle, others sit on the gunwale smoking and talking.*" The middle part of the movement is marked by a delicious canonic episode between the 'cello and the piano right-hand.

The *Lento* slow movement is solemnly tender and elegiac, with inscriptions drawn from the poem *To One Shortly to Die*:

“From all the rest, I single you out . . .
You are to die—let others tell you what they please
I cannot prevaricate . . .
Softly I lay my right hand upon you . . .
Strong thoughts fill you and confidence . . .
You forget you are sick . . .
I do not commiserate, I congratulate you.”

“*Let us go forth refresh’d amid the day*”, reads the introductory inscription to the virile and brilliantly fugue-textured finale — its dotted theme being almost an Americanization of the mirror Contrapunctus XVIII from the Bach *Art of Fugue*.

NOTES PREPARED BY D. H.

BERNARD GREENHOUSE has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the foremost American ’cellists in both the solo and the chamber music field. His recording activity has included work with the Bach Aria Group, as well as a wide modern repertoire. The present disc is the first of two with Menahem Pressler scheduled for release on the CRI label, the other being of John Lessard’s ’Cello Sonata (CRI 203). Among the other major Bernard Greenhouse recordings available at this writing are those of the Elliott Carter ’Cello Sonata (Desto 6419/419) and the Victor Herbert ’Cello Concerto (Desto 6417/417).

MENAHÉM PRESSLER currently teaches on the University of Indiana music faculty. Most of his past recording has been for the MGM classical label and covers such varied repertoire as the Shostakovich 24 Preludes, piano music of Lord Berners and Villa-Lobos, as well as large sectors of the Grieg and Debussy keyboard literature.

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY and its parent organization, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, are honorary societies with a distinguished membership of creative artists. They are chartered by an act of Congress, and are devoted to the furtherance of the arts in the United States.

Through joint committees of selection, these societies every year award fifteen grants to young artists in recognition of distinction and promise. Four of these grants go annually to composers, in addition to the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award given every third year to an established composer of distinction.

In the spring, an exhibition of the works of award winners in painting and sculpture is held at the Academy building. In 1956, it was decided to inaugurate a series of recordings with the similar purpose of calling attention to the works of award winners in music. This release, presented in collaboration with Composers Recordings, Inc., offers works by 1962 award winner Ernst Bacon and 1964 winner, Gordon Binkerd.

GORDON BINKERD (b. Lynch, Nebraska, 1916) gained his training as a composer from Bernard Rogers at the Eastman School of Music and from Walter Piston at Harvard University. Save for opera, he has written extensively in almost all performing media. Four symphonies, many works for chorus, an array of works for chamber groups including two string quartets and pieces for brass ensemble, works for organ including an Organ Service, plus a piano suite and the Piano Sonata recorded here — these are the chief elements of the Gordon Binkerd composition catalog.

His music is for the most part of the utmost seriousness, often contrapuntal, but always concerned for the vertical sounds of the combining parts. In texture frequently dense and involved, the fundamental impulse of Binkerd's music remains lyric. He is at ease with such large structures as symphony, quartet, and sonata, yet is capable of a fine-grained expressiveness that can be heard at its most characteristic in his large output of choral music.

Although Mr. Binkerd has lived most of his life on the central plains of the Mid-west, his music is in no sense regional. Nor do his works display the slightest interest in the bizarre, the atmospheric, or the trivial. They are as innocent of *chic* as is his artistic credo: "Music to me is beauty and excitement combined with significance." In this age of so many musical extremes, Binkerd has firmly maintained a position that has been characterized as "Radical Center." Such an artistic stance, as Dorothy Veinus Hagen once observed in an American Composers Alliance Bulletin article, "is neither new nor easy."

"The natural evolution in his music," the same writer observes, "is no accident. He is a man who delights in making things grow. He has a small farm of good black Illinois soil, and his gardening runs the gamut from red and white potatoes to wild flowers and trees. He is a strongly built, energetic man who is fond of chopping wood in moments of relaxation. In fact, his nature is the exact opposite of 'Bohemian,' his music is warm and lyrical, and never in need of a special environment."

Mr. Binkerd has held a Guggenheim Fellowship, and had been a member of the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Illinois, where he has taught composition and theory since 1949 and is chairman of the department. In 1964, he was awarded a grant from the Institute of Arts and Letters, the present recording of his Piano Sonata being part of that grant. His Second Symphony was commissioned from the Fromm Musical Foundation, his Fourth by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. His large work for double chorus, *Aspects of Jesus Christ*, commissioned by the Ford Foundation for the Mid-America Chorale, is being recorded by the Gregorian Institute of America. Other recordings to-date have been *Sun Singer* with the University of Illinois Symphony Orchestra (U. of Ill. Custom Recording 2); Symphony No. 1 with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (Columbia MS 6291/MI, 5691); Symphony No. 2 with the Oslo Philharmonic (CRI 139); and *Ad Te levavi* with the Mid-America Chorale (CRI 191).

Gordon Binkerd's Sonata for Piano is written in a brilliantly pianistic idiom solidly rooted in tonality, yet in no way reactionary. Its four movements encompass the traditional sonata design: a sonata allegro with two main subjects and development based on a transformation of the second; a deeply expressive slow movement (in ABCBA form) that confesses inspiration from the poems of William Blake; a contrapuntal scherzo that is a sort of three-part invention with trio; and an extensive finale incorporating a wide variety of dance rhythms.

"It is big and formidable and difficult," writes Joseph Bloch in *The Julliard Review*, "a piano sonata in the grand manner. Here the starting point is Stravinsky, the monumental Stravinsky of the Piano Concerto and the Capriccio, larger, more sonorous, more virtuoso than the style of most of the solo piano works. The Binkerd

Sonata adds a strong chromatic element, and the slow movement in particular abounds in marvelous colors and sounds.”

The structural solidity, energy and eloquence of the work reveal its composer as one of the significant voices in American music of this century.

STANLEY FLETCHER is British by birth but has been a naturalized American citizen since his eighteenth year. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Mr. Fletcher had his major training as a pianist under Guy Maier, later studying with Artur Schnabel and Anis Fuleihan. Acclaimed by Glenn Dillard Gunn in 1936 as already “One of the great,” Mr. Fletcher has found his long artist-teacher residency at the University of Illinois no handicap to an extensive concert career. He has been acclaimed variously as an outstanding exponent of Chopin, of Beethoven, of contemporary music, and of chamber music; but he prefers rejection of any such stamp of specialization. He has received major honors not only for his work as a concert artist, but for his outstanding scholarly contributions to musical journals.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)