

RICHARD DONOVAN

Passacaglia on Vermont Folk Tunes (1949) - Epos (1963)

Polish National Radio Orchestra — Jan Krenz, conductor

RECORDED BY POLSKIE NAGRANIA — POLAND

LESLIE BASSETT

Variations for Orchestra (1962-63)

Radio Zurich Symphony Orchestra — Jonathan Sternberg, conductor

RICHARD DONOVAN (b. 1891, New Haven, Conn.) has been associated for the greater part of his career with the musical life of that city and with the growth over the period 1928-60 of the School of Music at Yale University.

His studies were at the Yale School of Music and at the Institute of Musical Art in New York. There followed further study in Paris with Charles-Marie Widor, then a period of teaching and conducting in various church and school posts in New York. In 1920, Mr. Donovan became director of music at the Taft School, and three years later joined the music faculty of Smith College. In 1928 he returned to Yale to join the faculty of the School of Music, retiring in 1960 as Battell Professor of the Theory of Music.

Besides his Yale activities, Mr. Donovan directed the Bach Cantata Club of New Haven from 1933 to 1934, and as associate conductor of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra made a point of programming contemporary composers. From 1928 until 1966, Mr. Donovan was organist and choirmaster of Christ Church in New Haven.

As proponent and spokesman for his fellow American composers, Richard Donovan's work goes back to the late 1920's and early 1930's when he was associated with both the Pan American Association of Composers and the Yaddo Festival at Saratoga Springs. In more recent years, he has been both President and Chairman of the Board of the American Composers Alliance.

Besides being honored in 1963 with the National Institute of Arts and Letters Marjorie Peabody Waite Award "to an older artist in recognition of the continuing integrity of his work," Mr. Donovan was also given the 1962 Walter W. Naumburg Recording Award for his *Music for Six* and for *Five Elizabethan Lyrics for Soprano and String Quartet*. The latter two works have been recorded by Columbia.

Besides the works already noted, Mr. Donovan's catalog of compositions includes numerous songs and short choral pieces, a *Symphony in D* (1956), *Soundings* (1953) for trumpet, bassoon, and percussion (recorded by MGM), a *Mass for Unison Voices* (1955), *New England Chronicle* (1946-47) for orchestra (recorded by Mercury), *Suite for String Orchestra and Oboe* (1944-45) (recorded by Vanguard), *Fantasy on American Folk Ballads for Men's Voices and Piano* (1940) (recorded by Carillon), and *Smoke and Steel* (1932) for orchestra, after Carl Sandburg's poem.

Epos (“Communication—Message”) is described by Mr. Donovan as being planned in terms of an extended three-part structure.

“It begins,” notes the composer, “with the sounding of a short, solemn motto. After a questioning soliloquy from the bass clarinet, it is the English horn that clearly sounds the B minor opening subject. Motivic allusions gradually add up to extended melodic sentences.

“The second part is given over to energetic material, sometimes dance-like in a heavy way. A bridge leads to development of material heard thus far. The orchestral texture expands. Fresh ideas are explored.

“A quiet return to earlier ideas ensues, working up to a full orchestral climax dominated by high trumpets with woodwind underpinning through several octaves. Characteristic harmonic elements heard earlier pass in review. Bass clarinet and English horn together recall the opening *adagio*. Finally the original tonality of B leads the work to a close.”

Concerning the *Passacaglia on Vermont Folk Tunes*, Mr. Donovan cautions against taking the “Folk Tunes” designation literally. When this writer noted the resemblance of the Passacaglia theme to *Barbara Allen*, there came this rejoinder:

“About *Barbara Allen* raising her pretty head in my Passacaglia—yes, I see it now. But as you know, similarities in folk songs are almost always present. Here Barbara is regular; mine is irregular. She is ordinary major; mine is modal; and so on.”

“The passacaglia theme,” notes Mr. Donovan further, “is first heard in the ’cellos—a simple ground bass, modal in style. After a block of six variations on this melody, an episodic passage comes to the fore, introducing the first of a number of brief folk song quotations. Derived from various sources, these songs in their complete forms were familiar throughout rural Vermont in earlier times. However, I have thought it best not to identify any of the folk songs as such, if only to avoid controversy where collectors are concerned.

“These spirited folk song references provide the over all musical texture with necessary contrast and color; but the passacaglia melody in one form or another is seldom far away—contributing, through its rhythmic features and expressive character, to the unity of the work as a whole. Nearly all the thematic material of the quiet coda is derived from it.”

LESLIE BASSETT (b. Hanford, California, 1923) is Professor of Music at the University of Michigan, where he has been on the faculty since 1952. His composition studies have been with Ross Lee Finney, Nadia Boulanger, Arthur Honegger, and Roberto Gerhard. Among Mr. Bassett’s major grants and awards have been that of the Society for Publication of American Music (1960), the Prix de Rome (1961-63), the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1964), and the Pulitzer Prize (1966). Besides the Trio for Clarinet, Viola, and Piano (1953) recorded on CRI 148, and the Variations for Orchestra recorded here, Mr. Bassett’s major works also include two symphonies, *Designs, Images and Textures* (1964), Five Movements for Orchestra (1961), a Short Overture, three string quartets, Five Pieces for String Quartet, a woodwind quintet and numerous other works for band, chorus, chamber groups, and tape.

“The Variations for Orchestra,” observes Mr. Bassett, “was the last work composed during my two years as recipient of the Prix de Rome at the American Academy in Rome, 1961-63. Begun in late November of 1962 and completed the following May 1st, the Variations took shape with the sounds of the Radio Orchestra of Rome (RAI) in my ears. I attended most of the concerts of this excellent ensemble; and knowing that it would be giving the premiere of the work, I realized that I could ask for things that would be beyond the capabilities of lesser orchestras. I wanted to write a large, powerful, single-movement work that would place the listener in the midst of a form he could perceive and yet at the same time involve him in the gradual unfolding of a thematic-motivic web that would require his most thoughtful attention.

“The Variations are not based on a theme. The opening motivic introduction consists of four small areas or phrases, each of which is more memorable as color or mood than as theme, and each of which serves in some respect as the source of two variations. The first variation, for example, grows from the short repeated notes that appear early in the introduction; the second from a quintuplet figure and other minutiae from the second phrase; the third from a short but soaring clarinet line in the third phrase, etc. Naturally each of the variations exposes a significant amount of material that is not directly drawn from the introduction, but which I believed would be able to project and complete the sections. The last four variations take up some aspects of the introduction that may have been overlooked or minimized in the four earlier sections. Some of the variations are attached to those that follow or precede them, others are not. A sizeable conclusion, opening rather like the beginning, completes the work, after revealing once again several of the motivic elements in climactic context.

“The musical material of the Variations came about by very personal means. I was fascinated by orchestral texture, and conceived each section from a textural point of view long before pitches were considered. At the opening, for example, the double-basses are divided four ways, resulting in a quiet, low-pitched blur of sound that would convey the impression of introduction, of expectation, of upbeat. Likewise I strove to maintain what might be called a backdrop of basically unimportant sounds (colors, really; soft percussion, muted figures, harmonics, etc.) that would continue the expectant quality of the introduction into many of the variations that followed, giving the entire form a thrust toward the conclusion. One 12-note series (drawn from a set of pieces for women’s choir that I had just completed) appears occasionally and certainly had some influence upon the musical language; but this work is quite removed from serial process. There is an unobtrusive tonal organization, nonfunctional in the usual sense, yet meant to increase the significance of two or three pitches.

“I consider the Variations to be one of the most deeply motivated musical statements I have made. Many of the technical considerations faced at the time of composition have by now, two years later (1965), been largely forgotten or confused with those present in more recent works; but I remember that I found the process of more or less continuous statement, yet statement with developmental or reflective overtones, to be very exciting. The variation process, free from many of the customary melodic considerations and obligations, seemed to me to give new depth to melody, even though at the same time it made melody far less memorable.”

Ferruccio Scaglia conducted the first performance of the Variations for Orchestra with the Rome Radio Orchestra (RAI) at the Foro Italico in Rome, July 6, 1963. The American premiere was by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conducting, at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, October 22, 1965.

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 1964 award winner, Leslie Bassett, and 1963 winner, Richard Donovan.

DOUGLAS MOORE

JAN KRENZ, gifted conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra won a substantial measure of international renown for the versatility and musicianship he displayed during the Warsaw Autumn Festivals of Contemporary Music in 1963, 1964, and 1965. The present recorded performance of Richard Donovan's *Passacaglia on Vermont Folk Tunes and Epos* is one of a number of major recorded performances scheduled for release on American Music done under Mr. Krenz's baton and scheduled for release on CRI.

JONATHAN STERNBERG is associated in the minds of most record buyers with the first explorations of the Haydn Society into the lesser known symphonies of that great Austrian master. However, those with sharp memories will also recall that in 1953, Mr. Sternberg was represented on the Oceanic label with the first and only complete recording ever made of Charles Ives' *Theatre Set*. This first recording of Leslie Bassett's Variations for Orchestra serves to demonstrate effectively Mr. Sternberg's mettle with the contemporary idiom.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)