

MODERN MUSIC FOR TWO PIANOS

played by JOAN YARBROUGH AND ROBERT COWAN

WALLINGFORD RIEGGER

VARIATIONS for TWO PIANOS, Op. 54a (1952)

VINCENT PERSICHETTI

SONATA for TWO PIANOS, Op. 13 (1940)

NICOLAI BEREZOWSKY

FANTASY for TWO PIANOS, Op. 9 (1930)

Music played on two pianos by a pair of experts produces a richness that seems almost orchestral, and presents a marvelously easy-sounding display of technical dazzle. Most pianists will go out of their way for a chance to play at two pianos, and some have turned it to public account. Mozart and Clementi improvised for the Emperor Josef II and, in our own memory or just before, such legendary pianists as Josef and Rosina Lhevinne pleased concert audiences when they combined their talents at the keyboards.

Nevertheless, the medium has not attained the high estate of solo pianism. It is rarely to be found on the curriculum of music conservatories, so that those pianists who choose to specialize in it must work out for themselves such knotty and unremitting problems as split-second coordination without being able to see each other's hands. The musical relationship is said to be as intimate as, and requires the close understanding of, a marriage. Indeed, two-piano teams often turn out to be or to become husband and wife, as Joan Yarbrough and Robert Cowan are.

One of the weightiest problems of two-piano teams is the pianos themselves. Finding two pianos in any concert hall, let alone many concert halls, that are sufficiently matched in tone color and pitch is rare indeed. Yarbrough and Cowan have solved this problem with a specially-built trailer that resembles a horse-trailer. Twice a year, they load up their precious German Steinways and hitch up to their Mercedes for a tour that may take them several thousand miles.

The Cowans met in London in 1962, where both were studying on scholarships (his was a Fulbright). He was from Oklahoma City and she from Boston, he out of Juilliard and Eastman and she out of Oberlin. They married before they realized that they wanted to have a career together. Back at Eastman, they started exploring the library for repertory, and in 1964 embarked on the concert circuit by playing the American premiere of Niels Viggo Bentzon's *Symphonic Fantasy* with the Oklahoma City Symphony. Since then they have helped to expand the repertory through their own program of commissioning new two-piano works. They live in Montevallo, Alabama, and teach at the University of Montevallo and at the Brevard Music Center, Brevard, North Carolina.

In August, 1973, Yarbrough and Cowan gave the world premiere of Riegger's *Variations for Two Pianos and Orchestra* with the Peninsula Festival Orchestra under the direction of Thor Johnson, at Fish Creek, Wisc. This work bears the opus number 54b. Riegger's original Op. 54 is the version for one piano and orchestra. Like Brahms, Ravel and the American Ruggles, Riegger liked to re-arrange his music for several different combinations of instruments. Op. 54a is the version for two pianos alone. It is, in any version, one of the most successful compositions from the last decade of Riegger's life, being elegant, witty and highly pianistic.

WALLINGFORD RIEGGER (Albany, Ga., 1885— New York, 1961) was, of course, one of America's major composers. Working out of a background of solid 19th century romanticism, he developed a style notable for its uncompromising originality and independence. His pioneering *Music for Brass Choir* is on CRI SD 229, his *Symphony No. 3* on CRI SD 284, and his *String Quartet No. 2* on CRI SD 307.

There are few more universally admired contemporary American composers than VINCENT PERSICHETTI (b. Philadelphia, 1915). His contributions have enriched the entire musical literature and his influence as performer and teacher is immeasurable. Persichetti began his musical life at the age of 5, first studying piano, then organ, double bass, tuba, theory and composition. From the age of 20, he was simultaneously head of the theory department at Combs College, a conducting major with Fritz Reiner at the Curtis Institute and a piano major with Olga Samaroff at the Philadelphia Conservatory, in addition to studying composition with a number of important American composers. In 1948 he joined the staff of the Juilliard School, where he now (1974) heads the Composition Department, and he has been Director of Publications of Elkan-Vogel, Inc. since 1952. His *Concerto* and *Serenade for One Piano, Four Hands* are well known but this SONATA is his only work for two pianos, which is unfortunate, considering its great elegance and feeling for the medium. It is almost a sonatina in form, each of its four movements being brief and concise, without extended development.

NICOLAI BEREZOWSKY (b. St. Petersburg, Russia, 1900 d. New York, 1953) settled in New York in 1922 after a promising career in Moscow. He was a skilled violinist, serving five years in the violin section of the New York Philharmonic and also with the CBS Symphony and the Coolidge String Quartet. As a conductor, he appeared with the Boston Symphony and many of the other major symphony orchestras. His FANTASY was first composed in the version that appears on this recording. A year later, he composed an arrangement for two pianos and orchestra which is also in the repertory of Yarbrough and Cowan. It is in both cases, a big, delightfully splashy work, filled with heroic neoromanticism.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)

