

NEW PIANO MUSIC

ROBERT POLLOCK

BRIDGEFORMS (1972)

Robert Pollock, piano

ALFRED NIEMAN

SONATA NO. 2 (1963)

Alberto Portugheis, piano

This album contains examples of two important styles of 20th century piano composition, one American, the other British. Both are grandiose, but in separate ways — the Pollock being cast in brief, intense, complex movements, the Nieman in expansive and rather romantic ones. Both make heavy demands upon the performer, the Nieman in the grand rhetoric of European virtuoso concert playing; the Pollock in the precise, condensed manner of post-Webern serialism. Both works provide increasing pleasure with repeated listening.

ROBERT POLLOCK (b. New York, 1946) got his B.A. in music from Swarthmore College and his M.F.A. in composition from Princeton, and has started winning the awards (a Guggenheim Fellowship) and commissions (the National Endowment for the Arts) that are today's equivalent of the private patronage of earlier musical history. His *STRING QUARTET* is recorded on CRI SD 265. He writes:

“BRIDGEFORMS (1972) comprises a group of eight pieces: I — with great energy, II — agitated, III — melancholy, IV — march, V — expressively, VI — slow, somber, VII — delicately, VIII — dance.

“The pitch and interval content, registral sweep and total attack rhythm of the first six notes of Piece I are the matrix of the entire group of pieces. Piece II begins with the same six-note series. Its continuity is based upon new linear and chordal projections of that series. The climactic point of Piece III is immediately preceded by the series sweeping in a registral order opposite that of the beginning of Piece I. Piece IV begins with the series as simultaneity and in transposition. It ends similarly to the way Piece V begins; namely, with statements of the series as two successive trichords. Piece V is built around this trichord progression. Piece VI begins with the series in augmentation and transposition. The last chord of the piece forms the framework for the second arpeggiated chord of the next piece. Piece VII is an elaboration of the four trichords which begin the middle section of Piece I. Piece VIII contains the series in diminution (as dotted sixteenth notes) and in subdivision. The last section of Piece VIII echoes the third, B-D-sharp, which begins the middle section of Piece IV. Its tempo is the same as that of Piece I. The six-note series occurs linearly, in registral sweep and as final chord in closed spacing.

“The pieces are straightforward formally, characterized by a confluence of maximum dynamic intensity and registral expansion with large-scale metric accent. These points of confluence as well as the continual use of the six-note series form the connections between pieces.”

ALFRED NIEMAN's father was Russian, his mother Polish. They fled the Russian revolution on a White Russian passport and settled in London, where Alfred was born. He was encouraged in music by his mother. He began to make music at the piano when he was seven and began to compose when he was ten. He has always improvised, he says. He was almost put off piano by his first teacher, who hit his hands to punish mistakes. His next teacher was more tolerant.

The Nieman family was large and Alfred had to leave school at the age of 14 to find work. His first job was as a relief pianist in a silent film theatre. He was so impressionable that his first glimpse of Lon Chaney terrorized him to the point where he thereafter could not bear to look at the screen. To escape from the boredom of countless repetitions of the film scores, he improvised accompaniments. A pianist from the cinema orchestra suggested he study at the Royal Academy of Music. "What's that?" Alfred asked. He entered a competition and tied with Moura Lympany for the Ada Lewis Scholarship. He was only 15 and the required age was 18, but an accommodation was made. His first year at the Royal Academy he won a 20 Pound Sterling prize for composition, which represented "a fortune" to him. He won a second scholarship, and at the end of that year he went to Rome by special permission from the Royal Academy. When he was 17 he returned to the Academy with sharper critical attitudes and a wider idea of style. He won third and fourth year scholarships, and also won the Corder prize for composition and the MacFarren gold medal for piano. He made his concert debut at Queen's Hall at the age of 19, and received excellent notices.

Throughout his six years at the Royal Academy, despite scholarships and prizes, Alfred had to take outside work to support himself and assist his family. Constant exhaustion plagued him, and he eventually realized that he could never afford the costs of launching himself as a concert pianist. He also recognized a stronger impulse to compose. He left the Academy to take odd jobs, still playing in theaters or with dance hands, until the outbreak of World War II. His health was too poor for active duty, so he joined ENSA, the entertainment service for soldiers. Through this he came to work for the BBC, where he continued as performer and arranger until 1947, when he left to join the faculty of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama at the invitation of the Principal who had heard Nieman's *First Piano Sonata* performed by Irene Kohler at an International Society for Contemporary Music concert. Nieman then looked forward to concentrating on composition. However, a debilitating illness overtook him from 1950 to 1957, during which time he was unable to compose.

Since his recovery, he has been composing actively. His work is played frequently in Britain and recently he has had numerous performances in the USA. His most recent composition is *Meditation on Paradise Regained* which was commissioned by the British Arts Council for the Milton Festival. He is, in 1975, at work on a major symphonic work and is Professor of Composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He is involved through improvisation with music therapy and is also consultant for the National Association of Gifted Children. He is married, has two sons, and lives in Hampstead. This is his first recording.

- biographical notes by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

Hepzibah Menuhin has supplied the following comments on Nieman's SONATA NO. 2:

"The physical structure of this SONATA is more easily described than its impact on the listener. Its daring sequences are a powerful challenge to both ear and mind within the orderly development of a beautifully balanced framework. This is not a work in quest of originality but an original work by an inspired composer who is also a master craftsman.

"Though meant as a sonata, the work makes no use of sonata form as such. A twelve note row is used to trigger off contrasted ideas in the first movement (*Fantasia*). The conflict of these ideas evokes a dramatic thrust which generates an impressive climax. The following Passacaglia exploits the same row, this time strictly, building a series of variations on the subject which moves through different transpositions. Fiery variations in the middle resolved to a quiet ending.

"The last movement is built on clusters and the principle of the tone-row as girder. It is called *Music of Changes* because the nature of the music changes with each girder. There are twelve sections and a coda, which returns contemplatively to the first ideas of the *Fantasia*."

The SONATA is dedicated to Robin Jessel.

ALBERTO PORTUGHEIS was born in La Plata, Argentina, of Rumanian parents. He studied first in Buenos Aires, then in Geneva and London. He was first prize winner of the Geneva Virtuosity Competition and has been a soloist with orchestras all over Europe, Israel and the Americas.

The Pollock recording was made possible by a grant from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc., and the Nieman by a grant from the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation.

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)