

AMERICAN HISTORIC: THE PIANO SONATA

YVAR MIKHASHOFF, pianist

HUNTER JOHNSON **PIANO SONATA (1948)**

HUNTER JOHNSON (b. 1906, Benson, NC) graduated from the Eastman School of Music in 1929, and later studied with Alfredo Casella in Rome. His awards and honors include the Prix de Rome, two Guggenheim Fellowships and the 1958 award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He has taught theory and composition at the Universities of Michigan and Texas and at Cornell.

Johnson has composed extensively for orchestra and for a wide variety of chamber groups. He is perhaps best known for the music commissioned by Martha Graham for three of her ballets: *Letter to the World*, *Deaths and Entrances* and *The Scarlet Letter*. A concert suite of *Letter to the World* has been widely performed.

The pianist John Kirkpatrick has said that Hunter Johnson's PIANO SONATA is to the South what Charles Ives' *Concord Sonata* is to the North. Johnson writes:

"My music has been variously described as neo-classic, neo-romantic and nationalist. It may be a combination of all three, but I feel that there is little European influence discernible in my music.

The PIANO SONATA was completed in 1934 and was first performed in May of that year in Rome by Pietro Scarpini. It was revised in 1936 and again in 1947-48, just before publication. The revisions were intended to achieve greater clarity, concision and performance practicability.

"The general character of this sonata is somewhat rhapsodic and improvisatory, while following the general outlines of traditional sonata form. The opening theme of the first movement is heard several times in the second movement lyrically transformed, and is a principal unifying element. The last movement is a wildly exuberant scherzo, followed by a coda which includes material from all three movements. A thoroughly assimilated jazz flavor is evident in much of this work. In fact, one critic has described it as the apotheosis of the blues.

"This sonata has been widely performed in this country by John Kirkpatrick and others and throughout Europe by Leonard Mastrogiacomo and Yvar Mikhashoff."

ROBERT PALMER **SECOND PIANO SONATA (1948)**

ROBERT PALMER (b. 1915, Syracuse, NY) received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the Eastman School where he studied piano with Raymond Wilson and composition with Bernard Rogers and Howard Hanson. He also studied with Roy Harris and received a scholarship to study with Aaron Copland at the opening session of Tanglewood during the summer of 1940.

He taught composition, theory and piano at the University of Kansas at Lawrence from 1940 until 1943. Then he went to Cornell University to teach composition and advanced courses in the theory of music; he became Given Foundation Professor of Music Composition there in 1973 and Professor Emeritus in 1980.

He has composed for a variety of media and has received several major awards and commissions. This is his first CRI recording. He writes:

"I finished my *First Piano Sonata* in 1938 and it was played many times by John Kirkpatrick in the years following. I had planned to write several sonatas and started a second one in 1942, but it seemed too open and tonal for the dissonant norms of the time so I laid it aside. Kirkpatrick saw the opening section, and liking it very much, kept after me to finish it. I did so in 1948 as a two-movement, slow-fast conception. I have used this format many times since.

"After finishing the SECOND PIANO SONATA, I made revisions and simplified the notation through frequent discussions with Kirkpatrick — a kind of dialectical process which was one of the most valuable experiences of my life as a composer. His wisdom and patience seem remarkable as I recall this period now.

"The psychological connections between the two movements of the work are somewhat similar to those between a prelude and a fugue: the first movement both prepares for and leads into the second, but has its own distinct character.

"As a pianist, I love the way nineteenth-century composers used the instrument, especially Chopin. I hoped to achieve something of the spacious sound that he and other composers achieved, but in my own twentieth-century language.

"The first movement, *Andante con moto tranquillo*, is in four parts. In the opening section an extended melody is supported by rolling sonorous harmonies. A second contrasting idea, more lyrical and delicate, is then presented. In the third part there is a brief but intense development of the second idea and then a transition, slowing down the accumulated motion, leading into the recapitulation. A short coda, ending with the dominant harmony over a tonic pedal, prepares for the next movement.

"The second movement, *Allegro agitato*, has a compact sonata structure with coda. The first theme is probing and restless; it reaches a high level of energy but quiets suddenly before the second theme. The melody and harmony then create an elegiac atmosphere and the quintuple meter recalls the opening of the first movement. The developmental portion is relatively short, releasing pent-up energy in long arcs with the largest climax occurring just before the return of the first theme.

"The restatement, after some expansion, moves to the second theme, this time on E-flat, a step higher than the D-flat of the exposition. A broad and somewhat introspective coda on the home center of C brings the work to a close."

JACK BEESON

FIFTH PIANO SONATA (1951)

JACK BEESON (b. 1921, Muncie, Indiana) is best known today as a composer of seven operas, but he was introduced to audiences and critics (both here and abroad) as a composer of piano sonatas and songs. Though he played several instruments during his youth, his music studies began with the piano at the age of seven. By the summer of 1946, after five years at the Eastman School and a year of study with Béla Bartók, he had taught for two years at Columbia University (where he still teaches as MacDowell Professor of Music) and had written two piano concertos and seven sonatas for piano. The five numbered sonatas had been composed, one each summer, from 1942 to 1946. These works intrigued a number of pianists, among them Olga Samaroff Stokowski, who distributed copies among

her colleagues and students and arranged for the premieres of the second, third, and fifth sonatas on her series of American music in New York and Washington. The composer explains:

"At the urging of John Kirkpatrick, and with his aid, the FIFTH SONATA was revised in 1951 and then performed repeatedly by Kirkpatrick and other pianists until it fell out of sight and hearing into that special limbo known as 'in publication.' There it remained for twenty years while its benignly resigned publisher informed the fretting composer of the accidental melting of the first set of engraved plates, the dispersal of the second set after the sudden death of its engraver, a threatened bankruptcy, and an occasional misplacement of the manuscript in his cluttered office. The work was eventually rescued by the publication of a facsimile edition of John Kirkpatrick's edited manuscript by the Theodore Presser Co.

"The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, is based on two lyric ideas that are introduced and developed together and seasoned with intermittent simulated trumpets and muffled drums. It has somewhat the same relationship to a conventional sonata-allegro form as does the opening of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, composed a year earlier.

"The second movement, *Adagio*, is a set of ruminations on a theme, both tune and accompaniment occasionally evoking a memory of the blues.

"Trumpets and drums are the colors of the finale, a set of clearly defined variations on a rowdy march theme, which — as it turns out later in the movement — is itself a variation on "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

YVAR MIKHASHOFF is internationally renowned for his performances of American music. The list of American composers who have written for him reads like a *Who's Who*; Mikhashoff also commissions works from many promising young composers. His widespread European activities include playing the key acting-performance role in Sylvano Bussotti's opera, *La Racine*, at La Scala. He is on the faculty of the State University of New York at Buffalo. He dedicates this record, his first on CRI, to the great American pianist, John Kirkpatrick, who gave the first performances of these works.

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)