

CD REVIEWS

American Tone Poems

Louis Coerne *Excalibur* op. 180

Edward Burlingame Hill *Stevensonian* Suite No. 1 op. 24

Horatio Parker *A Northern Ballad* op. 46

John Alden Carpenter *Sea-Drift*

Karl Krueger *cond*
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Bridge Records BRIDGE 9190 (66 minutes: ADD)

Notes in English only.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, the United States prospered and grew into an international industrial giant. As it developed from an outlaw colony into an independent nation of immigrants, it attempted to compete with the Old World not only in commerce but in the arts as well. In New York City, for example, where the third largest German community in the world (after Berlin and Vienna) had become established by the mid-nineteenth century, music played an important role in the daily life of its residents. This development was seen across the country, as German musicians formed numerous orchestras, singing societies and bands, which attempted to compete with their European counterparts.

During much of the nineteenth century, American composers, both native-born and émigré, wrote for the ensembles available to them. Anton Heinrich (1781–1861), who emigrated from Bohemia at the beginning of the century, wrote more than a dozen orchestral works. Charles Hommann (1803–1873), born and trained in Philadelphia, wrote several overtures and a symphony. William Henry Fry (1813–1864), another Philadelphia native, wrote a number of tone poems, including his famous *Santa Claus* symphony, as well as three operas. The compositions of George Frederick Bristow (1825–1898) include four symphonies, an oratorio and an opera, as well as much chamber music. This early generation of composers wrote in a variety of styles: Bristow, for example, in a post-Mendelssohn vein, and Fry in a combined Italian/French style (undoubtedly influenced by the Berlioz he heard while living in Paris). Both Bristow and Fry were honoured by the English Proms conductor and impresario Louis Jullien in the 1850s, when their pieces were performed on his tour of American cities.

As the population of the United States increased dramatically during the 1860s, music took on a new importance. Young men, following the example of John Knowles Paine (1839–1906) and George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931),

could think of musical composition as a career, but to establish their credentials, study in Europe, usually Germany, was a given. Among the many composers born after the Civil War, virtually all went to Europe to study and to learn to compose in the international style. From the mid-1880s to the beginning of World War One, many of their pieces, following current international trends, were given public performance.

After the war, as a new style was evolving, performances became less frequent and then disappeared almost altogether. The general eclipse of this generation of American composers – including MacDowell (1860–1908), Frederick Grant Gleason (1848–1903), Arthur Foote (1853–1937), and Amy Beach (1867–1944) – has been difficult to comprehend. Their work, at its best, is equal to much European music of the period. But this very parity with European compositions seems to be the problem with many contemporary critics: the work not, like Ives or Copland, ‘new’ and ground-breaking. It therefore represents a time when America was beholden to the Old World and, as such, in the minds of the critics, has less value as a primary document of American greatness and uniqueness.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, several conductors tried to reacquaint audiences with this ‘lost’ generation of composers, with varying success. One of the most successful was Karl Krueger (1894–1979), who, after serving as Music Director of a number of American orchestras (Seattle Symphony [1925–32], Kansas City Philharmonic [1933–43], and Detroit Symphony [1943–49]), established the Society for the Preservation of the American Musical Heritage in 1958. Krueger undertook to record a representative selection of American pieces, including two symphonies by Bristow, the *Macbeth* overture by Fry, symphonies by Beach and Hadley, and shorter works by Farwell, MacDowell, Herbert, George Templeton Strong and William Grant Still, among others. The works on this Bridge CD were released originally between 1966 and 1969. Long unavailable, they are a most welcome return to the catalogue.

The best-known composer on this CD is Horatio Parker (1863–1919), whose negative fame is tied to his role as Charles Ives’s teacher at Yale. Used mostly as a tradition-bound foil for his most famous student’s unorthodox compositions, Parker’s music has been little studied and performed. A student of Chadwick and Rheinberger, Parker completed *A Northern Ballad* in 1899; it received many performances during his lifetime but has never been published. It provides a useful stylistic contrast to his best-known (and still frequently performed) choral work, *Hora Novissima* (1893). While he uses a traditional sonata form to serve for the basic structure of this 14-minute tone poem, there are numerous details, such as the complementary beautiful introduction and coda, that demonstrate his compositional skills and imaginative use of form. Though Parker is often accused of composing in the shadow of Wagner, *A Northern Ballad* shows him as a composer much more in the post-Wagnerian mode, along with Delius and especially Dvořák as known through the late tone poems.

The reputation today of Edward Burlingame Hill (1872–1960) is likewise based on his role as a teacher at Harvard, where his students included Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson and Elliott Carter. A student of Paine and Chadwick, Hill did not go to Germany for his Old World education, but to Paris, where he studied with Charles-Marie Widor. His music shows a decidedly French influence; his lectures on French Impressionism after the war brought him to the American Conservatory and Nadia Boulanger, the school of choice for young composers during the years between the wars, as well as after World War Two. Hill’s first suite on poems from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses*

was composed in 1916–17. Its four movements are ‘March’, ‘The Land of Nod’, ‘Where go the Boats’ and ‘The Unseen Playmate’. Though Hill called his piece a suite, there is a sense that he was really thinking in terms of a four-movement symphony, since the movements correspond to the traditional form – two fast outer movements (though not in sonata form) in F major that surround an Andante in D major and Scherzo in B). His music is delicately scored and harmonically complex. The Andante lullaby is the most impressionistic of the four movements, demonstrating a French sensibility akin to Fauré, while the last movement, in particular, evokes Delius in both its harmonic shifts and melodic contours.

Louis Coerne (1870–1922) is the least known of the American composers represented on this disk. After studying at Harvard with Paine, he went to Germany to study with Rheinberger. Coerne made several trips to Germany before settling down in the USA to serve as director of several music schools. His prolific output of more than 500 works includes an opera, several concertos, symphonic poems, many choral works, and chamber music. *Excalibur* is scored for large orchestra and shows Coerne’s orchestrational skills, no doubt a result of the earlier studies that led to his being awarded the first PhD in music at an American university for his 1905 dissertation ‘The Evolution of Modern Orchestration’. Although the liner notes suggest that this 1921 tone poem is strongly influenced by Wagner and Liszt, I believe it is more contemporary German in character – with an undercurrent of parallelisms and other French compositional devices in use. The audacious whole-tone opening and the contrapuntal writing throughout the piece evoke an amalgam of a Mahler and pre-atonal Schoenberg idiom.

The final work on this disk is *Sea Drift*, by John Alden Carpenter (1876–1951), best known today for his two ballets: the jazz-infused *Krazy Kat* (1921), based on the comic strip by George Herriman, and *Skyscrapers* (1925). *Sea Drift* is a later, somewhat nostalgic, work, dating from 1933 and revised in 1942; it is almost 17 minutes in length but, because of its amorphous structure, seems a bit longer. After an impressive atmospheric beginning, it settles into predictable patterns that lack the invention of some of his earlier pieces, and it occasionally sounds like a pale imitation of Debussy. Of all the works heard on this disk, it strikes me as the weakest in terms of its individual voice.

Perhaps the availability of these pieces will inspire some conductors to explore the many paths taken by American composers active at the turn of the twentieth century. Surely, as is exemplified by the works on the disk, there are symphonies and symphonic poems that are worthy of being heard today performed by a first-class ensemble. These are not works that should be relegated to the dustbins of old music. Without knowing some of this vast literature, it is virtually impossible to understand how music developed in the United States from its beginnings to the present. The reissues of the Society’s recordings are truly valuable for making these pieces once again available; I hope that they will inspire some conductors to investigate the rich heritage of American orchestral music that lies waiting to be rediscovered.

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