

Journal of the Society for American Music (2010) Volume 4, Number 3, pp. 377–378.
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Mark O'Connor. *Americana Symphony* "Variations on Appalachia Waltz." OMAC Records, 2009.

The latest CD release by violinist/composer Mark O'Connor contains two full-length orchestral works. The first, *Americana Symphony* "Variations on Appalachia Waltz," is performed by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra with Marin Alsop conducting. The second, Concerto No. 6 "Old Brass," features O'Connor as violin soloist with the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, Joel Smirnoff, conductor. The composer has also included detailed notes for each symphony movement and a synopsis of the concerto.

Mark O'Connor began his musical career as a contest-style fiddler, winning multiple national fiddling titles at the junior and adult levels by the time he was eighteen years old. He moved to Nashville and quickly became one of the country's most sought-after studio musicians, performing on hundreds of major label recordings. As a performer, his interests include traditional American old-time fiddling, Texas swing, jazz, blues, "new acoustic" music, bluegrass, and classical. His ability to perform and improvise with complete fluency in numerous styles is impressive, and he has proven to be a virtuoso of the highest caliber.

Although O'Connor composed his own tunes for many of his early solo recordings, it was not until the early 1990s that he began expanding his compositional output to include full-scale orchestral works written within traditional classical forms. With the release of his Fiddle Concerto No. 1, O'Connor began his journey into the classical music world. His many subsequent releases represent, to varying degrees, a blending of his vast experience with multiple musical genres.

The *Americana Symphony* is a set of variations built on motives and themes extracted from O'Connor's composition "Appalachia Waltz." The six monothematic movements are designed to paint varied pictures of the American experience. O'Connor is an admitted admirer of the music of Aaron Copland, and that influence is evident throughout the work. Many of the movements would provide an appropriate score for a Hollywood western, with their overt nationalistic themes, pentatonic scales, and open harmonies.

Although the overall impact of the work is effective, the slower movements (I, III, V, VI) tend to stretch the motivic material to the breaking point, wandering for a few extra minutes in the middle with little direction. The pleasing melodies and lush harmonies would create a beautiful backdrop for visual imagery, but I am not certain these movements hold the listener's interest as stand-alone instrumental works. The up-tempo movements (II, IV), however, display some of O'Connor's most inventive writing, and these are well placed within the work as a whole. The rhythmic playfulness of the *Open Plains Hoedown* displays O'Connor's complete knowledge of this style. Many old-time musicians drop beats at random throughout a tune, resulting in a rhythmic effect called "crooked." O'Connor has brought this improvised feel to the phrase structure of this movement, tipping the hat to his musical ancestors. Both of these movements could be extracted from the work as a

whole and performed individually as welcome additions to any concert program. Having conducted many of O'Connor's works, Alsop clearly has a feel for his style. The orchestra's performance is strong, and the recording quality complements the full scoring and open quality of the music.

The other work on this disc, Concerto No. 6 "Old Brass," was written while O'Connor was visiting a plantation in South Carolina built by Frank Lloyd Wright. He comments in his notes on the impact of the surrounding architecture and nature on each movement. O'Connor employs traditional tonal harmonies, repetitive melodies, and consistent motoric rhythms throughout the concerto. The sound is rich, and the music is accessible. O'Connor's performance is, as always, superb, and the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Joel Smirnoff provides a spirited accompaniment.

As in the *Americana Symphony*, the first two movements of the "Old Brass" concerto tend to focus on a single melodic motive. The short theme of the first movement is memorable, but at the same time it fails to hold the listener's attention for its entire eleven-minute duration. The second movement begins with a lovely new melody, followed a minute later by the theme from the first movement. Again, although the sound of the orchestra and soloist is wonderful, this movement, at just over ten minutes, feels like too much of a good thing. The final movement features the full virtuosic capabilities of O'Connor. Following five minutes of fugal material, he improvises a lengthy cadenza. Rapid-fire sextuplets, complex string crossings, crisp staccato, and lightning-fast scales flow from his instrument with ease. Even in the most challenging passages, his tone remains elegant, supple, and evocative. Compositionally, he again chooses to draw his melodic ideas for the cadenza from the first movement. An improvisation on the fugue theme would have offered greater variety.

This disc offers a welcome introduction to the music of O'Connor. With the *Americana Symphony*, he has created a modern symphonic work reminiscent of many of the orchestral works of Aaron Copland while adding personal touches of his own. For his fans, as well as interested musicians unfamiliar with him, Concerto No. 6 provides plenty of exposure to O'Connor's unique virtuosic playing.

Andy Carlson



Journal of the Society for American Music (2010) Volume 4, Number 3, pp. 378–380.
© The Society for American Music 2010 doi:10.1017/S1752196310000234

Lewis Nielson. *Écritures*. The Twittering Machine, Timothy Weiss, conductor. Centaur Records, CRC 2941, 2008.

The role of tone color as a compositional tool has evolved greatly over the last century. Once an element capable of shaping and enhancing a form, it is now, for many composers, an element from which form can derive. Whereas this progressive perspective has traditionally been more prevalent in Europe than in North