

RECORDING REVIEWS

Samuel Barber: The Complete Solo Piano Music. John Browning, piano. Nimbus Records NI 2528 (2009).

This Nimbus recording, a rerelease of *Samuel Barber: The Complete Solo Piano Music* issued by MusicMasters in 1993, features performances by pianist John Browning of Barber's Sonata (1949), *Interlude No. 1* (1931–32), *Nocturne* ("Homage to John Field") (1959), *Ballade* (1977), and *Excursions* (1942–44), in that order, with liner notes by K. Robert Schwartz. Ruth Laredo recorded a similar compilation in 1981, followed in the 1990s not only by this one by Browning, but still others by Jeffrey Jacob, Eric Parkin, Daniel Pollack, and Lilia Boyadjieva, a fair indication of how established a composer Barber has become. Although similarly titled, these recordings vary somewhat in their actual content, with Browning's release, at fifty-five minutes, on the slim side. Pollack's more circumspectly titled *Samuel Barber: Complete Published Piano Music* (on Naxos) actually contains, in addition to the forecited pieces, two works absent from the Browning release, namely, *Three Sketches* (1923–24), an early work, and *Souvenirs*, a piano duet (1951) arranged by the composer for solo piano (1952). Meanwhile, Boyadjieva's recording (on Solstice), although missing *Souvenirs*, features unpublished music not found elsewhere, including *Interlude No. 2*.

All of these compilations have as their centerpiece, of course, the Sonata, one of Barber's most ambitious works, and one regarded by some as America's greatest contribution to the genre. Considering such rivals as the piano sonatas of Ives, Sessions, Copland, and Carter, this assertion remains debatable. The first movement of Barber's four-movement effort, although tautly constructed from the tiniest two-note gesture, especially loses traction from time to time. But the piece's dash, alternating between flashy virtuosity and romantic brooding, has helped ensure it a secure place in the repertoire, and the work, for all its technical challenges, probably has been performed and recorded more often than any other American piano sonata.

The smaller piano pieces, like the composer's songs, very possibly show him to better advantage, especially the exuberant *Excursions* and the lovely *Nocturne*. In contrast, the dullish *Interlude No. 1*—subtitled here "Adagio for Jeanne" after the work's dedicatee, Jeanne Behrend, who premiered the piece as part of "Two Intermezzi for Piano"—still shows signs of immaturity, not least in its echoes of Chopin and Brahms. The *Nocturne* and the *Ballade*, although far more mature, still embrace Chopin, Browning stating with regard to the former, which he premiered, "I think Sam was paying tribute, not so much to John Field as to Chopin"¹ Like the Sonata, this *Nocturne* flirts with twelve-tone melody, although the music bears a stronger stylistic resemblance to Richard Strauss than to Schoenberg. Barber wrote his final piano piece, the haunting *Ballade* ("restless"), an intriguing example of his late style, for the Van Cliburn Competition.

¹ Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 402.

After the moody and somewhat overripe *Interlude*, *Nocturne*, and *Ballade*, not to mention the Sonata, the *Excursions*—described by composer as “‘Excursions’ in small classical forms into regional American idioms”²—comes as a breath of fresh air. Barber combined the folkloric strain exhibited here with his more natural introspection to create what many consider his masterpiece, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1947, rev. 1949), and he might have done well to have tapped this vein more often.

A student of Rosina Lhévinne’s at Juilliard, Browning, according to Barber biographer Barbara Heyman, met the composer in 1956 and immediately impressed him with his playing, so much so that Barber had Browning premiere his Piano Concerto in 1962.³ But Browning’s work here disappoints, at least relative to the rival Barber recordings. His account of the Sonata falters as compared, say, to those two classic recordings of the work by Vladimir Horowitz (RCA, 1950), who debuted the piece, and Van Cliburn (RCA, 1967); he simply does not have their amazing facility, an obvious limitation in a piece that depends so much on sheer bravura for its effectiveness. His performance particularly pales beside Cliburn’s, perhaps the best that I’ve encountered, although Walter Simmons, in a 1999 review for *Fanfare*, deems Lilia Boyadjieva’s “the most fully realized performance of the Piano Sonata on disc.”⁴ (Horowitz’s interpretation, for all its brilliance, seems stylistically off-kilter, making the piece sound, at times, too much like Scriabin.)

Even Browning’s renditions of the smaller pieces seem largely serviceable, except for the *Ballade* and the second movement of *Excursions* (in “slow blues tempo”), which are so slow and mannered as to try one’s patience. All in all, his interpretations arguably would profit from a more regular pulse, a lighter, more fleet tone, a greater control of middle voices and formal structure, and—as true of many Barber performances—a softer dynamic range and a greater sense of poetry, atmosphere, and color.

As in the case of Prokofiev, whose piano music bears some resemblance to Barber’s, pianists can easily fall into the pitfall of brutalizing this repertoire. Browning is far from the worst culprit in this respect, and the performances given here offer many felicities, including distinctive ways of articulating and voicing the music that might prove useful to students. Given Browning’s close personal association with the composer, this release naturally has historical importance as well. However, for the best performances of these pieces on record, one might look elsewhere.

Howard Pollack



² Samuel Barber, *Excursions* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1945).

³ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 402.

⁴ Walter Simmons, review of compact disc *Barber: Complete Published Solo Piano Music*, performed by Daniel Pollack, *Fanfare* 22/6 (July/August 1999): 108–12.