

MEDIA REVIEWS

Henry Kimball Hadley, *Salome*, *Scherzo Diabolique*, *San Francisco*, *Othello Overture*, *The Enchanted Castle Overture*, *Cleopatra's Night*. BBC Concert Orchestra, Rebecca Miller, conductor. Dutton Epoch CDLX 7319, 2014, CD.

When telling the story of U.S. orchestral music from the first half of the twentieth century, we tend to shine the spotlight on composers whose innovations contributed to the development of a uniquely “American” sound. Overshadowed are composers deemed stylistically conservative or too closely aligned with Austro-German traditions. As a result, few contemporary recordings exist of the latter repertoire. Boston-born composer and conductor Henry Kimball Hadley (1871–1937), appreciated as an important American composer during his lifetime but under-recognized today, is one of these often-overlooked figures. He strove to emulate European late-Romantic idioms in his compositions, a conservative approach during a time when the likes of Charles Ives, George Gershwin, and Aaron Copland were beginning to experiment with new sonorities and tonalities in an attempt to develop an American classical music. Listening to Hadley alongside these composers throws into relief just how closely aligned he was to his European teachers and role models, as he seemed to see no problem with emulating figures like Richard Strauss and Johannes Brahms. Yet, few contemporary recordings of Hadley’s compositions exist, making it difficult for listeners to assess his music on its own terms. Evidence suggests that he was received as more compositionally adventurous during his lifetime than he is today, and that he was considered one of America’s most important composers. The positive response of his audiences should prompt us to at least give composers like Hadley a listen.

Rebecca Miller deftly conducts the BBC Concert Orchestra on a new recording of Hadley’s works that until now have not been available to modern listeners. The compositions included on this album reveal a composer who skillfully navigated diverse musical styles and had a gift for orchestration and orchestral color. Hearing this selection reinforces assumptions about his late-Romantic tendencies, although some moments reveal hints of a more adventurous, modern musical style.

This beautiful recording consists of world premiere releases, plus his tone poem *Salome*, the earliest composition on the album, composed in 1909.¹ The majority of works included are later compositions, unlike the few previous Hadley recordings, which primarily focus on his earlier works. The selections offer a sense of the scope, range, and diversity of his compositional style. The album also highlights Hadley’s ability to musically depict a range of scenes, featuring a diversity of moods and tones indicated by his often-descriptive and programmatic titles. His choice of source material, including Oscar Wilde, Théophile Gautier, Edith Nesbit, and William Shakespeare, is further evidence of his European cultural influences.

¹ *Scherzo Diabolique* has previously been recorded by the Albany Symphony Orchestra in 1984, although it is listed as a world premiere on the album jacket. (See Albany Symphony Orchestra, *Carpenter/Hadley/Mason/Porter*, Julius Hegyi, conductor, New World Records, NW 321-2, 1984).

Hadley's tone poem *Salome* was written while in Europe, right after Strauss's more famous opera. According to Hadley, he did not hear Strauss's opera until after he wrote his version, although he did know and admire Strauss. His approach to the story is engaging, particularly the dramatic, chromatic movement, "Salome's Tanz"; but when compared with Strauss's version, its dramatic impact feels somewhat underwhelming. Hadley's talent with orchestral color comes through, though, particularly in the dramatic final minutes of the *Più lento* movement.

Othello Overture (1919) and *The Enchanted Castle* (1933) are the two most musically conservative compositions on the recording, both harmonically and structurally traditional. *The Enchanted Castle*, written for school orchestras, begins with hymn-like restraint that is maintained throughout, although at times it evokes classical Hollywood film music in its romantic expressiveness. The tone poem *Othello Overture* begins somberly and exercises a wide dramatic range over the course of its fifteen minutes. The intermezzo from his opera *Cleopatra's Night* (1918) sounds like a textbook example of late-nineteenth-century exoticism, with its rhythmic ostinato, flute solo, and prominent harp arpeggios, although very beautifully executed. Hadley allegedly visited cafes and theaters in Cairo in order to find source material for the opera but "found it all so crude and primitive and atrociously out of tune" that he left and instead went "to seek inspiration from nature."² *Scherzo Diabolique*, composed in 1934 to depict a harrowing car ride, is dramatic and exciting, with dynamic extremes and a driving mechanistic tempo that Bret Johnson, in his program notes for the recording, likens to Paul Dukas, Arthur Honegger, and George Antheil (although the connection for the latter two perhaps has more to do with the modern subject upon which it was based than any specific compositional affinities).

The work on the recording that I found most engaging was the 1931 suite, *San Francisco*, an homage to the city where he served as a conductor from 1911 to 1915. In this work, Hadley ventured into slightly more modernist musical territory, and he also strove to connect his composition to a specifically American setting. The first movement, "The Harbor," depicts the fog, ships' horns, birdcalls, and other sounds of the harbor, which Herbert Boardman in 1932 labeled "impressionistic" and an experiment in "ultra-modern harmonies."³ Indeed, although more tonally adventurous than his other works on the recording, the movement sounds almost neoclassical in spots. His second movement, "Chinese Quarter," evokes Chinese opera, although it is not clear how much first-hand experience Hadley had with traditional Chinese music. The quiet percussion ostinato paired with woodwind solos makes it the most restrained of the three movements. The final movement, "Mardi Gras," an upbeat, raucous dance number, rounds out the piece nicely. A highlight of the recording, *San Francisco* suite would make a wonderful addition to orchestral concert programs of American music.

In short, this recording makes an exciting contribution to the orchestral repertoire of the early twentieth-century U.S., offering listeners a chance to hear more works

² Henry Hadley, quoted in Herbert R. Boardman, *Henry Hadley: Ambassador of Harmony* (University of Emory, GA: Banner Press, 1932), 132.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

by one of the most successful American composers of his day. The recording quality is excellent, and the programming choice effectively demonstrates Hadley's compositional range. Bret Johnson's program notes contextualize Hadley's compositions, both within his particular milieu and more broadly within the classical music canon. At times, Johnson draws connections that are a bit of a stretch when comparing some of Hadley's works to those of Honegger, Antheil, and Gershwin, perhaps in an attempt to rescue him from his reputation as old guard and anti-modernist. Although some may find reason for critique in Hadley's stylistic diversity—as a sign of a derivative composer without a strong compositional voice—his skill for orchestration and his deft stylistic variety makes for an interesting recording and helps to build a serious case for inclusion of Hadley's works on more orchestral programming, if not as a highly original American modernist, then at least as a skilled late-Romanticist.

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Ben Johnston: String Quartets Nos. 6, 7 & 8. Kepler String Quartet. New World 80730-2, 2016, CD.

To my knowledge, no other contemporary American composer has cultivated the genre of string quartet as vastly as has Ben Johnston (b. 1926), who produced ten works that span a period of nearly fifty years.¹ Johnston, a proponent of extended microtonality, has reconciled his eclectic interests in just intonation, serialism, neo-classicism, minimalism, vernacular music, jazz, rock, and hymnody within his stage and dance music, orchestral and chamber pieces, electronic and aleatoric music, and particularly his string quartets. In the latter, he has exploited the intonational potentials of string instruments far beyond the already-established idioms of the genre. Somewhat different from the groundbreaking technological experiments of his composition colleagues at the University of Illinois, Johnston—a pupil of Darius Milhaud, Harry Partch, and John Cage—embraced the pioneering spirit so predominant at this institution, posing an essential question: “What might the European music have been like, had the idea of temperament been rejected?”²

¹ Although Samuel Barber, Henry Cowell, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Elliott Carter, Conlon Nancarrow, George Crumb, and George Perle composed string quartets, they do not rival the scope of Johnston's contributions. He composed his Quartet no. 1 in 1951 and Quartet no. 10 in 1995.

² Ben Johnston, “Autobiographical Lecture,” filmed [April 2006], YouTube Video, 1:41:06, posted [November 2010], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIXIOTTYpHY>. Composition faculty at the University of Illinois—including Lejaren Hiller, Herbert Brün, Salvatore Martirano, and James W. Beuchamp—developed compositional methods with algorithms, computers, and various electronic devices.