

 Symphonic Jazz: Grofé & Gershwin

Review by Uncle Dave Lewis

Bridge Records' *Symphonic Jazz: Ferde Grofé and George Gershwin* brings to American audiences state-of-the-art recordings featuring some of the most important American concert literature in instrumentation relatively few have heard. This material – music by Ferde Grofé and George Gershwin – is "important" because it represents the most successful and seamless fusion of American Popular Music elements and classical concert music in history. While one cannot be blamed for feeling that Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* is overexposed, many other outstanding works that arose out of Paul Whiteman's desire to combine the music that saved his life with the concert idiom that represented his roots have received comparatively little attention. This legacy has likewise been obscured by the practical necessity of symphony orchestras to reshape such symphonic jazz, initially written for expanded dance bands with saxophone sections in addition to strings, into a scoring made to suit their standard configuration. In such re-orchestrations, the banjo part and saxes go out the window and details such as the distinctive mutes used by the brass are absent. Luckily, all of the *Whiteman Orchestra's* original orchestrations – even ones they did not necessarily play – are kept on file at Williams College in Massachusetts, and these provide the source material for these new interpretations by the *New York Harmonie Ensemble* under Steven Richman. This group has distinguished itself through an outstanding recording of some of Copland's music in seldom-heard "original instruments" configurations.



Featured Artist
Steven Richman
Performance Sound
★★★★★ ★★★★★
Release Date Time
2006 63:42
Label
Bridge[9212]
AMG Album ID
W 145532

Perhaps the most "original" instrument featured on *Symphonic Jazz: Ferde Grofé and George Gershwin* is saxophonist Al Gallodoro, who at 93 is one of the last survivors of the *Paul Whiteman Orchestra*. He plays a lovely little tidbit written for him by Grofé entitled *Gallodoro's Serenade* with Lincoln Mayorga, and Gallodoro's performance stands as proof that musicianship is one area where some humans are able to defy age and its infirmities – you would never know that the player is in his nineties. The disc also includes Grofé's version of Gershwin's *Second Rhapsody*, a work too often heard in a cut-down, sanitized orchestration made after Gershwin's death. The Grofé works, *Mississippi Suite* and *Grand Canyon Suite*, are also heard in scores that originate from Williams. The claim that this *Harmonie Ensemble* recording is the "first complete recording" of the original *Grand Canyon Suite* is hard to establish, as Holland's the *Metropole Orchestra* has also recorded it for Basta on a disc called *Tabloid Suite*. Ultimately, who cares? These recordings by the *Harmonie Ensemble* are fabulously well made and provide the perfect antidote to Wynton Marsalis' pig-headed comment "Well, what do you expect from someone who calls himself a 'white man?'" Absolute glory, if one makes a judgment utilizing Bridge Records' amazing *Symphonic Jazz: Ferde Grofé and George Gershwin* as a yardstick.