

International Record Review (England) September, 2004

Copland: Music for the Theatre, Two Ballads for Violin and Piano, Elegies for Violin and Viola, El Salón México (arranged Toscanini); Appalachian Spring Suite (original version). Bridge CD 9145

Steven Richman, conductor; Harmonie Ensemble/New York.

Eugene Drucker, violin; Lawrence Dutton, viola; Diane Walsh, piano

Comparison: El Salón México (2-piano version): Goldina, Loumbrozo (Phoenix CD)

Music for the Theatre: New York Philharmonic, Bernstein 1958 (Sony)

Appalachian Spring: Copland, Columbia Chamber Orchestra (Sony-deleted)

This inspires more national pride than a dozen speeches from the current powers-that-be. Perhaps that is because **this music-making has a gentle modesty – and honesty – lacking in today’s socio-political climate.**

Curiosities abound; there are two first recordings. The genesis of the *Two Ballads* is an abortive violin concerto Copland began writing for Isaac Stern in 1957. The sketches lay unused until 1986, when Phillip Ramey and Bennett Lerner saw them and asked the composer’s permission to use them as the basis of two short works for violin and piano. Copland agreed (and supplied the title), and here is the result. The *Ballads* are hardly half-baked. Although it is sad to think of the concerto that never was, there’s joy in these miniatures. Eugene Drucker (of the Emerson String Quartet) and Diane Walsh play them beautifully.

The other premiere recording is of a solo piano version of *El Salón México* – arranged by none other than Arturo Toscanini! Apparently he did so for his personal use, to assist him in preparing *El Salón México* for orchestral performance. The arrangement is idiomatic and Walsh plays it with rhythmic verve and nostalgia. (Leonard Bernstein’s interesting two-piano transcription is on the Phoenix CD listed above.)

The *Elegies for violin and viola* (1932, revised 1933) are little known. They are spare but not minor; here is Copland at his most lean – almost Quakerish. Drucker and fellow Emersonian Lawrence Dutton give them their worth.

Roy Harris appreciatively dubbed *Music for the Theatre* “whorehouse music”; some claim that it was Copland’s first truly American work. **Hearing it played by an ensemble that conceivably could squeeze into a theatre pit is a pleasure! Here, it is both raunchy and naïve – surely what Copland had in mind! Next to this, Bernstein’s well-liked recording lacks nuance.** The disc closes with the *Suite from Appalachian Spring* in its original scoring for 13 musicians – a genuine accommodation to the small pit in the Library of Congress’s auditorium. It might have been more authentic to record the entire ballet (as Copland did), but all the important music is here, so I’ll be quiet. **Here, it is played with tender loving care, and none of the bombast which often cheapens the “Simple Gifts” climax.**

Benjamin Folkman’s complete annotations and Adam Abeshouse’s lifelike engineering add stature to an already important CD. Those who remember LP’s from the 1950’s may do a double-take at the cover design. Alex Steinweiss designed thousands of record covers “way back when” and Bridge has had the great fortune of rediscovering him. It was a joy to see his great looping letters again, and his faux-naïve figures cavorting against the expanse (albeit reduced from the LP era!) of the booklet cover!

Raymond S. Tuttle