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COPLAND: Music for the Theatre; 2 Ballads; Elegies; El Salon Mexico; Appalachian Spring

Eugene Drucker, v; Lawrence Dutton, va; Diane Walsh, p; Harmonie Ensemble New York/
Steven Richman--Bridge 9145--68 minutes

Two selections on this **stunning album** are premiere recordings. The Two Ballads for violin and piano are arrangements, done with Copland's approval, of extracts from a violin concerto he never completed. They are only two to three minutes each, but they're **soulfully romantic, very lovely, and deeply expressive** in the hands of Eugene Drucker (of the Emerson Quartet) and Diane Walsh, especially with engineering that is not only warm and balanced but delivers **the fullest and best recorded piano sound from top to bottom of the keyboard that I've ever heard.**

That same sound pervades Walsh's **awesome premiere recording of Toscanini's piano arrangement of El Salon Mexico.** Yes, I was skeptical too, but once I pushed the play button I was bowled over by how Walsh captures the lazy laconic gait, the cadenza-like flourishes, and the ever-so-slightly held back tango-like rhythms of the first dance. Stripped down to just the piano, it's even more of a revelation how richly Copland captured those dance-hall rhythms in his original orchestration. Part of Walsh's secret is her pedaling, which manages to extend a half-note or whole note for just one measure at a time, making it the base or foundation of that moment. And, as she approaches the ending, the tempo, which picks up almost imperceptibly, sweeps you up into a gripping finale. I've always thought that Leonard Bernstein's New York Philharmonic recording (the one on Sony) was unsurpassable. Well, in one amazing pianist he's met his match.

If that doesn't tempt you, try the following few remarks on Steven Richman's performance of one of my least favorite Copland pieces, **Music for the Theatre. The first movement opens with a terrifically slinky and supremely smooth trumpet fanfare. In II there's the sexiest Gershwin-esque clarinet playing you've ever heard. Then there's an English horn opening to III that's filled with longing, followed by a clarinet and trumpet, whose vibratos draw out the emotion even further. In all five movements the stellar playing is smooth and warm, pungent and edgy, and rhythmically hot. Add a rich recording and this is the best performance of this work I've ever heard, recorded or in concert,** because the Harmonie Ensemble makes music of a work that normally lies somewhere between "ideas that never worked" and "cute".

It's the Suite from Appalachian Spring that's performed here, but with Copland's original instrumentation for 13 players. **Not only is the playing just as superb, but Richman's brilliance as a conductor becomes crystal-clear: his capacity for multi-level dynamics that subtly join one another in the tenderest manner, his supple flow, pinpointed rhythms, and his ability to create atmosphere. There's one point about 13 minutes in where, for the bride's solo dance, the pace quickens ever so slightly--it is simply brilliant, something I've never attended to before. It's so alive it'd quicken the dead.** And over it all, for the first time I realize how the piano is in many passages the base (the bass, even) for this chamber orchestra version, especially given the consummate style of the orchestra's pianist, John Van Buskirk.

Also included is a rare recording of the Elegies for violin and viola (Lawrence Dutton also is a member of the Emerson Quartet), a six-minute work from 1932 intensely constructed and performed, and touched with tenderness and warmth.

In short, in every way this is **an extraordinary album filled with discoveries.**