

Cedille Records
CDR 90000 010

MUSIC IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN

John LaMontaine: Piano Sonata, Op. 3
Robert Palmer: Third Sonata
Hunter Johnson: Piano Sonata
Paul Bowles: Six Latin American Pieces
Carretera de Estepona

RAMON SALVATORE, PIANO

MUSIC IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN

- 1-3** LaMontaine: Piano Sonata, Op. 3 (13:00)
- 1 I. Vigorous and turbulent (4:30)
 - 2 II. Restrained but with deep feeling (4:00)
 - 3 III. Slowly; Moderately, with increasing impetuosity (4:15)
- 4-6** Palmer: Piano Sonata No. 3* (21:45)
- 4 I. Allegro agitato ma leggiero (7:30)
 - 5 II. Canzona — Fuga — Canzona (7:30)
 - 6 III. Scherzo — Trio (Barcarolle) — Scherzo (6:30)
- 7-9** Johnson: Piano Sonata (17:45)
- 7 I. Allegro molto e dinamico (6:15)
 - 8 II. Andante cantabile (6:15)
 - 9 III. Allegro giusto (5:00)
- 10-15** Bowles: Six Latin American Pieces (9:00)
- 10 Huapango No. 1 (1:10)
 - 11 Tierra Mojada (1:50)
 - 12 El Bejuco (0:52)
 - 13 La Cuelga (1:14)
 - 14 Orosí (1:51)
 - 15 Huapango No. 2 ("El Sol") (1:36)
- 16** Bowles: Carretera de Estepona* (2:20)

Ramon Salvatore, piano

*first recording

TT: (65:30)

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Music in the American Grain

Monroe Levin

The years 1896-1910 were special for American music. While Charles Ives was using those years to build his insurance business by day and write his body of strange-sounding music after work, four major composers were born: Roger Sessions (1896-1985) in Brooklyn, Roy Harris (1898-1979) in

rural Oklahoma, Aaron Copland (1900-1990) in Brooklyn, and Samuel Barber (1910-1981) near Philadelphia.

All of these composers grew up knowing little if anything about Ives's music. Although Ives published his famous "Concord" Piano Sonata in 1919, America did not hear the piece until John Kirkpatrick gave its first public performance in 1939. Ives's largest-scale work, the Fourth Symphony, was not performed until 1965, eleven years after the composer's death.

Instead of seeking out "America's greatest composer" in his Danbury, Connecticut retirement, Ives's spiritual successors sought European inspiration. Copland and Harris had lessons at Nadia Boulanger's Paris apartment; Barber composed his First Symphony in Rome; Sessions came under the influence of Swiss-born Ernest Bloch, who became an American Citizen in 1924.

Still, all four composers felt what Ives had first sensed in the American air. It was not only time to stop emulating German music a la Edward McDowell, but the time had come to replace other national reactions to the Germanic "mainstream" (e.g. those of Debussy, Bartok, Stravinsky) with America's own.

Sessions evolved from Bloch's nationalism to a version of atonality that promised exceptional freedom, as well as audience resistance. Barber's new American Romanticism veered toward an opposite pole. In between stood Copland and Harris. Their transplantation of Stravinsky's very theoretical, very sophisticated re-shaping of baroque and classical styles eventually drew the label of both names hyphenated; the composers of the next generation represented on this recording have often been called members of the "Copland-Harris" School.

As time passes, however, it is possible to differentiate more clearly between these two "Schoolmasters," and to see why (putting Paul Bowles in parentheses for the moment) John LaMontaine, Robert Palmer, and Hunter Johnson relate more to Harris than to Copland.

All three were, like Roy Harris, alumni of Howard Hanson's Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, where an inland variety of modernism prevailed. All tended to follow Harris (and Bela Bartok) in pursuing the

elusive spirit of native folksong rather than quote it directly. Apart from Johnson's Martha Graham ballets (*Letter to the World*, *Deaths and Entrances*, and *The Scarlett Letter*) their work was mainly in the medium of abstract instrumental music — an obvious distinction from Copland.

But more subtle differences lie in the areas of sonority, texture, and phrase structure. Palmer's typical (he would call it "organic") way of letting the fugue theme of the Third Sonata slow movement grow from its opening Canzona illustrates perhaps best the tradition Roy Harris exemplified in his Third Symphony: a combination of rhythmic irregularity and austere mood that suggest the rural world as opposed to that of the big city.

Vertically speaking, this Harris brand of rugged Americanism leaves a more sober taste in the ear than Copland's. Chords like those LaMontaine chooses for the build-up to his final Allegro, or Johnson for the plaintive outcries of pain in his finale, evoke their own expressive intensity. There is joy and triumph in this music of Inner America, but little of Copland's urbane wit and irony. Paul Bowles, never quite sure if he truly was a composer, has that sense of wit from his teacher, Copland. But Bowles is nonetheless related to Harris by the naive, unpolished flavor that gives his music an invigorating freshness and charm.

Separated in this way, the styles of Copland and Harris met different fates when Arnold Schoenberg's American disciples began dominating the scene after mid-century. It's not hard to understand how a public starved for contemporary sounds with genuine emotional content would turn to an *Appalachian Spring* before a more sober "music of the prairies." Very little was heard of the sounds of this disc during the 1960's and 70's.

Now, as the pendulum continues to swing away from atonality, music of the forgotten Harris-type composer can be re-evaluated. It is not the only "Music in the American Grain," but its grain is just as much worth exposing — its wood just as durable and maybe a little harder — as that of the music of Sessions, Copland, and Barber.

Notes on the Program

Steven Ledbetter

John LaMontaine's (b. 1920, Oak Park, IL) national honors include a Pulitzer Prize for his Piano Concerto No. 1 and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His overture, *From Sea to Shining Sea*, was featured at John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration. LaMontaine received his bachelor of music degree from the Eastman School, where he studied with Howard Hanson and Bernard Rogers. He later continued his studies with Bernard Wagenaar at the Julliard School and Nadia Boulanger at Fontainebleau. An excellent pianist, LaMontaine spent four years as Toscanini's pianist in the NBC Symphony Orchestra.

LaMontaine's influences — from medieval to serial, folk, and jazz — are as far-ranging as his compositions, which include symphonic, chamber, choral, operatic, and solo works, including many colorful, highly idiomatic pieces for his own instrument. LaMontaine composed his Piano Sonata while still a student at the Eastman School, where he gave the work's first performance as part of his senior recital to earn his performer's degree. LaMontaine describes the Sonata as representing “a *sturm und drang* period of youthful revolt and poetry.” This modest statement gives no hint of the remarkable finesse and confidence that distinguishes this early work. The sonata is imbued with a romantic spirit that well befits a pupil of Hanson. Its three movements are formally clear and concise. The first, in sonata-allegro form, features sturdy octaves bounding along in six-eight rhythm; the second is of great lyric intensity; and the third, a brilliant finale (following a slow introduction) transforms some of the material from the slow movement.

Robert Palmer's (b. 1915, Syracuse, NY) compositions have been regular concert fare since the 1940's. He has received commissions from nearly every major agency in the United States including the Columbia Broadcasting System and the Koussevitzky Foundation. Palmer has received awards and fellowships from the National Academy of Arts and Letters, two Guggenheim Fellowships, and a National Endowment for the Arts Award. A graduate of the Eastman School, Palmer studied with Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, and Aaron Copland. Palmer has been Professor of Music at Cornell since 1943 (Emeritus since 1980).

Composer George Green, a student of Palmer, has commented that the “outstanding characteristics of Palmer's music are its long, flowing melodies of irregular scansion and a motoric rhythmic drive.” Palmer completed the Third Sonata in 1979 and dedicated the work to Ramon Salvatore, who gave

its first performance in London. The first movement is a large-scale sonata structure with a reversed recapitulation. The first theme is rapid, almost breathless, in mixed rhythms and full of sudden contrasts, while the second is more continuous and cantabile, cast in complex but more regular metres. The second movement has a Canzona-Fugue-Canzona tripartite form. The Canzona is both lyrical and contrapuntal, in the rhythm of a Sarabande. The Scherzo and Trio third movement presents a return to the intense harmonic language of the first. There are two ideas in the Scherzo: the first is in a regular three-beat metre; the more dynamic and playful second idea is in mixed metres. The Trio suggests the rocking motion of a Barcarolle. Unifying the work is a sustained polychord of E major and G minor which appears at the end of the first movement and reappears to round out the sonata.

Although Hunter Johnson (b. 1906, Benson, NC) has composed extensively for orchestra and a wide variety of chamber ensembles, he is best known for three ballets commissioned by Martha Graham: *Letter to the World*, *Deaths and Entrances*, and *The Scarlett Letter*. Johnson's many awards and honors include the Prix de Rome (1933), two Guggenheim Fellowships (1941, 1954), and the 1958 award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. A 1929 graduate of the Eastman School, Johnson went on to study with Alfredo Casella in Rome.

Johnson's music has been variously described as neo-classic, neo-romantic, and nationalist. It is probably a combination of all three. The Piano Sonata was inspired by Johnson's first contacts with Europe, which impelled him to assert his own native qualities: "I write this amid the rotting splendor of Rome, but all the time my spirit was teeming defiantly with America." The Sonata was completed in 1934, revised in 1936 and again in 1947-48, just before publication. The revisions were intended to achieve greater clarity, concision and performance practicability.

Johnson's sonata follows the general outlines of traditional sonata form. However, its character is quite rhapsodic and improvisatory, giving it a jazzy flavor that lead one critic to dub the work "the apotheosis of the blues." Thoroughly imbued with a romantic spirit, it is music of the most ecstatic kind. The opening theme of the first movement is heard several times in the second, lyrically transformed, and is a principle unifying element. The finale is a wildly exuberant scherzo followed by a coda that includes material from all three movements.

Though better known as a writer (*The Sheltering Sky, Too Far From Home*), Paul Bowles (b. 1910, Jamaica, NY) is an important American composer whose music has witnessed a considerable revival in recent years. A student of Aaron Copland and Virgil Thompson, Bowles has composed in every genre from operas to solo piano works. He is particularly noted for his collaborations with William Saroyan, Tennessee Williams, and Orson Welles, including the recently recorded *Music for a Farce*, composed for a Mercury Theatre production. A world traveler based in Tangier, Morocco since 1947, Bowles often draws on native musical sources.

Bowles offers the following comments on his *Six Latin American Pieces* (1937-43):

The *huapango* was originally a dance form native to the provinces of Tamaulipas and Vera Cruz in Mexico. It was danced on a table-like board, with the feet of the dancers sharply accenting the rhythm. My *Huapango No. 1* uses actual folk material, while *Huapango No. 2* (“*El Sol*”) represents a greater abstraction of the form. *Terra Mojada* means “damp earth.” It is not a particular place; could be anywhere, more or less, as long as the ground was damp. *El Bejuco* is the name of a very primitive (in 1940) village on one of the lagoons north of Acapulco, named, I suppose, after the masses of vines and plants that surround it. A *cuelga* is a birthday. I wrote *La Cuelga* in 1943 for Lennie Bernstein’s birthday. In *Orosi* a simple melody becomes a dance, returns, and ends. *Orosi* is a village in a valley of Costa Rica. When I was living in Guanacaste, the cowboys on the ranch were building a marimba using bamboo and gourds. When it was finished, they spent each afternoon working obsessively on a 3/8 accompaniment to an unstated melody. The memory of that dogged accompaniment dictated the dance section of *Orosi*.

The last work on the program, *Carretera de Estepona* (The Road to Estepona) pays homage to the small Spanish fishing village of Estepona where Franco’s invading troops met their first resistance in 1936.

Monroe Levin is Music Critic for *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent* and author of *Clues to American Music* (Starrhill, Washington, D.C., 1992).

Steven Ledbetter has been Musicologist and Program Annotator for the Boston Symphony since 1979.

About the Performer

Chicago native Ramon Salvatore earned his Master of Music degree with honors and distinction from the New England Conservatory. He later studied for three years on full scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Mr. Salvatore's 1977 debut in London's Wigmore Hall was so well received that he returned to the Purcell Room in 1979 to give the world premiere of Robert Palmer's Third Sonata. Mr. Salvatore has enjoyed a busy performing schedule in the United States including an acclaimed New York debut in Carnegie Recital Hall (1980), performances at the 40th and 46th American Music Festivals at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1983, 1989), and a concert in Chicago's Orchestra Hall (1990). He has also performed on over fifty college campuses nationally, including many concerts that were broadcast over National Public Radio. In 1990, he won a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to present a series of three recitals entitled "American Piano Music in the Grand Tradition" in New York's Weill Recital Hall. Mr. Salvatore also presented this series of American Music of all periods in Chicago, to equally ecstatic reviews. All but the last work on this CD were performed at those concerts. Mr. Salvatore has recorded other repertoire from that series on a Premiere Records CD entitled "Blue Voyage — Music in the Grand Tradition" (PRCD 1019).

Of related interest on Cedille Records:

Easley Blackwood plays sonatas by Ives and Copland — CDR 90000 005

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***** The upstart new Chicago label Cedille scores a bull's-eye with composer-pianist Easley Blackwood, who gives perhaps the most coherent reading yet of Ives' sprawling, Transcendentalist sonata. Copland's starkly powerful sonata gets a reading that's so taut and nervous you'll think its about to leap out and bite you." — *Cincinnati Enquirer*