



Nov/Dec 2019 - Phillip Scott



The resurgence of the harpsichord in the 20th century involved more than the instrument's reappearance in performances of old music. New music was also composed for it, especially from composers with a Neoclassical bent. Well-established works by Francis Poulenc and Manuel de Falla were written for the virtuoso harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, but there are many others, including concertos by Bohuslav Martinů and Frank Martin. We should hear the latter's delightful concerto of 1951 more often. Martin's straightforward explanation for writing a work for harpsichord appears in his autobiography: "I did it because it was to a certain degree 'in the air'." Four other examples in the air at various

times appear on this terrific new release from Jory Vinikour and the Chicago Philharmonic, conducted by Scott Speck.

The short-lived Walter Leigh (1905–1942) wrote his brief *Concertino* in 1934. It is a genuinely diverting work: an unselfconscious Classical pastiche with an underlying English pastoral flavor.

The *Andante* cleverly suggests a Baroque aria, while the lively *Allegro vivace* third movement is joyfully bracing. Leigh's *Concertino* is familiar, having been recorded several times before. This performance is the most exciting I have heard and, like the whole program, comes in vibrant sound.

The least known music here, because it lay unplayed for 70 years, is Ned Rorem's *Concertino* of 1944. The only work on the program to use wind instruments as well as strings, it is a textbook example of 20th-century Neoclassicism. As Vinikour writes in the booklet note, describing the cadenza: "Ned Rorem meets Scarlatti." Typically, the scoring reveals clean lines and open textures in similar mode to Rorem's later concertos for flute and guitar. His harmony is modern, insofar as Vivaldi would not recognize it, but as in all Rorem's music everything seems satisfyingly inevitable. It is an attractive discovery (and the premiere recording).

The other two concertos are longer and, in the case of the concerto by Viktor Kalabis (1923–2006) packed with musical argument. Highly demanding on the soloist, it was composed in 1975 for the composer's wife Zuzana Růžičková, a distinguished Czech harpsichordist who passed away only two years ago. Lasting 28 minutes, this strong piece has little or nothing to do with music of the past. It covers a wide range of moods, notably in the lengthy third movement, and does not reveal all it has to say in just a few hearings. I am looking forward to getting to know the work more fully. Vinikour's performance has the added advantage of authenticity: He knew Kalabis and Růžičková well, and discussed this music closely with them.

Michael Nyman's concerto of 1995 is more of a known quantity, replete with a relentless solo part and the composer's stylistic tendency towards aggressive Minimalism. Very much a showpiece, it is dispatched by Vinikour with tremendous verve, matched all the way by the strings of the Chicago

Philharmonic. All four concertos are well worth knowing, and they could not have keener advocacy than they receive here.