BARBER *Complete Published Solo Piano Music* Daniel Pollack (pn) NAXOS 8.559015 (72:16) Three Sketches (1923-24); Interlude I (1931); Excursions, op. 20; Sonata, op. 26; Souvenirs, op. 28; Nocturne, op. 33; Ballade, op. 46

BARBER Sonata, op. 26; Nocturne, op. 33; Ballade, op. 46. HAGEN *Qualities of Light* Jeanne Golan (pn) ALBANY TROY-324 (58:53)

BARBER Sonata, op. 26. COPLAND Sonata. CARTER Sonata John Owings (pn) KOCH INTERNATIONAL 3-7622-2H1 (66:56)

FRICK COLLECTION RECITAL William Kapell (pn) RCA RED SEAL 09026-68997-2, mono/analog (74:54). Live broadcast: New York, 3/1/19

Traduction française des éléments principaux :

"… cette distinction (du meilleur enregistrement de la musique pour piano de Barber) revient au CD … avec la pianiste bulgare Lilia Boyadjieva … cet enregistrement (… correspond) à l'exécution la mieux réalisée de la Sonate pour piano sur disc.
… Si on est intéressé par le meilleur enregistrement de la Sonate de Barber, je recommanderais Boyadjieva. …"

COPLAND: Sonata. CHOPIN: *Nocturne*, op. 55/2; *Mazurka*, op. 33/3; *Polonaise-Fantaisie*, op. 61. MUSSORGSKY:

Here is the latest crop of releases to address the piano music of Samuel Barber, along with some other important (mostly) American piano music. Naxos's American Classics series enters the fray with a generous program featuring the veteran California-born and -based pianist Daniel Pollack. Pollack's performance of the Barber sonata at the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958 created quite a stir during the "Cold War" period, although it was rather overshadowed by Van Cliburn's triumph that same year. Pollack's recording of the sonata, made shortly thereafter for Melodiya, became one of the leading representations of a work far less familiar then than it is today. (Of course, Cliburn made his own reasonably successful recording of the sonata about ten years later.)

Despite the high esteem in which it is held by many, I have always felt that Barber's 1949 Piano Sonata is not quite the towering masterpiece one might expect such a work from this composer to be. Though I have been voicing this opinion for many years, I must admit that hearing countless performances, radically different in approach, has increased my affection for the piece, and I cannot deny that the more penetrating readings give me considerable pleasure. However I continue to feel that the work suffers from several weaknesses that cannot be totally overcome. One problem is that the texture of the first movement is overly congested, and with material that is too disparate in character, so that it seems to ramble frantically in too many different directions. A commonly encountered approach to this movement is to set a vigorous tempo and attempt to focus on the broad outline, with the result that the motivically dense texture becomes messy and chaotic. Another approach is to concentrate on conveying the many mood shifts and on elucidating significant textural details, but this often produces a performance in which the proverbial forest is concealed by the trees, as the overall sense of focus and direction is lost**. The only solution is—as in many works of Scriabin—to attempt the extraordinarily difficult task of doing both, i.e., setting and maintaining a vigorous sense of direction, while also delineating the many mood shifts and textural elements within their relative relationships to each other. I have heard only one performance that achieves this goal (and I will identify it in a moment).**

My other major complaint applies to a number of works that enjoy popular favor, so perhaps my feelings are not shared by everyone. I believe that it is necessary for a large-scale, multi-movement work to be unified by a consistent, superordinating concept, such that individual movements, regardless of how much they may differ from each other with regard to tempo, texture, thematic material, etc., join collectively in conveying this concept. In order words, the movements "belong" together. From this perspective, the twinkly little scherzo movement and the fugal finale in the style of a Latin-American dance, while providing conventional contrasts in mood, tempo, and pianistic challenge, are not consistent with or relevant to the overall meaning of the work, as proclaimed by the restless and uncontainable first movement, and acknowledged by the eloquently somber slow movement. And so, pianist after pianist, proceeding from the unquestioned premise that Barber's is *the* American traditionalist piano sonata *par excellence,* flails about in vain, trying to make it "work."

Pollack's approach is to tear at the work at break-neck tempos, completing the task at 18:12. While this tack certainly generates excitement, some passages, virtually impossible at such tempos, become scrambled and messy. Furthermore, Pollack's playing lacks sensitivity. Indeed, he plays most of the pieces on this disc in a crude, obvious, and heavy-handed way, with unusually fast tempos that minimize the depth of the music, skirting over emotional nuances, and missing the reflective and ethereal moments completely. If Pollack's reading of the sonata is rather crass, a piece like the delicate *Nocturne* is completely destroyed, while the inherently campy *Souvenirs* are deprived of the graceful and stylish charm that redeems their otherwise kitchy banality. Interestingly, the music that fares best in Pollack's hands are the *Excursions.* Here the composer's fastidious ventures into vernacular American styles benefit from the hearty virility imparted by Pollack.

In addition to the usual entries in the Barber canon, Pollack also includes some of the posthumously published works that have just recently been appearing on recording: the early salon pieces called *Three Sketches* and the 6-or-so-minute *Pictures at an Exhibition.* SCHUMANN: *Kinderszenen* (no. 1). SCARLATTI: Sonata in E, K.380/L.23

Interlude I. I expect that we will encounter this latter work fairly often now, as it is the short solo piano work in Barber's much-beloved early style that pianists and audiences have long wished for—the pianist's answer to the *Adagio for Strings*, so to speak. *Interlude I* does display the fingerprints of Brahms more than anything else he wrote, which probably accounts for the composer's decision not to include the piece, composed at about the same time as *Dover Beach*, in his official worklist. However, its warmth and lyricism are lovely, and its mood and character could only be attributed to Barber.

Pollack's performances were recorded in California in 1995. For some reason, the piano has both a metallic and muffled tone quality that is odd and not terribly appealing. So, in summary, this may be the least expensive recording of Barber's piano music, but it is definitely not the best. That distinction belongs to what is -- most unfortunately -- probably the least readily accessible disc: a French release on the Solstice label (SOCS 145; see "A Continuing Reassessment of Samuel Barber," in *Fanfare* 20:4), featuring the Bulgarian pianist Lilia Boyadjieva. All listeners who are interested in Barber's piano music are urged to make the effort to locate this recording, if for no other reason, just to hear the most fully realized performance of the Piano Sonata on disc.

If Pollack's reading of the Barber sonata is the most extreme example of the "fast and furious" approach, then Jeanne Golan's -- at 25:06 -- is the most extreme example of the "elucidate every strand" approach. Trained both at Yale and at Eastman, Golan seems to be a very intelligent young artist, and I suspect that she is well aware of what an unconventional interpretation she is presenting. Though it falls into the trap of losing its sense of direction, her reading of the first movement is illuminating in many ways, revealing an extraordinary richness of textural detail. The second and third movements are handled with appropriate delicacy and sensitivity, but her finale lacks sufficient propulsive power and intensity to achieve the desired effect.

However, as might be expected, Golan's reading of the 1959 *Nocturne* is exquisitely delicate and poetic. Indeed, I have never heard the piece in a lovelier rendition. Golan is also successful with the problematic late work, *Ballade*, imparting a wide range of subtle nuances into this Scriabin-like mood piece, which so few pianists seem able to bring to life. Golan's artistry is abetted by the extraordinarily fine sound quality captured at the New England Conservatory, where the recording, released on the Albany label, was made.

Koch International presents the Texan pianist John Owings in an intriguing concept recital that features the three major American piano sonatas of the 1940s: those by Barber, Copland, and Carter. To round out our little survey of recent attempts to master the Barber sonata, Owings's effort might be regarded as the most conventional and middle-of-the-road. In fact, it adds nothing to one's understanding or appreciation of the work, although it is successfully executed on its own terms. However, one factor that diminishes my enjoyment of the entire disc is the distant aural perspective captured on the recording, which was done at Texas Christian University, where Owings is a member of the faculty. Owings is obviously a more-than-competent pianist, and though his performance of the Barber is rather routine and uninteresting, he brings an energetic musical intelligence to his readings of the Copland and Carter sonatas. But these works especially are predicated on a bright, crisp, and clear type of piano sonority. Owings's performances of these two works would probably be more satisfying if they were recorded in a manner that better captured their sonic styles. In fairness, I should allow that sonic ambiance may be viewed as a subjective matter, and other listeners may feel differently.

Aaron Copland completed his Piano Sonata in 1941, around the time of *A Lincoln Portrait, Quiet City,* and *Rodeo.* However, unlike those three works in his populist-Americana vein, the Piano Sonata exemplifies the more abstract, personal aspect of his output. For many years the works in the latter group were discussed as if they were rather forbidding, inaccessible, and different in kind from his more populist creations. I would be surprised, however, if listeners failed to hear in this work (and in others of his "serious" pieces) most of the qualities -- except, perhaps, for the "wide open spaces" effect -- associated with his best-known compositions. Among the remarkable features of the sonata is its use of gestures and chordal sonorities as basic structural elements, rather than conventional motifs and themes. Another is its almost unbearably kinetic treatment of rhythm -- especially irregular, unpredictable, "additive," rather than regular, symmetrical, "metric" rhythmic patterns. This highly distinctive adaptation of an approach to rhythm derived directly from Stravinsky is often attributed to Copland's exposure to jazz, but is so much more elaborate and far-reaching that such a characterization is misleadingly superficial. Copland's treatment of rhythm, along with his unorthodox approach to piano sonority, heard first in the acerbic *Piano Variations* of 1930, exerted a tremendous influence on the development of American Neoclassicism. The aspect of the Piano Sonata that is initially most challenging to the listener, however, is not its harmonic or rhythmic complexity, but, rather, the long stretches of slow, spare writing, during which little seems to be going on. These passages may initially be taxing to one's concentration. However, with increased familiarity they reveal a searching, poignant simplicity and a spare but touching lyricism that balance the more nervous, agitated portions of the work nicely.

Among the pianists drawn to Copland's Piano Sonata was William Kapell, who included the work on a recital given at New York's Frick Museum in March, 1953 -- less than eight months before the fatal plane crash that ended the pianist's life at the age of 31. Apparently a broadcast tape of that recital has recently come to light, and has been released by RCA Red Seal with much fanfare. The sound quality of this release is quite good, its chief defect being some faintly audible interference from an adjacent radio station. The sonic ambiance, however, is close and bright, with a very immediate, almost percussive, quality -- diametrically opposed to the foggy ambiance heard on the Koch release. As suggested earlier, this bright, close sound is much more suitable to Copland's conception, although, quite understandably, as an older recording made to document an event, it is less than optimal, verging on a shallow harshness. Kapell plays the work with tremendous nervous tension and extraordinary precision. Although for the most part his rendition captures and aptly projects the sonata's expressive content, at times the tension underlying his reading seems a little severe and lacking in elasticity.

Discussion of the Copland sonata is incomplete without considering two other recordings currently available. One features Leonard Bernstein, who recorded what he called "my favorite piece of Aaron's" in 1947. Bernstein had such a profound and intimate affinity for the music of his compositional mentor that his interpretations of Copland's music are consistently and reliably definitive. At the age of 28 Bernstein was probably at the height of his enthusiasm for Copland's music and his piano technique might have been at its most fluent. Hence one might expect such a recording to be ideal, and that is pretty much the case -- especially as regards the sense of tensile elasticity and kinetic spontaneity one misses in Kapell's reading. The only shortcomings one might note are the dated sound quality and a less-than-total technical control, which one can expect, after all, from only the very finest full-time pianists.

All of which leads us to the other essential recording of the Copland sonata -- from one of the very finest full-time pianists of his generation. As part of its "Great Pianists of the 20th Century" series, Philips has reissued some of Leon Fleisher's solo recordings—among them the Copland sonata. This is an extraordinary document of piano artistry, fusing keen intelligence, profound musicality, and almost inhuman technical control. The only factor preventing me from terming this rendition "perfect" is its sense of composure; one misses Bernstein's restless verve and spontaneous exuberance. (Before leaving Fleisher, I must add that Philips's 2-CD set also includes Liszt's B-minor Sonata. *Fanfare* boasts so many Liszt authorities that perhaps I am not entitled to comment on a subject in which I claim no special expertise. Nevertheless, I do consider the Liszt B-minor to be the greatest piano sonata of the 19th century [after Beethoven], and have heard my share of performances. But I have never heard a reading of this work that approaches Fleisher's in achieving unhindered the fulfillment of an interpretive ideal that reveals the work to be a masterpiece of eloquence and coherence. No admirer of the B-minor Sonata should fail to be acquainted with it.)

Elliott Carter's Piano Sonata followed Copland's by five years, and, in many ways, takes the latter as its point of departure. Carter's approaches to harmony, rhythm, gesture, and piano sonority are essentially derived from Copland, but in this sonata he develops them to far greater levels of contrapuntal density, producing a work that is rich with interest and excitement. In fact, one might argue that the Piano Sonata represents Carter at the height of his authentic powers of musical creativity, before he veered off in directions that better insulated him from direct critical judgment. One might even further argue that Carter's is the most fully realized of the three American sonatas at the center of this review. Again, John Owings offers a brilliant and energetic reading of the work, for which one's enthusiasm is dampened only by the aforementioned complaint regarding sonic ambiance.

If one wishes to acquire a recording specifically for the Carter sonata, I would probably recommend Paul Jacobs's rendition on Elektra/Nonesuch. If one were seeking a recording of the Copland, I would recommend Fleisher. And if one were looking for the best recording of the Barber sonata, I would recommend Boyadjieva. But if one wishes to acquire all three works on one disc, and is not very sensitive to sonic ambiance, then Owings on Koch would be quite adequate.

Let's return for a moment to the Kapell recital. In addition to the Copland sonata, the pianist offered several Chopin selections, the brief Schumann tidbit, a Scarlatti sonata, and the *Pictures at an Exhibition*. One must begin by noting that the sound quality that suited the Copland sonata so well is quite inappropriate for the music of Chopin, which sounds as though it is being viewed under a microscope, which is not the best way to view Chopin. Furthermore, in listening to this disc, I couldn't shake the impression that a few notes on the piano were a tad out-of-tune. Nevertheless, the Op. 61 *Polonaise-Fantaisie* is heard in a performance that I think many will find quite thrilling. The familiar Scarlatti sonata sounds lovely as well. However, Kapell's breathlessly urgent and pianistically undaunted traversal of Mussorgsky's *Pictures* fails to add luster to what is for me a threadbare war-horse.

Pianist Jeanne Golan entitles her recital on Albany, "American Tonal," and complements her Barber selections with a very recent work by the 38-year-old Curtis-trained Daron Hagen. This is my first exposure to Hagen's music, and he appears to be an interesting Post-Modern voice reminiscent of no other composer in particular except, perhaps, Olivier Messiaen. Clearly, Hagen's notion of tonality is a far more vague concept than Barber's. *Qualities of Light* is a 23-minute work in three movements, rather dreamlike and mysterious in tone. The central movement was composed first, and seems to be a rather elaborate set of variations, while creating a somewhat nightmarish effect. The two short outer movements are more peaceful and serve as a sort of frame. The work did not elicit a strong reaction from me, other than openness to hearing more from this composer.

Walter Simmons