

*Issue 29:1 Sept/Oct 2005*

## **THE UNCOVERED RUGGLES**

The title of this disc is "The Uncovered Ruggles," and that's a particularly apt title, as while almost all this material is in some sense new, much of it is already known. Donald Berman was a student of John Kirkpatrick, the tireless advocate of piano music by the American "ultramodernist" movement, most notably that of the two close friends, Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles (1876-1971). Kirkpatrick is largely responsible for the patience, consulting, editing, and encouragement that resulted in the single piano work in Ruggles's published canon, *Evocations*. Berman works from Kirkpatrick's decades-long research and efforts to reconstruct a series of works Ruggles never allowed to appear in finished form. Because his labors are finally crystallized in this recording, we have almost a third more of the composer's music than we did before, and as such, this is a major release, at the very least for what it reveals of new perspectives on American music history.

Ruggles actually beats Webern for the smallest "official" output of any major composer in the last century. His "complete" works were issued on LP (Columbia M2 34591) by Michael Tilson Thomas and the Buffalo Philharmonic in a double album (why on earth

isn't this out on CD by now?). He was a composer who agonized over every note. While some of this comes from perfectionism, it also appears that insecurity and world-class procrastination also played a part (see Marilyn Zifrin's biography, *Carl Ruggles: Composer, Painter, and Storyteller*.) In a sense, all his music seems to be a preparation (and afterthought) to his one grand orchestral work, *Sun-Treader*, which is one of the certifiable masterpieces of the first half of the 20th century. For whatever reason, a lot of music remained on his worktable, never making it to the publisher (and this does not include all of his early, far more Romantic works, which he destroyed). The works on this collection fall into two broad groups. First, there are pieces that we already know from the Ruggles canon, either in their original form or in alternative arrangements. The former include the four *Evocations*, the song *Toys*, and *Exaltation* for piano (which I know from the Columbia LP as an organ work). The latter include the arrangement of the orchestra work *Organum* for two pianos, and the trumpet choir piece *Angels* for piano. Second, there are the either unpublished but finished works, or pieces that Kirkpatrick edited into a final form. Here, the first includes the remaining songs, each very different: *Ich fühle dienen Odem* is pure Germanic Romanticism, reminiscent of similar works in the Ives songbook; *Windy Nights* is a taut dissonant setting of a Robert Louis

Stevenson poem; *Prayer* is perfectly respectable Victorian uplift. The other category is that of the reconstructed works, and here things get particularly interesting. Berman mentions in his notes that *Visions* (apparently conceived as a fifth *Evocation*), is more "rhapsodic" than other of Ruggles's pieces. That's very true, and applies in fact to most of the "new" works. When compared to the works that the composer let out into the world, all these pieces sound far more free, formally. They're less obsessively focused on a particular idea, more varied in their materials. Of course, they all have Ruggles's unmistakable stamp—intensely wrought, unrelenting (but coherent and consistent) dissonance, transcendental yearning, brief durations (none is more than seven minutes long). And each has a particular character—the March has martial rhythms woven in (though you can hardly march to it), the *Valse lente* is in a triple meter (though it doesn't lend itself to dancing, either!). *Visions* sounds almost like a continuous multimovement recap of the previous four *Evocations*. *Parvum organum* seems like a sketch for the final *Organum*, and *Mood* is precious, as it appears to be the only scrap left of music that was derived from the composer's lost opera, *The Sunken Bell*.

On the one hand, this freer sounding music is a bit of a shock, if you know Ruggles well already. It doesn't sound as "disciplined," and that also has to do with

the fact that Kirkpatrick had to often cobble together different sketches into a single work; hence its greater "mutability." Listening to the whole program at a stretch becomes wearying; after a while, another crashing climax is one too many. Also, this music is all about *line*, and the piano, of course, is a far more "pointillistic" instrument. One senses that almost all these works are meant for an ultimate orchestral setting in order for the true force to emerge. Working with similar harmonic and expressive materials, Ives (a true pianist) was able to make far more successful music, with textures that counteracted the harmonic austerity.

But if you listen to one work at a time, giving some time in between to savor them, the strengths of this music come to the fore: rock-solid integrity, unshaken belief in the "transcendental," a fearless projection of sounds that are meant to brace, not soothe. I've gone on at some length here, in large part because Ruggles is very important to me. I think this is an extremely valuable release for anyone interested in the history of American concert music. These are sensitive, committed, historically informed performances by all, with pride of place to Berman, for whom this is a labor of love, and for which this becomes a logical complement to his earlier two volumes of Ives arcana on CRI and New World. The sound is quite fine, though I did find the sudden

greater reverb of Jordan Hall in *Mood* a little disconcerting. There are extremely sophisticated digital ways now to match different room qualities in post-production, but I suspect said difference was retained due to a philosophical commitment to "authenticity" of recorded sound, and I can't argue with that (and it's no doubt in the spirit of the composer, as well). This will probably turn up on my Want List in the next issue. **Robert Carl**