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Songs of Samuel Barber and Ned Rorem New World NW 229

Songs of Samuel Barber

Samuel Barber was born on March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. He remembers that his parents never particularly encouraged him to become a musician, but as his mother's sister, the renowned Metropolitan Opera singer Louise Homer, was a frequent visitor to the Barber home, the atmosphere there was not at all inimical to musical aspirations. Barber began to study piano at six and composed his first music a year later (a short piano piece in C minor called "Sadness"). When he was ten he composed one act of an opera, *The Rose Tree*, to a libretto by the family's Irish cook. At fourteen Barber entered the newly opened Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, having arranged to be excused for a couple of days a week from high-school classes. At the Curtis, composition was always his first interest, and his mentor was Rosario Scalero. Barber's biographer Nathan Broder wrote:

Scalero... laid more emphasis upon counterpoint than upon any other element of composition, and prescribed innumerable exercises, insisting upon vital and meaningful writing in all parts. The beneficial results of this intensive training are apparent throughout Barber's output. His music is seldom static; and even where the harmonies are ambiguous, the contrapuntal texture is alive.

Barber also studied piano with Isabelle Vengerova and singing with Emilio de Gogorza [New World Records NW 247, *When I Have Sung My Songs: The American Art Song 1900-1940*]. He completed his work at the Curtis in 1932.

Along with the deeply felt nature of his materials and the high craft of his writing, Barber's

romanticism brought him early success as a composer. Because of his First Symphony (1936, revised 1942), Bruno Walter thought of him as "the pioneer of the American symphony." ("That's not true," said Barber almost forty years later. "That should be Roy Harris.") In the late thirties Barber was the first American to be performed by Arturo Toscanini (*Adagio for Strings* and *First Essay for Orchestra*), and, not long after, his music was championed by artists of the stature of Bruno Walter (First Symphony and *Second Essay for Orchestra*), Eugene Ormandy (Violin Concerto), Artur Rodzinski (First Symphony), Serge Koussevitsky (Second Symphony), Martha Graham (*Medea*), and Vladimir Horowitz (*Excursions* and Piano Sonata).

Leontyne Price introduced Barber's *Hermit Songs* in 1952, and two years later Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony premiered his *Prayers of Kierkegaard*. In 1958 the Metropolitan Opera gave the first performance of *Vanessa*, which won that year's Pulitzer Prize. Barber's Piano Concerto was heard in September, 1962, at Philharmonic Hall during the inaugural week of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and brought him a second Pulitzer Prize. In September, 1966, *Antony and Cleopatra*, commissioned for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House, had its premiere; and in 1971 *The Lovers*, for baritone, chorus, and orchestra, was introduced in Philadelphia by Eugene Ormandy. Barber is now at work on an oboe concerto and an orchestral piece, both of which will be premiered during the 1978-79 season by the New York Philharmonic.

Gilbert Chase once wrote of Barber's "romantic allegiance," and Virgil Thomson has described Barber's musical style as an "elegant neo-romanti-

cism." The terms "romantic" and "neo-romantic" bring to mind a kind of music that is melodic, easy on the ears (that is, with a low dissonance quotient), and formally traditional. "I hate those convenient labels," Barber said recently. "But I suppose it would be silly to deny that my musical impulses tend to correspond to what is generally meant by 'romantic.'"

Barber's music is distinguished above all by a pronounced lyricism, not only in his songs and operas but also in his chamber and orchestral scores. As Broder wrote, "[Barber] is a lyric poet... aloof from the swirling currents in which many of his colleagues are immersed." Unlike many of his American contemporaries—for instance Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, William Schuman, Roger Sessions, or Walter Piston—Barber was never an innovator, never experimented with technical devices, and was satisfied to work in a familiar idiom. (In 1936 Copland stated that the then twenty-six-year-old Barber composed "in a somewhat outmoded fashion.... So excellent a craftsman should not content himself forever with the emotionally conventional context of his present manner." In 1977 I asked Copland if that rather severe opinion still stood, and he replied: "Sam Barber is a very gifted man who writes expertly in a style that may not be everyone's cup of tea but which is, nonetheless, perfectly acceptable. A composer of real personality, he is a credit to American music.")

Since 1939 Barber has made occasional use of modern techniques, but he remains at heart a conservative. Illustrative of this is his little-known Symphony No. 2 (1944, revised 1947), a tense and dissonant score that caused its first audiences to think that Barber had adopted a markedly acerbic new style. He hadn't. For all its modern trappings, the Second Symphony is another study in its composer's somewhat elegaic romanticism, an impressive score that has been, unfortunately, withdrawn. As one critic aptly put it, the Second Symphony "harnesses modern discords to basically nineteenth-century modes of construction."

If Barber has remained a traditionalist, he does occasionally combine the old with the new: in the Piano Sonata (1949) and the Piano Concerto (1962) classical forms are enriched by twelve-tone writing and irregular rhythms; in the *Capricorn Concerto* (flute, oboe, trumpet, and strings; 1944) and the Cello Concerto (1945) by irregular, varied rhythms and a more *secco* scoring than usual; in the Second Symphony and the dance score *Medea* by aggressive polytonality. However, in his recent cantata *The Lovers*, per-

haps in response to the eroticism of the Pablo Neruda poems, Barber's romanticism (which has always owed a certain debt to Tchaikovsky and Puccini) emerges undisguised.

A TALK WITH SAMUEL BARBER

PHILLIP RAMEY: From when do your earliest songs date?

SAMUEL BARBER: From when I was very young. My first songs were children's songs, Mother Goose and things like that. From age thirteen or fourteen on, I wrote quite a few songs, none of which were ever published. My first printed song was "The Daisies," written in 1927 (it was dedicated to my mother, whose name was Daisy). Many young composers start with songs—at least they did in my day. Writing songs just seemed a natural thing to do. Of course, I was influenced by the fact that my aunt, Louise Homer, was a famous Metropolitan Opera contralto. And her husband, Sidney Homer, was a very fine song composer.

P. R. Was your aunt enthusiastic about your becoming a musician?

S. B. Yes and no. She and Uncle Sidney encouraged me to become acquainted with only the finest music. Above all, she did not want me to be a dilettante, and it was not until I was fourteen and had entered the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia that they gave their full approval. It was by then obvious that I was to be a composer, for good or bad.

But I often had to persuade Aunt Louise to try out something of mine: I'd ask, and she would say, "Sammy, I'm sorry, I'm out of voice"; then I'd plead and she'd say, "Well all right I'll look at it." She was often tired when she visited us in West Chester, particularly if, as often happened, she had been recording that day in Camden, New Jersey, for Victor, with people like Caruso and Galli-Curci.

P. R.: Did she ever program anything by you?

S. B.: There was a never-published series of songs which she sang for me privately, and she did perform one, "Watchers," on one of her last tours, and had a success with it. I heard her do it at Carnegie Hall, and there were a few good reviews, but "Watchers" was not a very good song, though it was highly dramatic and had a big range—from low A below C to high A.

P. R.: You said that at age fourteen it was “obvious” that you were to be a composer. Do you remember when you were first aware that you wanted to devote your life to music?

S. B.: When I was about nine I left a letter on my desk one day when I went to school. It read: “NOTICE to *Mother* and *nobody else*—Dear Mother: I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don’t cry when you read it because it is neither yours or my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now without any nonsense. To begin with, I was not meant to be an athlete [sic]. I was meant to be a composer and will be I’m sure. I’ll ask you one more thing. —Don’t ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go and play football. —*Please*—Some-times I’ve been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad (not very).

Love, SAM BARBER II.”

P. R.: You were articulate for a child of nine.

S. B.: I have always had a sense of the written word, and have sometimes thought that I’d rather write words than music. I also have a funny memory for words. For example, if I come across a word I don’t know, rather than get up out of bed I will wait two or three days, remember the word perfectly, and then look for it in the dictionary.

P. R.: Often enough, composers will admit that they don’t much enjoy reading poetry and do so only when searching for texts to set. Are you like that?

S. B.: To some extent. It’s very hard for me to enjoy poetry per se, as I always have in the back of my mind the feeling that I may come across a usable song text. I tend to mark things when I read a promising poem for the first time, and then to go back and try to appreciate it simply as poetry. However, I do enjoy reading contemporary poetry, not only in English but in German and French, and I’ve made a real study of Dante and Goethe in their original languages.

P. R.: Have you ever set a poem that you didn’t entirely understand?

S. B.: Yes. The song “Nuvoletta” is a case in point. The text is from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. I’m not unlearned in Joyce; I’ve read quite a few books on him. But what can you do when you get lines like “Nuvoletta reflected for the last time on her little long life, and she made up all her myriads of

drifting minds in one; She cancelled all her engagements, she climbed over the bannisters, she gave a chilly, chudly, cloudy cry” except to set them instinctively, as abstract music, almost like a vocalise?

P. R.: I assume that you normally let the text dictate the form of a song.

S. B.: You pretty much have to if you don’t want to distort the text, although sometimes I cut out a verse here and there. I try, by the way, not to distort the natural rhythms of a poem, because if this happens the words will be distorted and so will the public’s understanding of them. I very much want the words to be comprehensible. My songs, like *lieder*, tend to highlight the texts.

P. R.: I believe you prefer lyrical, romantic poetry.

S. B.: That’s true. Such poetry fits well with my musical style, after all. Not that I mind complex imagery in a poem: James Agee’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, which I used as a text for voice and orchestra, is in several places complex and was not at all easy to set.

P. R. But complex or not, *Knoxville* is essentially nostalgic picture-painting.

S. B.: True enough.

P. R.: You have little interest then, in more modern, or avant-garde, poetry?

S. B.: Not much. I wouldn’t think of setting Allen Ginsberg. I did once use Theodore Roethke poems, but they were really not very near to me. I admit that I often get bored looking through modern poetry for texts, so little of it seems suitable—the wrong poetry for me. I think you’re hinting that what I really prefer is a poem that is lyric and nostalgic. But many of the texts I’ve used—for instance both “The Heavenly Banquet” and “Promiscuity” from *Hermit Songs*—are not like that at all.

P. R.: Do you write songs quickly?

S. B.: Most often, mainly because songs are small forms determined largely by text. If I start a song in, say, the afternoon, I generally finish it in a day or two. This is not true of an operatic aria.

P. R.: The English critic Wilfrid Mellers has written

that the “core” of your music lies in your “understanding of the human voice.” Do you ever think of the voice when writing for other mediums?

S. B.: Never. Any melody I write is just abstract music coming out of my head and has nothing at all to do with the voice. I think only of whatever instrument or ensemble I happen to be writing for at the time. If I found it necessary to think of the voice when writing an orchestral work, I would have to consider myself rather limited as a composer.

P. R.: There are composers who avoid the voice completely.

S. B.: And are probably quite right to do so. Among Americans I think of Walter Piston, who was not a very lyric composer anyway. Men like Piston, Roger Sessions, and Aaron Copland (although Sessions and Copland have written songs and operas) are essentially instrumental composers. In that sense, I myself am bisexual: I do both.

P. R.: Is there an American song tradition?

S. B.: Way back there’s Stephen Foster, and there’s all of that turn-of-the-century salon stuff which tended to be Germany-oriented, but I don’t think that constitutes a real American tradition. But is there any real American symphonic tradition, for that matter? Composers like MacDowell, Parker, Chadwick, and Foote derived from either German or French music.

P. R.: There was Charles Ives, although he was pretty much unknown until the sixties’ revival. And he wrote quite a few songs.

S. B.: I can’t bear Ives. It is now unfashionable to say this, but in my opinion he was an amateur, a hack who didn’t put pieces together well. As for those of his songs that I know, I don’t think they are particularly effective—and that includes the famous “General William Booth Enters into Heaven”—nor am I in any way impressed by them.

I once attended one of Copland’s Tanglewood classes for composers in which Aaron announced somewhat peremptorily, “Here in Tanglewood we have decided that Charles Ives is a great composer!” I backed my car out onto Route 183 and drove away without comment.

P. R.: What do you think of Ned Rorem’s songs?

S. B.: I like one, “The Lordly Hudson.”

P. R.: You used a French text for your *Mélodies Passagères*. American composers have generally avoided setting foreign languages.

S. B.: Americans generally avoid speaking foreign languages, so it’s not surprising. Almost everything I’ve done has been in English, but I happen to speak fluent French, so there seemed no reason not to set those Rilke poems. I was living in France at the time [1950-51] and was, I suppose, in a French mood. Those particular poems were written while Rilke was living in Paris (he was secretary to Rodin), and he actually wrote them in French.

P. R.: Poulenc recorded *Mélodies Passagères*. Was he enamored with those songs?

S. B.: Francis was a darling man, but he was enamored only with his own songs. However, when I played *Mélodies Passagères* for him he liked them and did not suggest any changes in the French prosody. But he did say that while there were no mistakes in the French setting he thought that a sensitive French musician would nonetheless know the songs were not written by a Frenchman. Probably because the musical style is my own—I certainly didn’t try for a French tone.

Actually, I don’t think that Francis knew my music all that well. I do remember that Horowitz played him my Piano Sonata and Poulenc enthused about it, terming the fugue “a knockout.” But Francis and I were very friendly—in fact, I’ve rarely been that close to another composer. I dedicated *Mélodies Passagères* to him, and he dedicated to me his “Capriccio d’après *Le Bal Masqué*” for two pianos. He used to visit me in Mount Kisco and I him in Paris. The last time I saw Francis was in Paris, at Les Halles: he was rushing off on the back of a motorcycle and waved an extravagant goodbye.

I know Poulenc would be very happy that this record has finally been released after so many years, for he often asked me why it had been held up. (I never knew. Incidentally, I was present at the recording session.)

P. R.: Now tell me about *Dover Beach*.

S. B.: The text is, of course, by Matthew Arnold. “Dover Beach” is a poem that fascinated me; it’s extremely pessimistic—the emotions seem contemporary. “Dover Beach” is one of the few

Victorian poems which continue to hold their stature; it is a great poem in fact.

Originally, I cut the middle part about Sophocles. Soon after *Dover Beach* was finished I played it at the Owen Wister house in Philadelphia, and Marina Wister exclaimed, "But where's the wonderful part about Sophocles?" (Conversation was at a high level at those grand Philadelphia houses—if you said Sophocles when you meant Aeschylus you simply didn't get another drink.) She was quite right, and so I wrote a contrasting middle section. The piece was the better for it.

P. R.: I believe you also showed *Dover Beach* to Ralph Vaughan Williams.

S. B.: Yes, I did. Not long after I completed the final version of *Dover Beach*, Vaughan Williams lectured at Bryn Mawr College, and I visited him there. I sang *Dover Beach* for him at the piano, and he seemed delighted. He congratulated me and said, "I tried several times to set 'Dover Beach,' but you really *got* it!" That was a great boost for me, since praise for my music was not overflowing in those Philadelphia days.

P. R.: How did this recording come about?

S. B.: That was due to Charles O'Connell, at the time the head of Victor Records. Actually, Rose Bampton, who gave the first performance in New York in 1938, had also recorded *Dover Beach* for Victor, but it hadn't been released. I myself had sung it privately several times with the Curtis String Quartet and O'Connell asked me to do a

record with them—which was a great stroke of luck, because it was almost impossible to get anything recorded in those days. I wanted to do it and I sang well enough then. However, the recording session was nerve-racking. As I said, I had never sung *Dover Beach* in public (except once at a farewell party for Josef Hoffman in Maine) and we had to get the piece on two 78-rpm sides. We did each side twice, but that was it. No splicing, etc., etc. We had rehearsed a lot, and I was in pretty good voice that day, so it went well. (At one point one of the players tapped his bow against the stand, and that can still be heard on the record.)

* * *

Dover Beach, Op. 3, for voice and string quartet on the poem by Matthew Arnold, was written in 1931. It had its first public performance in New York at a League of Composers concert on March 5, 1933, by Rose Bampton and the New York Art Quartet.

Mémoires Passagères, Op. 27, for voice and piano on poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, dates from 1950-51. The first, fourth, and fifth songs were premiered by Eileen Farrell and the composer in Washington on April 1, 1950; the complete cycle had its first performance by Pierre Bernac and Francis Poulenc at Dumbarton Oaks on January 21, 1952.

PHILLIP RAMEY is a composer, a pianist, and writer. His compositions include five piano sonatas, two piano concertos, chamber and orchestral scores, and the "Leningrad Rag," written for Vladimir Horowitz. Ramey has recorded contemporary piano music for Columbia Masterworks and Turnabout. He has provided analytical liner notes for over a hundred recordings and is at present annotator and program editor of the New York Philharmonic concert booklets.

THE RECORDINGS

Side One SONGS OF SAMUEL BARBER

Band 1

Dover Beach, Op. 3

(Matthew Arnold)

Samuel Barber, baritone; Curtis String Quartet. Recorded May 13, 1935, in Camden, New Jersey. Originally issued on Victor 8998.

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast
the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of
England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil
bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the
night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-
blanched land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw
back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and
bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.
The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round
earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle
furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges
drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which
seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor
light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for
pain;
And here we are as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle
and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Bands 2-6

Mélodies Passagères, Op. 27

(Rainer Maria Rilke)

Pierre Bernac, baritone; Francis
Poulenc, piano. *Recorded February 15,*
1952 in New York. Originally recorded
for Columbia XLP-9280 (never
released).

I. Puisque tout passe

Puisque tout passe,
faisons la mélodie passagère;
celle qui nous désaltère
aura de nous raison.

Chantons ce qui nous quitte
avec amour et art;
soyons plus vite
que le rapide départ.

I. Puisque tout passe

Since all things pass,
let's make a passing melody;
the one to quench our thirst
will be the one to win us.

What leaves us, let us sing
with love and art;
and swifter let us be
than the swift departure.

II. Un cygne

Un cygne avance sur l'eau
tout entouré de lui-même,
comme un glissant tableau;
ainsi à certains instants
un être que l'on aime
est tout un espace mouvant.

Il se rapproche, doublé,
comme ce cygne qui nage,

sur notre âme troublé...
qui à cet être ajoute la tremblante image
de bonheur et de doute.

II. A Swan

A swan moves over the water
surrounded by itself,
like a painting that glides;
thus, at times,
a being one loves
is a whole moving space.

And draws near, doubled,
like the moving swan,
on our troubled soul...
which to that being adds
the trembling image
of happiness and doubt.

III. Tombeau dans un parc

Dors au fond de l'allée,
tendre enfant, sous la dalle,
on fera le chant de l'été
autour de ton intervalle.

Si une blanche colombe
passait au vol la haut,
je n'offrirais à ton tombeau
que son ombre qui tombe.

III. Grave in a Park

At the end of the avenue, sleep,
tender child, beneath the stone;
around your interval we'll sing
the song of summer.

If a white dove
flies overhead,
I will lay upon your grave
only its shadow that falls.

IV. Le clocher chante

Mieux qu'une tour profane,
je me chauffe pour mûrir mon carillon.
Qu'il soit doux, qu'il soit bon
aux Valaisannes.

Chaque dimanche, ton par ton,
je leur jette ma manne;
qu'il soit bon, mon carillon,
aux Valaisannes.

Qu'il soit doux, qu'il soit bon;
samedi soir dans les channes
tombe en gouttes mon carillon
aux Valaisans des Valaisannes.

IV. The Bell Tower Sings

Better warmed than a secular tower,
to ripen my carillon am I.
May it be sweet, may it be good
for the girls of Valais.

Every Sunday, tone by tone,
I throw them out my manna;
may it be good, my carillon,
for the girls of Valais.

May it be sweet, may it be good;
into their beers on Saturday nights,
drop by drop, falls my carillon
for the boys of the girls of Valais.

V. Départ

Mon amie, il faut que je parte.
Voulez vous voir
l'endroit sur la carte?
C'est un point noir.
En moi, si la chose
bien me réussit, ce sera un point rose
dans un vert pays.

V. Departure

My sweet, I must go away.
Would you like to see
the place on the map?
It's a black point.
In me, it will be
if the thing succeeds,
a rose-red point
in a green land.

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Songs of Ned Rorem

“I started to talk and to compose almost at the same time,” wrote Ned Rorem in his book *The Final Diary*. “The first music [was] vocal.” Four hundred songs and seven operas later, it seems fitting that his initial efforts should have been for the voice. For there is no question that Rorem, cited by *Time* magazine in 1964 as “probably the world’s best composer of art songs,” is one of the leading vocal composers of our day.

Rorem was born on October 23, 1923, in Richmond, Indiana, but spent much of his youth in Chicago. There, from 1938 to 1940, he studied harmony and composition with Leo Sowerby at the American Conservatory. Further studies were at Northwestern University (1940-42), the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia (1943), and the Juilliard School in New York (1946, 1948). Rorem also worked privately with Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland. In 1948 his setting of Paul Goodman’s “The Lordly Hudson” (1947) was designated “best published song of the year” by the Music Library Association, his first important acclaim. Other early pieces are “Alleluia” for voice and piano (1946); *Four Madrigals* for chorus (1946); *Concertino da Camera* (1946); the song cycles *Seven Little Prayers* (1946), *Three Blues of Paul Goodman* (1947), and *Three Incantations for a Marionette Play* (1948); *Mourning Scene* for voice and string quartet (1947); First Piano Sonata (1948); a ballet, *Death of the Black Knight* (1948); and incidental music for various theatrical productions.

From 1949 to 1951 Rorem lived in Morocco, where he produced “some twenty large-scale compositions.” By that time he had gained the facility to turn out large amounts of music, a practice that has continued to the present. Scores dating from his Moroccan period include *Barcarolles* for piano and Violin Sonata (both 1949); *Six Irish Poems* for voice and orchestra, Second Piano Sonata, Second Piano Concerto, *Sicilienne* for two pianos, String Quartet No. 2, and First Symphony (all 1950); and no fewer than six song cycles—*Penny Arcade* (1949); *Flight for Heaven* (1950); and *Another Sleep, To a Young Girl, Cycle of Holy Songs, and From an Unknown Past* (all 1951).

In 1951, having received a Fulbright Fellowship for study with Arthur Honegger, Rorem took up residence in Paris. There he became friendly with luminaries like Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, and Georges Auric. Poulenc in particular was to exert an influence on Rorem’s developing style,

especially in the vocal realm. From Rorem’s Paris days date two operas (*A Childhood Miracle* [1952] and *The Robbers* [1956]); four song cycles (*Poèmes pour la Paix* and *Ecologues* [both 1953], *Four Dialogues* [1953-54], and *Anacreontiche* [1954]); *Design* for orchestra (1953); *Six Songs* for high voice and orchestra and Third Piano Sonata (both 1954); *The Poets’ Requiem* for soprano, chorus, and orchestra (1955-56); Second and Third Symphonies (1955 and 1957); and the *Sinfonia for Fifteen Wind Instruments* (1957).

Rorem returned to the United States in 1957. Since then he has lived mostly in New York and for the past few years also in Nantucket, where he has a house. He is frequently in residence at Yaddo, the artists’ colony at Saratoga Springs, New York, and has written much of his recent music there. Rorem was Slee Professor and composer-in-residence at the University of Buffalo from 1959 to 1961 and composer-in-residence at the University of Utah in 1966-67. Among his honors are the Gershwin Memorial Award, the Lili Boulanger Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Pulitzer Prize.

One of the most often commissioned American composers, Rorem is also among the most prolific. Since 1957 he has produced a large body of music that includes several additional song cycles (notable among them are *Poems of Love and the Rain* [1963], *Some Trees* [1968], and *War Scenes* [1969]); five operas (*Last Day* [1959], *The Anniversary* [1961-incomplete], *Miss Julie* [1964-65], *Bertha* [1968-69], and *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters* [1969]); *Eagles* for orchestra (1958); Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano (1960); *Eleven Studies for Eleven Players* (1962); *Lions* for orchestra (1963); *Lovers* for harpsichord, oboe, cello, and percussion (1964); *Letters from Paris* for chorus and orchestra and *Sun* for voice and orchestra (both 1966); *Water Music* for violin, clarinet, and small orchestra (1967); *Spiders* for harpsichord (1968); Piano Concerto No. 3 in Six Movements (1969-70); *Day Music* for violin and piano (1971); the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Air Music* for orchestra (1974); and *Sky Music* for harp and Eight Études for piano (both 1976). Rorem is at present (1977) working on a commission from the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Despite interesting and successful scores in genres other than vocal, Rorem has achieved his greatest renown with his multitude of songs. He once wrote:

I’d always found word-setting to be as natural as speaking. That very naturalness, plus love of verse, drew me to song. No matter what language we are

born to, we each, as individuals, speak that language in our own special manner. I set words to music as I talk them: which is what makes my songs personal—if indeed they are.

James R. Holmes in the *Dictionary of Contemporary Music* makes an astute appraisal of Rorem's songs:

Rorem is the foremost American composer of art songs. . . . Poetic texts in the pre-1954 songs were drawn from all literary periods; since then Rorem has used primarily the poetry of twentieth-century Americans (notably Paul Goodman, Theodore Roethke, Kenneth Koch, and Howard Moss) and of Walt Whitman. The 1944-47 songs were guided by traditional principles, concentrating on a smooth projection of the text by the voice in a lyric, diatonic modal style against a richly textured, chromatic accompaniment in the piano. The Whitman songs of 1957 exhibit greater use of angularity and dramatic timing in the vocal lines, while the fast-running, almost hysterical setting of *Visits to St. Elizabeth's (Bedlam)*, completed immediately after the Whitman, exhibits greater independence between vocal and piano lines. These two works presaged the dramatic songs of Rorem's "second period" when he returned to song writing in 1959. The lyrical songs since then are suffused with a simpler charm and build to clearer climaxes than do the earlier songs, while the piano parts, less chromatic, are leaner in texture. Vocal lines in the dramatic songs, sometimes completely unaccompanied, have rhythmic variety, are often highly melismatic, and employ wide leaps alternating with repeated-note passages. The piano parts contain extreme contrasts in dynamics and textures, often increasing the tension with clustered dissonances; they are no less important than the voice in expressing the text. Most vocal solo works since 1960 are cyclic.

Above all, Rorem's songs tend to be successful because of his sensitivity to prosody, his innate understanding of what is graceful for the voice, a finely honed theatrical instinct welded to an intensely lyrical style, and, in the pre-1963 songs, a tonal, conservative language. (Apropos of this last: *Poems of Love and the Rain* of 1963 and *War Scenes* of 1969, among the best of Rorem's works in any medium, display an impressive command of contemporary techniques.) Such characteristics have made a good part of Rorem's song catalogue attractive to singers and practical for them. But let the composer have the last word: "A songwriter's. . . success lies less in comprehending the words he is setting than in feeling them musically, and in being able to convince us of the necessity of his feeling."

A TALK WITH NED ROREM

PHILLIP RAMEY: When did you first begin to compose songs.

NED ROREM: The first real pieces I wrote date from when I was about fifteen, and they were songs. I didn't write them from interest in the voice but from interest in poetry. It was always a toss-up as to whether I would be a composer or a writer. Since I would have hated to give up either, I never did. Songs sprang from a desire to link two loves, words and music.

Actually, in those early days I didn't know much about the human voice. I wasn't particularly interested in the voice as an instrument until long after I'd produced what I still think of as some of my best songs—"The Lordly Hudson," "Alleluia," "Spring and Fall"—which had no models but which serve as models for me today. But my songs have never been written for love of the voice and they still aren't. Then and now, my aim is to give a piece of literature a dimension that it might not already have.

P. R.: Some poets don't want another dimension. I remember T. S. Eliot telling me, in relation to poems of his I had used for a song cycle, that he saw no reason whatsoever for setting poetry to music, and so always denied composers publication permission.

N. R.: That certainly was his point of view. As far as I know nobody ever got permission from Eliot. There is no such thing as an Eliot song in the repertory.

There are three kinds of poets: the Eliot kind, who don't want anything set; the Kenneth Koch kind, who can't wait (some perfectly reputable and well-known poets are simply *lusting* to have you set them); and the third kind, who don't care one way or another, even if they think that adding music is a bit superfluous (Apollinaire used to say about Poulenc, "If it amuses Francis, let him do it").

Worst of all are poets who write poems especially for the composer. They try to help him by putting in what they feel are musical phrases with vowels, and then tend to write inferior poems while attempting to make the composer's decisions for him.

P. R.: Has poetry you've set ever dictated a musical style?

N. R.: My style has always been pretty much the same—that is, my musical language, like my point of view, has remained the same. I might occasionally change my tone in different songs, but not my grammar.

P. R.: How do you feel about the violations of a text, especially the rhythmic violations, that seem to almost inevitably result when a poem is set to music.

N. R.: Since any song will break the bones of a poem, I try to take it easy, never repeating words unless they recur within the poem, and trying to set the poem in the rhythms of speech as I understand it. My attitude is completely different from that of a composer like Boulez, who illustrates—or frames—the poet rather than the poem. Which, of course, justifies for Boulez all kinds of changes.

P. R.: Do you read much poetry?

N. R.: I almost never read poetry anymore just for the joy of it, only with the intention of finding settable texts.

P. R.: Have you ever set poems that you didn't understand, which had ambiguities?

N. R.: Occasionally I have taken poetry that, as we Quakers say, "speaks to my condition." If it is very complicated I may not know, intellectually, exactly what it means. And perhaps ten years later I'll play the song through and say, "Is *that* what that poem means?" My own music will have clouded the meaning because I was so anxious to set the poem that I thought of it in terms of its being sung rather than what it said, and had heard it through my notes rather than through the words themselves.

P. R.: But can a poem be too complex to set?

N. R.: One might be for me, perhaps, that would not be for you. Boulez (I mention him because he is my antithesis) uses extremely complex poetry, like Mallarmé and René Char. But his aim is to reflect rather than to make comprehensible.

P. R.: You once said you could set anything, including the telephone directory.

N. R.: I used to have that attitude, but now I only want to set what, to repeat myself, "speaks to my condition"—and the telephone directory doesn't.

P. R.: Do you consider yourself essentially a vocally inspired composer?

N. R.: Yes. I always think vocally. Even when writing for violin or timpani, it's the vocalist in me trying to get out. Music is, after all, a song expression, and any composer worthy of the name is intrinsically a singer whether he allows it or not.

P. R.: You mean that when you write in other mediums you still, in some way, think of the voice?

N. R.: Yes, I imagine so. I know the other instruments well and love them, so it's gotten more and more subconscious. I love to orchestrate, but orchestration is not composition. Actually, when I'm composing an orchestral piece I try to write "singably," in the sense of giving physical pleasure to the instrumentalists.

P. R.: Is song composing generally a fast process with you?

N. R.: Well, "Visits to St. Elizabeth's" [1957] took five months. But normally I write quickly. The first song on this record, "Early in the Morning," was done in one sitting—about two hours. That evening I sat down and went through it taking out superfluous notes. Then I copied the music and it was finished. "I Am Rose" is only ten measures long—I wrote it in almost the time it takes to sing it. Offhand, every song in this album was probably written in one sitting of two hours, touched up within the next twenty-four hours, and then copied immediately. So they were in their final forms very quickly.

P. R.: That's rather a different process from composing a string quartet or piano sonata.

N. R.: Completely different. A large instrumental piece requires extended concentration and working out, while with a song I'll sometimes write the entire vocal line, without harmonies, on a train. Occasionally I'll have accompaniment figures or harmonies in my notebook and then I'll force and adjust the vocal line on top of what is already written.

P. R.: Then you compose away from the piano.

N. R.: I can, but I always write songs at the piano, where I sing them to myself with my little squeaky voice that nobody likes. Orchestral music is done

away from the piano, although as I don't have perfect pitch I make sure I'm always near one so I can check things. Britten apparently never wrote at the piano, while Stravinsky always did. There is no rule.

P. R.: Earlier you said that every composer is "intrinsically a singer." Do you find it odd that there are those who consider themselves to be instrumental composers exclusively?

N. R.: A composer like Walter Piston said that he could not write a song because he had no idea of how to set words to music and therefore the concept was completely foreign. With me it's the opposite: song comes so easily I always feel I'm cheating a little. Having the poem means that half the work is done, for the poem tends to dictate form. So you don't need much sense of form to write an effective song.

P. R.: Would you say there is an American song tradition?

N. R.: What do you mean by tradition? There is certainly an American song *history*. I would say that identifiably American songs date back no more than seventy-five years—to Edward MacDowell, John Alden Carpenter, composers of that ilk. But the golden age of song in the United States lasted only three decades, from 1930 to 1960, with composers like John Edmunds, David Diamond, Israel Citkowitz, Paul Bowles, Theodore Chanler, Virgil Thomson, William Flanagan, and Daniel Pinkham. From MacDowell's time to, say, 1950 there was a real song-recital tradition here which is, alas, no more. Today almost nobody seems to be writing songs.

P. R.: How do you feel about Charles Ives's songs?

N. R.: It used to be that of all our underrated composers Ives was the most overrated. He is no longer underrated, but he's still overrated. Of his huge output about ten percent is fantastically gorgeous, while the rest is grist for the mill. Of his hundred and fifty or so songs, fifteen are as fine as any in English. They don't give me the pleasure that a Debussy song does, or even one by John Edmunds, but that's taste rather than value. I admire Ives's songs more than I like them.

P. R.: And Samuel Barber's?

N. R.: Quaintly enough, I find Barber's songs the weakest part of his otherwise strong output. They

work, but they work in a turn-of-the-century way. They present few problems, and that's why singers sing them. Understand that I'm not criticizing Barber's language, only his tradition.

P. R.: Regarding language, do you think that the twelve-tone method mitigates against writing songs?

N. R.: It's pretty much meaningless to me, but I wouldn't presume to say that twelve-tone writing is necessarily unvocal, in the light of Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*. Twelve-tone music by its nature can illustrate only emotions gone awry, since there are no harmonic resolutions. Show me a convincing twelve-tone song on a merry text.

P. R.: You said before that almost nobody is writing songs today. Why do you continue to?

N. R.: Out of habit. My songs don't get sung all *that* much, but they do get published automatically (knock wood). Actually, the real reason I continue to write songs is simply that I like to.

P. R.: But would you like to if they *didn't* get performed or published?

N. R.: Probably not. But then, I doubt if I would have stuck it out as a composer if I hadn't had early success. Composers who are content to write for the shelf: that way lies madness.

Curiously enough, although I have a considerable reputation as a song composer, I have been writing nonvocal music, except for choral pieces and four or five isolated songs, for the last ten years. This is because in recent times no one ever commissioned me to write straight songs until a couple of years ago when Joyce Mathis asked for a cycle. Ironic, isn't it?

P. R.: Now, to the songs in this album.

N. R.: All of them are early—that is, none was written later than 1959. Also, every one of them is standard in the Schubert sense of having vocal lines with accompaniments that are not self-sufficient.

"Early in the Morning" is on a text by the late Robert Hillyer. The words are American in every sense, but the music is a memory of French pop songs. Now, insofar as they link two arts, all songs are hybrid. This one is doubly so because it tries to be French in an American way. Although it is not narrational, a Frenchman who didn't under-

stand English might find it so because of the nature of the tune. I was living in Paris at the time I wrote “Early in the Morning” [1954] and was feeling nostalgic: the poem is all about being an American in Paris.

“I Am Rose,” on a darling poem of Gertrude Stein’s, is short, about ten seconds long. There are as many ways to sing it as there are singers, and it can go fast or slow or in between. It’s my masterpiece.

P. R.: Oh?

N. R.: I’m being cute. “To You” was composed in the summer of 1956 as one of five songs on Walt Whitman poems. It’s about two strangers who meet in the street. A talented dilettante named Wilder Luke Burnap, who had a not-unpleasant baritone voice, asked me to write those songs for him to sing self-accompanied on the virginals (not that one thinks of Whitman as a virginals poet).

“Pippa’s Song,” on a poem of Robert Browning’s, was written in Paris in 1953, the first of six songs for extreme high voice and orchestra commissioned by a coloratura named Virginia Fleming. In the original version the voice states a theme, a flute imitates it, then a trumpet. Of course, that sort of thing doesn’t come out as one would wish on a piano—all the rustlings of spring sound a bit corny with piano tremolos—but it works well enough. Instead of doing the usual coloratura kind of thing with the vocal line I simply wrote the music I always write, but about a fifth higher. The words float around up there like silver threads amongst golden clouds. You can’t possibly understand the words, but in this case I’m to blame, not the singer.

“Spring” was one of my first songs, dating from 1947. It came about at the suggestion of John Edmunds, who told me I should write a song on a ground bass.

“Spring and Fall” is dedicated to the great vocal teacher Eva Gauthier, who was very kind to me and whose classes I used to accompany for a living. She was about the only teacher of French vocal literature during the forties and fifties.

It was the pianist Leon Fleischer who suggested Robert Herrick. There are ten songs in the cycle *Flight for Heaven*, all about flirtation, love, illness, and death. “Upon Julia’s Clothes” concerns liking a woman for the vibration of her clothes. “To the Willow Tree” is about mooning for lost love; jilted lovers classically sit under willow trees. *Flight for Heaven* was written in 1950 for the French bass Doda Conrad.

“Lullaby of the Woman of the Mountain,” on a poem of Padraic Pearse’s, also dates from 1950. Nell Tangeman had given me a big book of Irish poetry and asked for some songs. I had already written *Six Irish Poems* for voice and orchestra for her, and I wrote several non-orchestral songs on poems from the book. This is one of them.

The last three songs on this record—“Snake,” “Root Cellar,” and “My Papa’s Waltz”—are the most recent [1959]. I was goaded into doing them by soprano Alice Esty (I’ve written about her and Nell Tangeman and Eva Gauthier in my article “The American Art Song from 1930 to 1960—A Personal Survey” [New World Records 80243-2, *But Yesterday Is Not Today*]). These songs are on Theodore Roethke’s marvelous, very singable poems. I have to be convinced by a poem to produce a good song. I’d had Roethke in the back of my mind long before I actually set him. He’s second only to Paul Goodman as the poet I most often return to.

THE RECORDINGS

Side Two

SONGS OF NED ROREM

Recorded 1962-63 in New York. All selections originally issued on Columbia MS-6561.

Band 1

Early in the Morning

(Robert Hillyer)

Donald Gramm, baritone; Ned Rorem piano.

Early in the morning
Of a lovely summer day,
As they lowered the bright awning
At the outdoor cafe,
I was breakfasting on croissants
And café au lait
Under greenery like scenery,
Rue François Premier.

The were hosing the hot pavement
With a dash of flashing spray
And a smell of summer showers
When the dust is drenched away.
Under greenery like scenery,
Rue François Premier.

I was twenty and a lover
And in Paradise to stay,
Very early in the morning
Of a lovely summer day.

From *Collected Poems*, by Robert Hillyer.
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Robert Hillyer. Copyright © 1961 by Robert
Hillyer. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A.
Knopf, Inc.

Band 2

I Am Rose

(Gertrude Stein)

Regina Sarfaty, mezzo-soprano; Ned
Rorem piano.

I am Rose my eyes are blue
I am Rose and who are you
I am Rose and when I sing
I am Rose like anything.

Reprinted from *The World is Round*, © 1938
& 1967, by Gertrude Stein, a Young Scott
Book, by permission of Addison-Wesley
Publishing Company, Inc.

Band 3

To You

(Walt Whitman)

Donald Gramm, baritone; Ned Rorem
piano.

Stranger, if you passing meet me and
desire to speak to me,
Why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?

Band 4

Pippa's Song

(Robert Browning)

Gianna d'Angelo, soprano; Ned Rorem,
piano.

The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearl'd;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven
All's right with the world.

Note: For a setting of the same poem, com-
posed in 1900 by Mrs. H. H. A. Beach, the lis-
tener is referred to New World Records NW
247, *When I Have Sung My Songs: The
American Art Song 1900-1940* (Side One,
Band 2).

Band 5

Spring

(Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Phyllis Curtin, soprano; Ned Rorem,
piano.

Nothing is so beautiful as spring—
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and
lovely and lush;
Thrush's eggs look like low heavens,
and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so
rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear
him sing;
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms,
they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in
a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too
have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in
the beginning
In Eden garden—Have, get, before it

cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, Lord, and sour
with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and
boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy child, thy
choice and worthy the winning.

Band 6

Spring and Fall

(Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Donald Gramm, baritone; Ned Rorem
piano.

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Golden-grove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can
you?

Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leaf-meal
lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Band 7

Two Songs from Flight for Heaven

(Robert Herrick)

Upon Julia's Clothes To the Willow Tree

Donald Gramm, baritone; Ned Rorem
piano.

UPON JULIA'S CLOTHES

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then, methinks, how sweetly
flows
The liquefaction of her clothes!

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see
That brave vibration each way free,
O how that glittering taketh me!

TO THE WILLOW TREE

Thou art to all lost love the best,
The only true plant found,
Wherewith young men and maids dis-
trest,
And left of love, are crown'd.

When once the lover's rose is dead,
Or laid aside forlorn:
Then willow garlands 'bout the head
Bedew'd with tears are worn.

When with neglect, the lover's bane,
Poor maids rewarded be
For their love lost, their only gain
Is but a wreath from thee.

And underneath thy cooling shade,
When weary of the light,
The love-spent youth and love-sick
maid
Come to weep out the night.

Band 8

Lullaby of the Woman of the Mountain

(Padraic Pearse)

Charles Bressler, tenor; Ned Rorem,
piano.

O little head of gold!
O candle of my house!
Thou wilt guide all who travel this
country.
Be quiet, O house!
And O little grey mice,
Stay at home tonight
In your hidden lairs!
O moths on the window, fold your
wings!
Stay at home tonight, O little black
chafers.
O plover and O curlew, over my house
do not travel!
Speak not, O barnacle goose, going over
the mountain here!
O creatures of the mountain, that wake
so early
Stir not tonight till the sun whitens
over you.

Band 9

Snake

(Theodore Roethke)

Gianna d'Angelo, soprano; Ned Rorem
piano.

I saw a young snake glide
Out of the mottled shade
And hang, limp on a stone:
A thin mouth, and a tongue
Stayed, in the still air.

It turned; it drew away;
Its shadow bent in half;
It quickened and was gone.

I felt my slow blood warm.
I longed to be that thing,
The pure, sensuous form.

And I may be, some time.

Composed 1958
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Band 10

Root Cellar

(Theodore Roethke)

Donald Gramm, baritone; Ned Rorem
piano.

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank
as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for
chinks in the dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed
crates,
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like
tropical snakes.
And what a congress of stinks!
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against
slippery planks.
Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small
breath.

Composed 1958
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Band 11

My Papa's Waltz

(Theodore Roethke)

Donald Gramm, baritone; Ned Rorem
piano.

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Fell off the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not contain itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Composed 1958
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DISCOGRAPHY

See current Schwann catalogues.

Side One - SAMUEL BARBER - Total time 16:20

- 1 DOVER BEACH, Op. 3 (Matthew Arnold) 7:48
(publ. G. Schirmer, Inc.)
Samuel Barber, baritone. Curtis String Quartet: Jascha Brodsky, violin; Charles Jaffe, violin; Max Aronoff, viola;
Orlando Cole, cello
- MÉLODIES PASSAGÈRES, Op. 27 (Rainer Maria Rilke)
(publ. G. Schirmer, Inc.)
- 2 Puisque tout passe 1:16
3 Un cygne 2:16
4 Tombeau dans un parc 1:40
5 Le clocher chante 1:19
6 Départ 1:39
Pierre Bernac, baritone; Francis Poulenc, piano

Side Two-NED ROREM (stereo recordings) Total time 18:03

1 EARLY IN THE MORNING (Robert Hillyer)	1:45
<i>(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)</i>	
Donald Gramm, baritone	
2 I AM ROSE (Gertrude Stein)	0:17
<i>(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)</i>	
Regina Sarfaty, mezzo-soprano	
3 TO YOU (Walt Whitman)	0:36
<i>(publ. Elkan-Vogel Co., Inc.)</i>	
Donald Gramm, baritone	
4 PIPPA'S SONG (Robert Browning)	1:53
<i>(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)</i>	
Gianna d'Angelo, soprano	
5 SPRING (Gerard Manley Hopkins)	1:49
<i>(publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)</i>	
Phyllis Curtin, soprano	
6 SPRING AND FALL (Gerard Manley Hopkins)	1:53
<i>(publ. Mercury Music Corp.)</i>	
Donald Gramm, baritone	
7 Two Songs from FLIGHT FOR HEAVEN (Robert Herrick)	
<i>(publ. Mercury Music Corp.)</i>	
UPON JULIA'S CLOTHES	0:41
TO THE WILLOW TREE	2:02
Donald Gramm, baritone	
8 LULLABY OF THE WOMAN OF THE MOUNTAIN	
(Padraic Pearse)	2:00
<i>(publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)</i>	
Charles Bressler, tenor	
9 SNAKE (Theodore Roethke)	0:51
<i>(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)</i>	
Gianna d'Angelo, soprano	
10 ROOT CELLAR (Theodore Roethke)	2:08
<i>(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)</i>	
Donald Gramm, baritone	
11 MY PAPA'S WALTZ (Theodore Roethke)	1:21
<i>(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)</i>	
Donald Gramm, baritone	

All selections on Side Two accompanied by the composer
Full discographic information may be found within the individual discussions of the works in the liner notes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to RCA Records for *Dover Beach* and to CBS Records for all other selections on this record.

Program consultant: David Hamilton

Rerecording engineer: Jerry Bruck

Mastering: Lee Hulko, Sterling Sound

Cover art: Leo Katz. "Pegasus." Engraving and etching.

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (Pennell Fund)

Cover design: Elaine Sherer Cox

Library of Congress Card No.78-750041

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