



# New World Records

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## William Schuman: Undertow — Morton Gould: Fall River Legend

New World NW 253

“If the beat falls in the right place for my purposes,” wisecracked the late, great Ruth St. Denis, “it’s great music.” The First Lady of the American Dance, whose innovations affected the course of both dance and theater around the world, was joking, of course, but there was an element of truth in her seeming irreverence. Above all, the dancer requires music that is “danceable,” and the choreographer either seeks out already written music that inspires him to create movements equivalent to sound patterns or he commissions new music to support an already conceived choreographic plan. Ballet masterpieces have emerged in both categories: from George Balanchine’s world famous *Serenade* (set to Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade in C* for String Orchestra), a supreme example of a dance genre that St. Denis named “music visualizations,” to such great ballet-dramas with specially commissioned scores as Antony Tudor’s *Undertow*, music by William Schuman, and Agnes de Mille’s *Fall River Legend*, score composed by Morton Gould.

American music for American theater dance dates back to the early days of the Republic. The easiest way for a ballet master to be assured that “the beat falls in the right place” was to compose his own music, and early dancing masters, who accompanied their classes by playing the violin themselves, often did just that. Dancers, choreographers, and ballet masters coming to America from France in the wake of the French Revolution brought with them European ballet scores by Gluck, Grétry, and others, or remembered bits of opera music that could be adapted for

American productions. Alexander Reinagle, an orchestra conductor, composed music for Harlequinades, a popular form of entertainment, often patriotic in theme, that lasted from the days of George Washington well into the nineteenth century. A dancer admired by President Washington was John Durang, our country’s first major dancer, whose most popular solo, part ballet and part folk dance, was *Durang’s Hornpipe*, composed by a German-born American, Franz Hoffmeister. The music exists to this day, as does a piece of music from 1797 that was included in a new ballet—the short passage was described as “a new country dance, called Yankee Doodle.”

Lillian Moore, the late American dance historian, discovered that a distinguished French refugee, the choreographer-ballet master Pierre Landrin Dupont, composed music in addition to choreographing, dancing, and producing and that his musical contributions included minuets composed for a performance attended by General Washington and another written for Mrs. Washington. Some fragments remain, and two of his minuets are included in Albert Stoessel’s orchestral suite, *Early Americana*.

Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, ballet enterprise in America, if it existed at all, was at a standstill. Dancing survived at balls and cotillions, in cakewalk contests, and in minstrel shows. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a new dance age was born. Isadora Duncan, untrained but fired with a vision of “I see America dancing,” dared to dance to musical masterworks (symphonies included). Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn not only created

their "music visualizations" to Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Scriabin, and Honegger, but also commissioned new scores by American composers, among them Charles Wakefield Cadman and Homer Grunn.

With the birth, or rebirth, of American ballet and the emergence of that new theatrical dance form known, for want of a better name, as "modern dance," commissioned scores for dance increased accordingly. John Alden Carpenter, who had composed for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, turned his efforts to writing for American companies; Chicago's Ruth Page commissioned scores by William Grant Still (one of the first black musicians to compose for dance), Jerome Moross (*Frankie and Johnny*), and Aaron Copland's first score for ballet, *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* (later, Copland composed *Billy the Kid* for Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Caravan and *Appalachian Spring* for Martha Graham); Richard Rodgers tried his hand at ballet with *Ghost Town*, Virgil Thomson with *Filling Station*, Paul Bowles with *Yankee Clipper*; Samuel Barber, Henry Cowell, Wallingford Riegger, Norman Lloyd, Walter Piston, and others collaborated with the moderns. Some, such as Genevieve Pitot, composed or arranged dance music for musical comedies, wrote scores for modern dance works, and created ballets. The list of American composers who collaborated with choreographers is both extensive and impressive.

Both *Undertow* and *Fall River Legend* were commissioned by the American Ballet Theatre more than thirty years ago and both remain in the company's repertory. That American composers were engaged to write the scores is not at all surprising. The Ballet Theatre, as ABT was called when it was formally founded in 1939, initially divided itself into three wings: a classical (or traditional) ballet wing under Anton Dolin; a contemporary English ballet wing under Antony Tudor; and an American wing headed by Eugene Loring, who had already created *Billy the Kid* and *Yankee Clipper* for Kirstein's Ballet Caravan. Even at its debut on January 11, 1940, at New York's Center Theater, in Rockefeller Center, The Ballet Theatre heralded through its opening program a continuing concern for American music as well as for American choreographers, dancers, and designers. For along with an unforgettably brilliant performance of Michel Fokine's *Les Sylphides* to the music of Chopin came the experimental, controversial, innovative *The Great American Goof*, with book and spoken words by William Saroyan, choreography by Loring, and a score by Henry Brant.

That same season saw de Mille's *Black Ritual*, also experimental, with an all-black dance unit incorporated into The Ballet Theatre for that one production. *Undertow* entered the company's repertory on April 10, 1945, and *Fall River Legend* on April 22, 1948.

Both *Undertow* and *Fall River Legend* are about murder. Each ballet's principal character—with whom we of the audience sympathize—is a murderer. Both are dramatic ballets, although the former is clearly allegorical while the latter is narrative. Psychological elements are at the root of their conflicts rather than the old-time fairy-tale contest between good and evil.

*Undertow*, a ballet in one act with prologue and epilogue, is a major work in that category of ballet described in the late thirties and early forties as "dramatic" or "psychological" ballet. Tudor, with his *Jardin aux Lilas* (first produced in England in 1936) and *Pillar of Fire*, his first American-made ballet (1942), was a leader in a movement that sought to bring together the technique of classical ballet with the new expressivities of modern dance. The hero of *Undertow* was neither Prince nor Lover but one called The Transgressor. At the conclusion, there was neither a Happy Ending nor a Sweetly Poetic Death, but, rather, murder, accusation, guilt, and ostracism.

The names of characters in *Undertow* are drawn from mythology and thus serve allegorical functions in the unfolding of the drama from temptation to transgression. The settings and some of the costumes (by Raymond Breinin) suggest an English or European city of an earlier period, but the events could have occurred anywhere and the Transgressor-hero could have been produced by any society.

The Prologue presents Cybele, an ancient mother-goddess, in labor. She is lying down face-up, her hands describe the arc of a swollen belly, her legs and pelvis move in anguished distortions, and from her loins a child is thrust into the world. The mother pulls a cord tightly around her newly restored waist, rejects her child, and departs with her lover, Pollux. The Transgressor has been formed by his mother's flesh and his mother's rejection.

During the central portion of the ballet, the Transgressor grows from youth to manhood, and his hatred of women increases accordingly. At first he is attracted to the innocence of Aganippe, then hypnotized by the glitter of Volupia the streetwalker. He is briefly drawn to the sermonizing, moralizing Polyhymnia and wonders at the careless nuptial antics of Hymen and Hera. Ate, a figure of reckless

evil, fascinates and repels him as he observes her poisonous whoring, and he attempts unsuccessfully to kill her. Finally, the alluring but wholly destructive Medusa captures him, but the urge to murder is successful this time. He strangles Medusa as she tries to seduce him.

In the Epilogue, he stands alone, branded. Not even the innocent Aganippe will comfort him, for she points an accusing finger at him and shows him a balloon she has let loose. It is free to fly where it will while he is trapped by Fate.

William Schuman's score is a "musicalization" of Tudor's danced drama. In the music, one hears—as one sees in the movement—the identifying characteristics of the players: the ironically "sacred" melodies of Polyhymnia, the gushing and bubbling of Hymen and Hera, the drunken close harmony of three charwomen, the slimy sinuosities of Ate, and the shrieking, shattering, no-stops explosion that is the murder of Medusa.

Of course, the old dramatic ballets from the Romantic Age (approximately 1825-1850) had their musical leitmotifs also. One of the first and best was Adolphe Adam's score for *Giselle* (1841), with musical themes for Giselle, Albrecht, Hilarion, and the Wilis. With his score for *Undertow*, Schuman did not spurn this form so essential to dramatic or narrative ballet. Instead he brought it into this century musically as well as dramatically, and, as Tudor did in his choreography, probed a dimension rarely explored and exploited before the days of Duncan and St. Denis: depth—of character, of emotion, and, most important, of human behavior.

William Schuman, born in New York City in 1910, has often been a collaborator in the world of dance and has always been one of its friends. *Undertow* was his first major dance score. It was followed in 1948 by his score for Martha Graham's *Night Journey*, a masterpiece not only in the Graham repertory but also, by all standards of excellence, in the field of contemporary dance. *Judith*, the first symphonic work created for a solo dancer, was commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra, and was performed in 1950 by Martha Graham. As president of the Juilliard School of Music from 1945 to 1962 (after a ten-year professorship at Sarah Lawrence College), Schuman fostered the art of dance by establishing a full-fledged Dance Department, under Martha Hill's direction. During his tenure as president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City (1962-1968), all forms of dance—ballet, modern, and ethnic—received his enthusiastic support along with the art most closely associated with him, music. Indeed, he once told me that

just about the best way for an American composer to have his music most often heard was "to have his music seen."

Morton Gould (born on Long Island in 1913) is another American composer whose music has been "seen" countless times. How often, do you suppose, has Jerome Robbins' ballet *Interplay* been performed by the American Ballet Theatre since 1945, the New York City Ballet since 1952, the Joffrey Ballet since 1972? As "American Concertette," it was first presented in 1945 as part of Billy Rose's *Concert Varieties*, in which Robbins and others of his Ballet Theatre colleagues also performed. But as major an accomplishment as the score of *Interplay* is for the dance, it is but one item in the prolific output of a composer who has written symphonies and symphonettes, concerti and rhapsodies, music for Broadway shows, movies, vaudeville, revues, patriotic occasions, as well as a wonderful *Tap Dance Concerto* (performed by Danny Daniels) in which the tapping feet constitute the solo instrument in the orchestra. And, of course, a ballet that is a perennial favorite, *Fall River Legend*.

*Fall River Legend* is based on the Lizzie Borden murder case. Lizzie was actually acquitted of killing her father and her stepmother, but for dramatic purposes, the choreographer, Agnes de Mille, found her guilty. Since she was departing from history and going into legend, Miss de Mille called her principal character The Accused. This one-act ballet, in eight scenes and a prologue, unfolds the story of a girl who loses her loving and very tender mother, who dies of an apparent heart attack. A stern, ominous family friend, whom the child has always disliked, marries the forlorn widower. The child is tormented, or imagines she is, by the Stepmother, who keeps her from having any social life and who suggests to the Father, the concerned young Pastor who befriends Lizzie, and others that the girl is not quite right in the head.

Driven to boredom and distraction by confinement in her own home, she leaves the company of her parents (Scene 2) to chop some kindling wood for the fireplace. As she picks up the ax, the Stepmother cringes in fright. Lizzie, on an innocent errand, smiles. But, perhaps, the sight of the terrified woman plants the seed of an idea. Later the Stepmother interrupts a happy scene at a church social, tries to convince the Pastor that Lizzie is "touched," and forces her to return home. The desperate Lizzie again picks up the ax (Scene 5), but this time it is to seek escape through the only way that seems possible, murder.

Besides providing the de Mille choreography with a rhythmic base, the Gould score supports gestures, movements, dances (solos, duets, trios, ensembles), and even tableaux with sounds that augur, mirror, comment on, and report the events of the melodrama. There are Lizzie's soft and lovely dreams of romance, in which all of youth passes before her eyes; there are the sounds of hymns and good fellowship as she seeks refuge in church meetings and socials; there are the longing phrases of love for a lost mother; and, after murder has been done and Lizzie opens the door of the house to tell the neighbors of the horror she has "discovered," her shout is extended into the agonized cry of full orchestra.

With Morton Gould in *Fall River Legend*, as with William Schuman in *Undertow*, the structure of score and the structure of choreography come together in theatrical unity so that the content and intent of the choreography are heard as well as seen. These ballets make looking and listening co-equal.

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(The first cast of *Undertow* was headed by Hugh Laing as The Transgressor; Nana Gollner, Medusa; Alicia Alonso, Ate; Diana Adams, Cybele; John Kriza, Pollux; Lucia Chase, Polyhymnia; Shirley Eckl, Volupia; Patricia Barker, Aganippe. Although the role of The Accused in *Fall River Legend* was created for Nora Kaye, illness prevented her from dancing the part until sometime after the premiere, when it became one of her most celebrated characterizations. At the premiere of *Fall River Legend*, The Accused was played by Alicia Alonso; the Pastor, John Kriza; the Stepmother, Muriel Bentley; the Father, Peter Gladke; the Mother, Diana Adams.)

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#### *the artists*

*Joseph Levine* was music director and conductor of the Ballet Theatre Orchestra from 1950-58. During his tenure with the company he recorded sixteen ballet scores for the Capitol label, and conducted three Ballet Theatre "specials" on the *Omnibus* television series. Mr. Levine was the pianist for The Philadelphia Orchestra from 1940-50, and a faculty member of the Curtis Institute (where he had studied with Josef Hofmann, Wanda Landowska, Artur Rodzinski, and Fritz Reiner). He was music director of the Omaha Symphony and Omaha Opera from 1958-69, and associate conductor of the Seattle Symphony from 1969-73, and of the Honolulu Symphony and Hawaii Opera Theater from 1973-76.

*The New York Philharmonic* was founded in 1842. Among its celebrated permanent conductors have been Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, Artur Rodzinski, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, and, beginning with the 1977-78 season, Zubin Mehta. Since the 1930s the Philharmonic has made hundreds of recordings, first for Victor, then, beginning in the 1940s, for Columbia.

*Dimitri Mitropoulos* (1896-1960) began his career as a composer and pianist. In the mid-1920s, after a five-year stint as répétiteur at the Berlin Staatsoper, he became the conductor of the municipal orchestra in his native Athens. Soon thereafter he was leading major orchestras throughout the Continent. He made his United States debut with the Boston Symphony in 1936 and became permanent conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony the following year. In 1949 he shared the conductorship of the New York Philharmonic with Leopold Stokowski; in 1950 Mitropoulos was appointed the Philharmonic's musical director. During his eight years with the orchestra Mitropoulos gave many premieres of contemporary American works and inaugurated concert performances of twentieth-century operas—an innovation at that time—most notably, legendary interpretations of *Wozzeck* and *Elektra*. After leaving the Philharmonic he appeared frequently with the Metropolitan Opera and with orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic. Mitropoulos died in Milan during a rehearsal at the Teatro alla Scala. He made numerous recordings, chiefly for Columbia, many of which are devoted to American and European music of our time. Maestro Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic may also be heard on NW 286, in a performance of Leon Kirchner's Piano Concerto No. 1.

Side One Total time 24:12

WILLIAM SCHUMAN: *UNDERTOW*

(publ. G. Schirmer, Inc.)

Ballet Theatre Orchestra, Joseph Levine, conductor

(Recorded April 21, 1953, in New York; originally issued on Capitol P-8238)

Side Two Total time 24:23

MORTON GOULD: *FALL RIVER LEGEND*

(publ. G. Schirmer, Inc.)

The New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

(Recorded March 31, 1952, in New York; originally issued on Columbia ML-4616)

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