

PETER SERKIN

New World Records 80344

**Piano Works by
IGOR STRAVINSKY
STEFAN WOLPE
PETER LIEBERSON**

Stravinsky wrote his *Serenade en La* for the phonograph, which in 1925 was just beginning to seem more than a toy. At his first negotiations with Columbia the suggestion was made that he write something specifically to fit the three-minute capacity of each of four ten-inch 78rpm sides. He responded with the *Serenade*, completing it that October, though it was not recorded until 1934.

The title, Stravinsky explained, does not mean that the *Serenade* is in A, rather that he had made "all the music revolve about an axis of sound which happened to be *la*." He called the work a serenade, to suggest the entertainments commissioned by eighteenth-century patrons, Columbia being his Esterhazy or Haffner, but in his autobiography had this to say about the difference:

Whereas these compositions were written for ensembles of greater or less importance, I wanted to condense mine into a smaller number of movements for one polyphonic instrument. In these pieces I represented some of the most typical moments of this kind of fete. I began with a solemn entry, a sort of hymn; this I followed by a solo of ceremonial homage paid by the artist to the guests; the third part, rhythmical and sustained, took the place of the various kinds of dance music intercalated in...serenades and suites of the period; and I ended with a sort of epilogue which was tantamount to an ornate signature with numerous carefully inscribed flourishes.

Stravinsky called the piano "the fulcrum of my musical discoveries." He composed at the keyboard, and the sharply defined attack of this most refined--and polyphonic--of percussion instruments informs the sonorous ideal of most of his work. Yet he wrote comparatively little piano music as such, most of it in the 1920s. The 1924 Sonata has three movements, a toccata with lyric touches that have a certain whiff of Parisian cabaret, an ornate Adagietto, and a Finale that is mostly a two-part invention in which the composer rejoices in the polyphonic possibilities of his instrument.

There was much talk then about "back to Bach," and in the two quick movements you can hear why, but the important presence in the Adagietto is the Beethoven of the slow movements of the sonatas Opus 10, No. 1, Opus 22, and Opus 31, No. 1, all of which Stravinsky had recently studied in an attempt to get over his antipathy to that composer's pathos. Stravinsky's Adagietto, the only one of the Sonata's three movements to have a verbal tempo mark rather than just a metronome number, is, with all its coolness of manner and concern with elegance of presentation, a deeply affecting movement, a miracle of unostentatiously original piano style, and a feast of inspired melody. (Soon after, George Balanchine would discover the visual counterpart of such lines.)

Stefan Wolpe (NW 306, 308) was born in Berlin in 1902 and died in 1972 in New York. He is missing from most of the maps and Baedekers to recent music, yet he was a giant in his generation, admired by contemporaries as different from him and from each other (except in their mastery) as Elliott Carter (NW 219, 333) and Milton Babbitt (NW 209, 307), and a central influence on composers as

diverse as Ralph Shapey (NW 254, 333), Morton Feldman, and Charles Wuorinen (NW 209, 306). Carter wrote in a memorial article in *Perspectives of New Music*, "Comet-like radiance, conviction, fervent intensity, penetrating thought on many levels of seriousness and humor, combined with breathtaking originality marked the inner and outer life of Stefan Wolpe, as they do his compositions."

The list of those of who formed him is wildly varied-Franz Schreker, Busoni, Scriabin, Satie, Webern, Paul Whiteman, and the artists associated with the Bauhaus. He traversed, in the course of his intensely lived, often turbulent life, many styles and manners, perhaps finding a totally settled and resolved, concentrated musical language of his own only in those amazing last years when to his other struggles was added the need to come to terms with being slowly crippled by Parkinson's disease. As he lacked any gift for self-promotion and his music is frighteningly difficult, it is no wonder that his work has not been much in evidence in the marketplace. His is, nonetheless, some of the most eloquent and compelling music of our century.

Hardly any of Wolpe's admirers would blindfold identify the *Pastorale* as a work of his. Written in 1939 for the then very young pianist Jack Maxin, it is an enchanting miniature that sounds like something French from between the wars, but something French that has been unaccountably haunted by Mahler.

The Passacaglia is the last in a set of *Four Studies on Basic Row*, written in 1936 but revised shortly before his death. Wolpe was seeking ways to combat what he regarded as a static quality in much twelve-tone music, and he achieved here a piece as grandly expressive and varied as it is rigorously worked. The sequence of variations unfolds as a great crescendo and acceleration, though the close is quiet.

Wolpe wrote *Form IV--Broken Sequences* for Robert Miller, a fine pianist who died of cancer at an early age. To the date July 1969 on his manuscript, Wolpe added in parentheses "in his 67th year." Here is late Wolpe at its powerful best, melodic lines of extraordinary tensile strength, firmly sculpted counterpoint spelled by chords in rich and original harmonies, a delectable suppleness of rhythm, and a constantly surprising sense of forward progress-broken sequences indeed -that confidently asserts its own incontrovertible laws.

Peter Lieberson (b. 1946) (NW 325), who lives in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, wrote his *Bagatelles* in 1985 for a concert to benefit the All-Newton Music School. They are dedicated to Andrew Wolf, a pianist who headed that school and who was also destroyed young by cancer, and to Peter Serkin, who first played them. Lieberson is the son of Goddard Lieberson, a composer best known as the visionary record executive who gave Columbia its glory years, and Vera Zorina, the dancer and reciter. Peter Lieberson learned his craft from Milton Babbitt, Charles Wuorinen, Donald Martino (NW 210, 320), and Martin Boykan. Formally and informally, they organized and ratified what Lieberson had learned from the wide listening to twentieth-century music he had done on his own as he worked to stretch the Stravinsky-, Broadway-, and jazz-dominated horizons of his boyhood. His life in music has been shaped by his study-and now also teaching-of Vajrayana Buddhism, which has affirmed his sense of discipline, at the same time granting him greater ease and freedom, expanding his view, as he has put it, from tunnel vision to panoramic.

The first of the three *Bagatelles*, "Proclamation," is prelude and brief, full of arpeggios much varied in range and speed, liquid in harmony and tone. Its brevity is effective preparation for the wide spaces of "Spontaneous Songs," a slow movement with a wonderful sense of patience and calm. Finally, "The

Dance," a dance whose energy is gentle, much of it a "one-part invention," which closes in delicious tranquility.

—Michael Steinberg

Michael Steinberg is *Artistic Adviser for the San Francisco Symphony*.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Igor Stravinsky

Capriccio. Charlotte Zelka, piano; Southwest German Radio Orchestra, Harold Byrns conducting. Turnabout 34130.

Concerto for Piano and Wind Orchestra. Adam Fellegi, piano; Budapest Symphony, Janos Ferencsik conducting. Hungaraton 12021.

Concerto for Two Solo Pianos. Alfred Brendel and Charlotte Zelka, pianos. Turnabout 34465.

Concerto for Two Solo Pianos; Sonata for Two Pianos. Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, pianos. CSP AMS-6333.

---. Paul Jacobs and Ursula Oppens, pianos. Nonesuch 71347.

Petrouchka. Alfred Brendel, piano. Turnabout 34258E.

---. Misha Dichter, piano. Philips 6514323.

---. Maurizio Pollini, piano. Deutsche Grammophon 2530225.

Serenade in A; Sonata; other works. Noel Lee, piano. Nonesuch H-71212.

Stefan Wolpe

Chamber Piece No. 2. Parnassus, Anthony Korf conducting. New World NW 306.

Enactments, for three pianos. Continuum. Nonesuch 78024.

Form. Robert Miller, piano. CRI S-306.

----. Russell Sherman, piano. New World NW 308.

Form IV: Broken Sequences. Robert Miller, piano. CRI S-306.

Four Studies on Basic Roms: Passacaglia. David Tudor, piano. Counterpoint 5330E.

Piece in Two Parts for Solo Violin. Rose Mary Harbison, violin. New World NW 308.

Peter Lieberson

Concerto for Four Groups of Instruments. Speculum Musicae, Peter Lieberson conducting. CRI S-350

Piano Fantasy. Ursula Oppens, piano. CRI S350.

Lalita (Chamber Variations). Speculum Musicae, Robert Black conducting. Bridge BDG 2005.

Piano Concerto. Peter Serkin, piano; Boston Symphony, Seiji Ozawa conducting. New World NW 325.

PETER SERKIN, is renowned for his performances and recordings of a broad range of repertoire. He studied at the Curtis Institute with Lee Luvisi, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, and Rudolf Serkin, and also worked with the late Marcel Moyse and Ernst Oster. He continues to study with Horszowski and Karl Ulrich Schnabel. Serkin has worked closely with such composers as Olivier Messiaen, Toru Takemitsu, Luciano Berio, and Peter Lieberson; he was a founding member of the chamber group Tashi. He has recorded for Pro Arte, Deutsche Grammophon, RCA, Columbia, and Vanguard, and can be heard with the Boston Symphony on New World's recording of Peter Lieberson's Piano Concerto (NW 325).

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Peter Serkin, Piano

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Igor Stravinsky: Serenade in A
(publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)
1- Hymn (3:12)
2- Romanza (3:14)
3- Rondoletto (2:39)
4- Cadenza Finale (3:07)

Igor Stravinsky: Sonata
(publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)
5- Comodo (3:02)
6- Adagietto (5:06)
7- Finale (2:26)

Peter Lieberson: Bagatelles
(publ. G. Schirmer, Inc.)
8- Proclamation (1:18)
9- Spontaneous Songs (5:46)
10- The Dance (3:11)
11- Stefan Wolpe: Pastorale (2:08)
12- Stefan Wolpe: Form IV: Broken Sequences (4:17)
(publ. Henmar Press, Inc.)
13- Stefan Wolpe: Passacaglia (from Four Studies on Basic Rows) (13:12)
(publ. Merion Music, Inc.)

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