

John Knowles Paine

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 23; Overture to Shakespeare's "As You Like It"
New World 80374-2

John Knowles Paine's Symphony No. 1 is a milestone in the development of American music. It was not the first symphony written by an American (George Frederick Bristow, for many years a violinist in the New York Philharmonic, had already written several), but Paine's two essays in the medium are the first that could be received by the musical community here and abroad as works of a composer fully trained to the highest international (i.e., German) standards. Their premieres—The First Symphony in 1876, the Second in 1880—may be said to mark the effective beginning of the American symphonic tradition, inspiring an entire generation of gifted composers to aim at the most demanding forms, the largest scale of work.

Paine's musical gifts were recognized early, even in the somewhat rustic precincts of Portland, Maine, where he was born on January 9, 1839, the son of a shop owner who sold music and repaired umbrellas and other mechanical devices. His musical aptitude was apparent to his teacher, Hermann Kotschmar, a German immigrant musician, under whose direction the young man (at age sixteen) composed a string quartet. It was obvious that his talents deserved the finest musical education obtainable, and in the 1850s that meant going to Germany. He went to Berlin for three years (part of that time sharing rooms with Alexander Wheelock Thayer, who was just then embarking on his lifelong project, a great Beethoven biography). In Berlin Paine pursued studies in organ (he was a virtuoso of the instrument) and composition. Some of his first works were elaborate sets of variations for solo organ, which he performed in his recitals.

Upon returning to the United States, he settled in Boston. Soon his Mass in D (New World 80262-2) persuaded many that here was a significant new voice, even though only portions of the work were performed. (It had a full performance with orchestra in Berlin.) Eventually he convinced Harvard's president, Charles Eliot Norton, of the importance of musical studies in a university, and in 1873 Paine was named assistant professor of music. For the rest of Paine's life he combined composition with teaching. Immediately after his Harvard appointment, he entered a particularly prolific period, turning out in quick succession the Symphony No. 1 and the Violin Sonata in B minor (1875), an overture to *As You Like It* and a symphonic poem on *The Tempest* (1876), the Duo Concertante for violin, cello, and orchestra (1877), the Symphony No. 2 (1879), and a complete incidental score for male chorus and orchestra to *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the original Greek (1880-81). His place as a major American composer was marked by the number of commissions he received for such special occasions as the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. He composed substantial works for chorus and orchestra and spent a large part of the last two decades of his life completing the opera *Azara* which, to his intense disappointment, he was never to hear.

During this time, he was a distinguished teacher as well; the roster of his pupils includes composers John Alden Carpenter, Frederick S. Converse, Arthur Foote, Edward Burlingame Hill, and Daniel Gregory Mason, not to mention novelist Owen Wister (who was a composer before he turned to fiction), and the critics and historians Richard

Aldrich, Olin Downes, and Hugo Leichtentritt. In 1898 Paine became a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

American musical life in the nineteenth century—especially in the genres of orchestral, choral, and chamber music—was dominated by German taste. The influence originally came by way of London at the end of the eighteenth century, with the music of Handel, Haydn, and other continental masters popular in the British capital. Boston's Handel and Haydn Society was founded in 1815 with the specific aim of performing, frequently and well, the two compositions then regarded as the greatest ever written: Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*. But even by then the name of a younger German composer had begun to stir interest in the New World: the Handel and Haydn Society tried in vain to commission a work from Beethoven. And by the 1830s, Beethoven's significance, especially in the symphony, was undisputed. For decades to come, American musicians and critics called for orchestras skilled enough to give first-rate performances of the nine Beethoven symphonies. Transcendentalist writers at mid-century found in Beethoven a composer who could ennoble mere musical sounds with ethical force, inspiring the listener to strive for the noblest goals. The high regard in which Beethoven was held only grew after 1848, when large numbers of German immigrants, many of them musicians, came to the United States to avoid the political upheavals at home. (One of these was Paine's teacher Kotzschmar.)

All composers learn from the best available model, and during the nineteenth century, the ideal for the symphony was Beethoven; creators who honored him in that realm include Berlioz, Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler—and Paine. Gunther Schuller—whose revival of Paine's Mass in D at the New England Conservatory during his presidency there and subsequent recording mark the first high point of the Paine revival in our day—has called Paine's First “the best Beethoven symphony that Beethoven didn't write himself.”

It is worth noting that Paine's First was composed between 1872 and 1875, at the end of what we can now see was a rather bleak time in symphonic history. For a quarter century, from the appearance of Schumann's last symphony in 1851 to the premiere of Brahms's first in 1876, not a single symphony appeared that remains in the standard repertoire today. And when Theodore Thomas's orchestra played Paine's symphony for the first time (Boston, January 26, 1876), the audience must have found it an assertion of artistic independence. At long last a native composer had appeared whose orchestral works could join the European repertoire without embarrassment. Many years after that date, composer George W. Chadwick, just twenty-one at the time, recalled in his memoirs:

To me, it was a great event, not only on account of its intrinsic beauty, of which it had a great deal, but because it proved we could have a great musician, and that he could get a hearing. To me there was something Godlike in the very name of Symphony.... Besides, this symphony showed great skill and knowledge, especially in the Adagio, the theme of which I still remember.... (It) was a work one could live with.

The seriousness of Paine's symphony, and the positive reaction of the players and the audience, sparked more than one budding young composer in Boston, and perhaps elsewhere in the country. They recognized his homage to Beethoven's Fifth, not only in

choice of key, but in the characteristic rhythmic figure of the first movement's development. But far more than that, they recognized the spaciousness of Paine's first movement, its wide-ranging harmonic span and energy; the vigor and wit of the scherzo; the warm lyricism of the Adagio, becoming more agitated in the middle section; and the exuberance and dash of the C-major finale. The symphony may have been his first, but it was also an achievement of lasting significance, and "Jakey" Paine (as his friends sometimes called him, from his initials J.K.) was instantly established as the leading composer in America.

The overture to *As You Like It* was Paine's second work for orchestra. It was premiered in Boston by the Theodore Thomas Orchestra on November 21, 1876, and received at least seven other Boston performances before Paine's death in 1906. But it has been heard all too rarely since then. Like Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Nights' Dream* overture, the work was not composed with a stage production in mind, but simply to evoke in music some of the joyous spirits of Shakespeare's comedy. There are no themes designed to capture the Forest of Arden (unless perhaps the slow introduction be considered "forest murmurs" or the lively Rosalind, of Orlando pining for love, or the clown Touchstone; nor is there any attempt to translate the most famous monologue in the play—"All the world's a stage..."—into music. The overture is cast in the normal design for such works: a slow introduction with a clarinet melody that foreshadows the principal theme, followed by the Allegro in sonata form. The mood is occasionally vigorous and energetic, and for the most part the 6/4 rhythm skips along, as does the Shakespeare play that inspired it.

—Steven Ledbetter

Steven Ledbetter is musicologist and program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His research interests include the music of the New England school and the development of the American symphonic tradition.

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Schmidt, John C. *The Life and Works of John Knowles Paine*. Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1980.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Concert variations on the Austrian Hymn, Op. 3, No. 1. Janice Beck, organ. Musical Heritage Society ORA-263.

Fantasia über "Ein feste Burg," Op. 13. Richard Morris, organ. New World 80280-2.

Fuga giocosa, Op. 41, No. 3; *Romance*, Op. 12. Malcolm Frager, piano. New World 80206-2.

“Moorish Dance” from *Azara*. Royal Philharmonic, Karl Krueger conducting. Society for the Preservation of the American Musical Heritage MIA-132.

Mass in D. St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Gunther Schuller conducting. New World 80262-2.

Oedipus Tyrannus, prelude from incidental music, Op. 35. London Symphony Orchestra, Kenneth Klein conducting. Angel CDC 49263.

Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 24; *Romanza and Humoresque for Cello and Piano*, Op. 30; *Larghetto and Humoresque for Piano, Violin, and Cello*, Op. 32. Joseph Silverstein, violin; Jules Eskin, cello; Virginia Eskin, piano. Northeastern NR-219 CD.

Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 24. Rafael Druian, violin; Benjamin Pasternack, piano. GM Recordings GM 2021 CD.

Symphony No. 2 in A, Op. 34. New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta conducting. New World 80350-2.

The Tempest, Symphonic Poem, Op. 31. Royal Philharmonic, Karl Krueger conducting. Society for the Preservation of the American Musical Heritage MIA-130.

ZUBIN MEHTA has been music director of New York Philharmonic since the 1978-79 season. When he relinquishes his post in the 1990-91 season, he will have become the longest-tenured music director in the orchestra's modern history. Concurrently he is music director for life of the Israel Philharmonic. Mehta was born in Bombay, India, the son of the Bombay Symphony's co-founder. At eighteen he began studies at Vienna's Academy of Music; he made his conducting debut in Vienna at the age of twenty-five. From 1961 to 1967 he was music director of the Montreal Symphony, and in 1962 became music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Mehta conducts leading opera companies and orchestras around the world, including the Vienna State Opera and the Royal Opera at Covent Garden. His recordings are on the Columbia, London, Deutsche Grammophon, RCA, and New World labels.

THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC, founded in 1842, is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States and one of the oldest in the world. Among its celebrated conductors have been Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, Artur Rodzinski, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Leonard Bernstein, and Pierre Boulez. The orchestra has performed in 348 cities in 50 countries and on five continents. In June of 1988 it returned from a triumphant tour of the Soviet Union, which culminated in an historic joint concert with the Soviet Ministry of Culture's State Symphony Orchestra in Moscow's Gorky Park. Since its first recording for Columbia in 1917, the New York Philharmonic has made hundreds more, on the Columbia, Deutsche Grammophon, London, RCA, and New World labels.

JOHN KNOWLES PAINE

1 Overture to Shakespeare's “As You Like It,” Op. 28 (10:11)

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 23

- 2 I. *Allegro con brio* (11:03)
3 II. *Allegro vivace* (7:34)
4 III. *Adagio* (9:55)
5 IV. *Allegro vivace* (8:34)

New York Philharmonic
Zubin Mehta, conductor

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Engineers: John Newton, Henk Kooistra
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