

The Violin Music of ARTHUR FOOTE

New World Records 80464

Arthur William Foote (1853-1937) was born in Salem, Massachusetts, and lived all of his adult life in Boston. During his lifetime he was nationally acclaimed as a keyboard performer (he was organist at Church of the Disciples in Boston from 1878-1910), educator (he taught at the New England Conservatory from 1920-1937), and composer, and what is more, was one of the earliest American composers to win international recognition. Assuredly, he was one of the most important American musical artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a new appreciation of the high quality of his creations has been steadily growing.

His parents were descended from old New England families. Arthur's father, Caleb Foote, the son of a sea captain, was orphaned early in life, grew up in poverty and without an education, but eventually by his own efforts acquired learning and became editor and owner of one of New England's oldest newspapers, the *Salem Gazette*. His determination to succeed against all obstacles, his continuing modesty about his abilities, and his unpretentiousness despite the wide recognition his achievements received are qualities that his son inherited.

Arthur Foote was the first prominent American composer totally educated in America. After beginning lessons in piano playing with Fanny Paine (no relation to John Knowles Paine) in Salem, he studied theory with Stephen Emery at the New England Conservatory, keyboard playing with B. J. Lang, Boston's eminent choral director and pianist, and composition with the highly respected John Knowles Paine at Harvard, where he earned the first M.A. degree in music ever conferred by an American university. Initially, he admired the music of the early nineteenth-century composers Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Chopin; later that of Brahms and Wagner. Wagner, however, had no appreciable influence on Foote's style. He found Wagner's approach completely at variance with his own preference for straightforward and eloquently tuneful layouts. While based on Baroque and Classical structures, Foote's works reflect the Romantic urge for a warm, expressive line supported by colorful, chromatically shaded harmony. Beautifully crafted, his music is derived from contemporary Central European practices, and contains few American inflections; it rather essentially represents an individual poetic utterance.

The attributes just described are especially applicable to the violin music contained on this CD, where Foote indulges his predilection for a fully developed singing melody. It should be added that throughout his life, Foote had a special knack for string writing, witness his serenade and several suites written for string orchestra, his three string quartets, and the many other chamber works that feature stringed instruments. He himself said: "It is singular that, in spite of my not playing any string instrument, nor indeed knowing in detail about the technique of even the violin, everything for strings has been practical and grateful."

We often hear that Foote was conservative. Indeed, when he was older, he did prefer the central core of inherited musical postulates of his own time above what he perceived as the new and unusual gimmickry and senseless stylistic changes of the twentieth century, while at the same time calling for tolerance for every sort of musical experimentation. In his own day, he was not considered a conservative. He observed closely and sympathetically the confident forward thrust of

contemporary musicians (Brahms, Liszt, Dvorák, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Joachim Raff, and Anton Rubinstein), especially in harmony, orchestration, and the use of modally tinged melody. Foote, however, never relinquished his inheritance from composers of the past, never joined the musical iconoclasts of the twentieth century, and altered his own style slowly and cautiously. However, when surveying the modern scene and the innovating activities of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, he felt no trepidation about the future of music, even if he did find their relentless dissonance and weakening of tonality unsuited to his own nature.

Although he would gain international respect for his musicianship and compositions, Foote remained an unpretentious person, hesitant about the praiseworthiness of his efforts, and reluctant to push himself forward. His most frequently performed pieces--for example, several of the songs and chamber works; *Four Character Pieces after the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám* (1900) for full orchestra; the Suite in E for string orchestra (1908); and *A Night Piece* for flute and strings (1922)--all made their way into public esteem on their own merits.

The Sonata in G Minor for violin and piano, opus 20, was completed in 1889 for his violinist friend Franz Kneisel, to whom it was dedicated, and it immediately became popular. Kneisel and Foote gave the work its premiere in Boston, on December 2, 1889. Foote was then 36 years old, and a mature composer. The piece was published in 1890. If a precedent must be found, it is in the music of Schumann and Brahms. Foote himself said that the Sonata was so well liked that it received an unusual number of performances.

The elevated quality of the writing is sustained throughout the four movements (*Allegro appassionato*, *Alla Siciliano*, *Adagio*, *Allegro molto*). He writes confidently for the violin: Textures are always lucid, never cluttered with excess notes and doublings. The expression ranges from the sweepingly emotional and climactic statement to the lyrically intimate declaration. Yet nothing is done to excess: The climactic is never hysterical frenzy; the intimate is never mawkish salon music. The first movement, in sonata-allegro form, is keyed to these two contrasting moods, which are set forth in a colorful and spirited series of changing musical events. Throughout the movement, the ideas expressed and the way they are carried out do convince the listener that this was written by a master who had something to say and knew how to say it with precision.

The second movement, in the dominant-major key of D, is in ternary form, with an opening and closing *Andantino grazioso* section built on a gently lilting tune in 6/8 time. Its middle section, *Allegretto grazioso*, in B-flat, provides a sprightly contrast and even has a suggestion of Hungarian gypsy music. This intermezzo-like *Alla Siciliano* is kept intentionally light and agreeable in order to provide emotional relief after the excitements of the opening movement.

Then, with the slow movement, in 4/4 time and the key of E-flat, the refreshed listener is returned to music of a reflective and often an intensely emotional aspect. Only instead of the dramatic rhetoric of sonata form, here is song-like meditation, sometimes appearing as a quiet vocalization, sometimes swelling in fervor, and sometimes approximating a solemn march.

The concluding movement, also in 4/4 time and back in the home key of G minor, opens on a boldly stated theme in the violin and goes on to the expected lyrical contrast. This contrast contains phrases high in the violin's range that may have had special meaning for the composer inasmuch as

the expression conveyed seems highly personal and is deeply moving. Eventually, they give way to a broad statement akin to the psalmody of New England tradition. The expected working-out and reprise sections follow. Almost at the end of the finale, a recall of the third movement's opening tune enters. Altogether, the sonata is one of the first finished chamber works that Americans could proudly claim as their own.

In the remaining music on this CD, the violin is the dominant instrument; the piano accompanies. Complete spun-out melodies, and not laconic motives open to development, make up the substance. Foote wants to address his audience with one direct communication after another. Individuality is encountered in the subtle curve of a melodic passage, in the astute handling of a harmonic progression, not in a musical treatment that is conspicuously dazzling or exorbitantly different. The music is meant to be appreciated for itself and not for its nationalistic overtones or advanced stylistic features.

Three Character Pieces for violin and piano, opus 9, was completed in 1885, four years before the sonata, and published in 1886. The first performance took place in Boston, on November 30, 1885, with Charles Allen on the violin and Foote at the piano. A "character piece" is a brief poetic composition that ordinarily brings out a distinct mood or picture. This work comprises three such character pieces: *Morning Song*, *Menuetto Serioso*, and *Romanza*, which apparently are not related to each other. All three are given a ternary design (ABA¹), the return of the A section being somewhat varied. The emphasis is on the melodic line given to the violin. The piano only now and then is apportioned music of thematic substance. Nevertheless, the keyboard contributes a variety of lovely sonorous harmonies in apt rhythmic configurations. The first piece is an *andante* in G major and 9/8 time; its expression is that of an *aubade*--lightsome *plein air* tones agreeably reach the ear in most measures, but there are also allusions to a more cheerless environment. The second, in G minor, opens on a *quasi recitative*, then goes into a *moderato grazioso* in 3/4 time, which sounds always somber and sometimes tense. The third is an *adagio non troppo* in E major and 3/4 time. The violin sings with strong feeling in its voice; the piano abets the violin with rich harmonies.

The *Melody* for violin and piano, opus 44, dates from 1899 and was published the next year. The title proclaims its nature. In the ternary form favored by Romantic composers for their shorter, more lyrical pieces, it starts off with a guileless tune that grows rather heated in the middle, only to return to simplicity at the end. The music contains no hint of the colorful exoticism that found its way into *Five Poems after Omar Khayyám* for piano, completed at about the same time. However, it provides a winning entertainment.

Ternary form prevails in the remaining compositions. The *Ballade* in F Minor for violin and piano, opus 69, was premiered and published in 1910. With it, we sense some stylistic change: A Dvorák-like modal flavor has entered the music. The archaisms and hints at narrative delivery are entirely appropriate for a *ballade*. The internalized Romantic fervor of the earlier works has abated, replaced by a more dignified, externalized expression, albeit given an attractively warm triple-time sway.

The Opus 74, consisting of the graceful *Canzonetta* and the unruffled crooning of *A Song of Sleep*, was published in 1913. These two pieces are pleasing bagatelles only, and were not intended to achieve any high peaks of sentiment. For all their brevity and unpretentiousness, they do establish legitimate moods--after all, one is not always given to deep thoughts.

The last number, *Legend*, opus 76, probably completed shortly after the previous work, exists in manuscript form at the Harvard Musical Association, in Boston. More substantial than the two-movement Opus 74, it opens on a recitative-cadenza for violin, after which the violin is given the voice of a balladic storyteller. Then, with the piano supplying accompaniment, the violin elaborates on the "ballad-legend," its melody rather declamatory and modal in effect. Much of the music is built on one short melodic-rhythmic figure. As with the *Ballade*, the expression is elevated and, however romantic the coloration, less personal than the earlier violin pieces: Serenity is preferred to white heat. The fire and ardor of youth contained in the Violin Sonata is here offset with the reverie and meditation of the fully matured composer.

—Nicholas Tawa

Nicholas Tawa (Ph.D. Musicology, Harvard) is Professor Emeritus Music at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. He has written eleven books and many articles on American music and music in American society. Recently he has been engaged in a study of Arthur Foote and his relation to his time and place.

KEVIN LAWRENCE (violin) studied at the Juilliard School with Ivan Galamian and Margaret Pardee. While at Juilliard he also studied chamber music with Felix Galimir and continued his training with Josef Gingold at the Meadowmount School in Westport, New York. He was appointed to the Meadowmount faculty by Ivan Galamian in 1980 and taught there each summer until 1994, when he became dean at the Killington Music Festival in Vermont. He joined the faculty of the North Carolina School of the Arts in 1990. Mr. Lawrence is currently on the solo artist-touring roster of the North Carolina Arts Council.

ERIC LARSEN (piano) has studied with Dora Zaslavsky and Artur Balsam in New York, Pierre Sancan in Paris, and Benjamin Kaplan in London. Upon his graduation from the Manhattan School of Music he was appointed to the faculty of the North Carolina School of the Arts. In the summer of 1993 he established the first student piano chamber music program at the Meadowmount School. Mr. Larsen is also on the faculty of the Ibla International Piano Academy in Italy. He has recorded for Bay Cities Records, Melodiya, and Russian Disc.

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Five Poems after Omar Khayyám. Virginia Eskin, piano. Northeastern NR 223-CD.
Francesca da Rimini. Louisville Orchestra; Jorge Mester, conductor. Albany TROY 030-2.
Quartet in D for Strings. Kohon Quartet. Vox Box CDX 5057.
Suite in E for String Orchestra. Boston Symphony Orchestra; Serge Koussevitzky, conductor. Pearl
PEA 9492.

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THE VIOLIN MUSIC OF ARTHUR FOOTE 80464-2

Kevin Lawrence, violin

Eric Larsen, piano

ARTHUR FOOTE (1853-1937)

Sonata in G Minor for violin and piano (Op. 20)

1 Allegro appassionato (6:02)

2 Alla Siciliano (4:29)

3 Adagio (6:59)

4 Allegro molto (8:22)

Three Character Pieces for violin and piano (Op. 9)

5 Morning Song (5:02)

6 Menuetto Serioso (4:52)

7 Romanza (5:48)

8 *Melody* for violin and piano (Op. 44) (5:21)

9 *Ballade* in F Minor for violin and piano (Op. 69) (8:33)

Two Pieces for violin (Op. 74)

10 Canzonetta (4:05)

- 11 A Song of Sleep (3:49)
12 *Legend* for violin and piano (Op. 76) (7:25)

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
email: info@newworldrecords.org

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