

This compact disc of the three symphonies of Anthony Louis Scarmolin (1890-1969) is the first commercially available recording of any of his more than 1,100 works. His output includes eight operas as well as numerous orchestral works, songs, sacred music, chamber music, works for solo piano, and pieces of a pedagogical nature.

Who was Anthony Scarmolin? He was born in the northern Italian textile town of Schio, and came with his family to the United States at the age of ten. His father, a textile worker, gave him his first music lessons. In his teens he enrolled in New York's German Conservatory of Music, where he studied piano with Bertha Cahn. His earliest preserved compositions date from this period. They are very much the work of an autodidact, featuring a fascinatingly tortured chromaticism which at times crosses the border into the realm of atonality--very surprising for a relatively unsophisticated adolescent in that time and place. These works bear little resemblance to his future compositions, and one of the many tantalizing questions facing the Scarmolin biographer is what became of this early expressionism. The mystified and negative reactions of the Conservatory's dean, Carl Hein, who advised the young composer to abandon such pathways and to follow the leads of the old masters, do not seem sufficient to deter the kind of questing musical intellect these works evince. That, however, seems to have been the result.

Scarmolin graduated from the Conservatory in 1907. A debilitating hand condition forced him to forgo a planned Carnegie Hall debut. Although he eventually recovered, he seems to have given up any plans for a career as a concert pianist. Instead he threw himself into the business of building up a "practice" as a composer, flogging his songs, salon music, easy choral works, and pedagogical piano music to various publishers with gradually increasing success. His salon songs, in particular, were popular. David Bispham and Beniamino Gigli both performed songs by Scarmolin, and Gigli used his influence to bring Scarmolin's 1913 opera *The Interrupted Serenade* to the attention of the board of the Metropolitan Opera (no performance resulted from this effort).

He was drafted into the army in 1917 and went to France with the 320th Field Artillery Band. In France he continued to compose, adding patriotic songs to his output. He returned to the States in 1919, and soon found work directing the band and orchestra at Emerson High School in Union City, New Jersey, a job he held with distinction, judging by the reports of his former students, until heart trouble forced his retirement in 1949.

Along with his high school duties, which included a great deal of music written for his student band and orchestra, he continued to take an active part in the then-rich musical life of Hudson County, New Jersey. His *Overture on a Street Vendor's Ditty* was performed in February 1946 by the Jersey City Philharmonic Symphony Society, J. Randolph Jones conducting. He appeared as a guest conductor and composer with the North Hudson Symphony Orchestra in February 1937, leading a program that included not only his *Moment Musical* and *Valse Pizzicato*, but also works by Berlioz, Ippolitov-Ivanov, Sullivan, and Haydn (the "Surprise" Symphony).

He also kept busy at a more sophisticated level of the music community. In 1939 he won honorable mention in a competition sponsored by the American Academy of Ancient Instruments for his *In*

Retrospect, written for harpsichord and a quartet of viols. The New Jersey Symphony, under the baton of Henri Persis, performed his tone poem *Night* in March of 1941. Persis took an interest in Scarmolin's works, and arranged for performances on Radio Luxembourg in 1947, including one of the First Symphony (it is unclear whether this was live or recorded). In 1946 Scarmolin was a prizewinner at the First Congress of the Fellowship of American Composers, an event organized by the fellowship's founder, Roy Harris. As a result, his *Tribal Dance* (for band) and *Credo* (also known as *My Creed*, for chorus) were performed at Detroit's Music Hall.

In 1926 Scarmolin married Aida Balasso, a singer and voice teacher, who subsequently devoted herself ardently to the furthering of her husband's career. The couple was childless and traveled frequently to Italy, where the composer and his music seem to have been warmly welcomed.

Scarmolin was a compulsive composer, writing music on menus and scraps of paper, in cars, trains, and other improbable venues. Music seems to have flowed from his pen as does wine from a cask, and he rarely took the time to edit or do draft-work. This can be a drawback in his work, but as compensation it offers attractive melody and harmony, abundantly served in a conservative style, and flavored with occasional piquant touches of otherwise consistently solid orchestration.

The emotional makeup of A. Louis Scarmolin, as he came to refer to himself (probably in an attempt to soft-pedal his background at a time when ethnicity was less proudly displayed than it currently is) is another mystery. He was a humble and private man, led an ordinary life, and seemed to compose less out of a need for self-expression than from sheer delight in making music. Similarly, he seems to have insulated himself from events of the outside world, or at least to have kept any of his thoughts on these matters from showing themselves in his work. Of the hundreds of pieces he wrote during the turmoil of the late Thirties and World War II, there is only one vague reference, in the programmatic preamble to the symphonic poem *Visions* (1939), to "troubled humanity, anguished, tortured, oppressed." The relevant pages of his catalog are otherwise filled with titles like *Tree Whispersings* (for string quartet, 1939), *Variations on a Folk Song* (for string orchestra, 1942), and *Zombies* (for band, 1944).

After decades of building up a reputation as a composer of music in various purely "functional" genres, Scarmolin seems to have renewed his interest in instrumental "art" music in the mid-Thirties. Most of his chamber music and "serious" orchestral works date from after 1935. The three symphonies date, respectively, from 1937, 1945-46 and 1952. The First Symphony was performed during Scarmolin's lifetime primarily by community orchestras, such as the Bloomfield, New Jersey Symphony, which performed the work in 1947 under the baton of Walter Kurkewicz. As mentioned before, it also received professional airplay in Europe. It is uncertain, however, if Scarmolin ever had an opportunity to hear his other two symphonies.

The musical language of the three symphonies is decidedly conservative. That of the First Symphony is evocative of Rachmaninov and Richard Strauss, as well as the émigré Hollywood composers of the period such as Korngold and Steiner. This latter influence can be heard in the upward-surgingly second theme of the first movement.

Touches of well-traveled exoticism are heard in the Second Symphony--the modal second theme of its first movement is suggestive of Vaughan Williams, and the second and third movements have touches of Orientalism. The language of the Third Symphony is more influenced by the contemporary styles of Harris and Copland--reflective, with its parallel fourths and fifths, of the social-realist Americana of the

Thirties and Forties.

To varying degrees all three works are spiced with occasional forays into whole-tone vagueness. After his experimental youth, the tonal free-fall of the whole-tone scale became the limit of modernism in Scarmolin's musical language.

Scarmolin could be profligate when it came to cramming melodic and harmonic material into individual movements--but his approach to the larger issues of symphonic balance appear to have been concise and well-considered. In the First and Third Symphonies the movements are played without pause, and, more important, in each of the symphonies there are three, rather than four, movements. The Third, subtitled "Sinfonia Breve," was originally called "Symphony in One Movement," but its uninterrupted span is clearly divisible into three distinct movements tied together by recitative-like passages for solo bassoon, which is undoubtedly why the original subtitle was dropped. In each of the symphonies the movement omitted from the traditional four-movement scheme is the scherzo. This is probably because all three finales incorporate the fleet textures and rhythms characteristic of scherzi into the general mood of triumphant closure more characteristic of finales.

To the listener new to Scarmolin's three symphonies (almost everyone), there are many delights to be savored. The berceuse-like slow movement of the First Symphony is beautiful in its innocence and grace, and forms the perfect contrasting centerpiece to the romantic histrionics of the outer movements.

The folk-like melody forming the second theme of the Second Symphony's opening movement is a memorable one, and features a delightful phrase-ending modulation from G major to F# minor. As the outer movements are of a much lighter and more playful character than their First Symphony counterparts, the Second Symphony's slow movement is correspondingly darker and more chromatic. A highlight of the third movement is the "oriental" transformation of the opening theme, which occurs at the close of the exposition, featuring a solo cello against a delicate background of strings, harp, and celesta.

The most striking part of the much shorter Third Symphony is its brooding introduction, and its ensuing dramatic first "movement." There is a recurring motive heard in the woodwinds at the outset that echoes, surprisingly, a similarly recurring motive from the slow movement of Bela Bartók's 1937 Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. The same motive is heard in the brass in the final measures of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra.

For much of the information which exists on Anthony Scarmolin, biographically so elusive in the ordinariness of his life, I am indebted to the trustees of the A. Louis Scarmolin Trust past and present, including Margery Stomne Selden (to whom we are indebted for the story of Gigli and *The Interrupted Serenade*), John Hamel (whose personal memories provide insight into the composer's character) and, most important, Helen Benham, whose detective work has turned up numerous illuminating details. Her scholarly work, still in progress, will complement this recording and, it is to be hoped, subsequent discs in the process of familiarizing us all with the work of Anthony Scarmolin.

—John Sichel

John Sichel, a composer, is also a trustee of the A. Louis Scarmolin Trust. He has combined his two careers in his

orchestrations of three of Scarmolin's atmospheric piano preludes, which have been recorded and are currently awaiting release. Sichel's orchestral composition 'Three Places in New Jersey has been recorded by the Slovak Radio Orchestra and is to be released on Opus One. He holds a doctorate in composition from the Yale University School of Music.

Joel Eric Suben studied conducting with Jacques-Louis Monod, Witold Rowicki, Otmar Suitner, and Sergiu Celibidache. While still a student, Suben led the first Boston performances of *Service Sacré* by Darius Milhaud with members of the Opera Orchestra of Boston. A finalist in the 1976 Hans Haring Conducting Competition of the Austrian Radio at Salzburg, he made his debut in 1977 with the American Symphony Orchestra in New York and devoted all of 1978 to organizing performances of American music as a Fulbright scholar in Poland. Suben has led first performances and commercial recordings of more than 150 works by American and European composers, and appears frequently as a guest conductor of major Central European orchestras. Suben's activities as a composer encompass some 60 published works. Currently (1996) he serves as music adviser of the Wellesley Philharmonic in Massachusetts.

The **Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra** of Bratislava, the oldest symphonic ensemble in Slovakia, was founded in 1929 through the efforts of Milos Ruppeldt and Oskar Nedbal, prominent figures in Slovak musical circles. Ondrej Lenárd was appointed its conductor in 1970. Under its present conductor-in-chief, Róbert Stankovsky, the orchestra regularly tours throughout Europe and the Far East, most recently in Japan and South Korea. The Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra is well represented on dozens of recent major-label recordings.

The **Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra** of Katowice was founded in 1935 in Warsaw by conductor-composer Grzegorz Fitelberg. The orchestra was re-formed in 1945 in Katowice. Among the conductors and soloists who have worked with the orchestra are Artur Rubinstein, Isaac Stern, Witold Lutoslawski, Krzysztof Penderecki, Leonard Bernstein, and Maurizio Pollini. The Polish Radio National Symphony has made more than 200 recordings for EMI, Decca, Newport Classics, CRI, and Polskie Nagranie. Under its chief conductor, Antoni Wit, the orchestra maintains an active worldwide touring schedule.

Symphonies No. 1 and 2

Producer: František Poul

Sound engineer: Hubert Geschwandtner

Technical engineering assistant: Ala Kováčsová

Symphony No. 3

Producer: Beata Jankowska-Burzyńska

Sound Engineer: Otto Nopp

Digital Editor: Artur Moniuszko

Symphony No. 2 was recorded January 23-25, 1995, and Symphony No. 1 was recorded January 26-28, 1995, in the Concert Hall of the Slovak Radio, Bratislava.

Symphony No. 3 was recorded September 25, 1993, in the Concert Hall of the Polish Radio, Katowice.

Cover art, including size, gallery credit, date, format of art (pastel, etc):

Photograph courtesy of A. Louis Scarmolin Trust

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

This recording was made possible with grants from The A. Louis Scarmolin Trust, Save The Music, Inc., Malcolm and Marsha Witt, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and Francis Goelet.

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A. LOUIS SCARMOLIN (1890-1969) 80502-2

Symphony in E Minor (Symphony No. 1) (1936) 30:09

Allegro moderato, Adagio, Allegro vivo (performed without pause)

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra; Joel Eric Suben, conductor.

Symphony No. 2 (1946)

I. Allegro moderato 10:36

Stanislav Bicăk, bassoon solo

II. Adagio espressivo 6:56

Peter Sivanic, horn solo

III. Con moto 7:19

Miroslav Herák, cello solo

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra; Joel Eric Suben, conductor.

Sinfonia Breve (Symphony No. 3) (1952) 9:51

Zygmunt Tlatlik, bassoon solo

Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra; Joel Eric Suben, conductor.

Symphony No. 1 published by Sam Fox Publishing Co. Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3 unpublished. All compositions ASCAP.

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