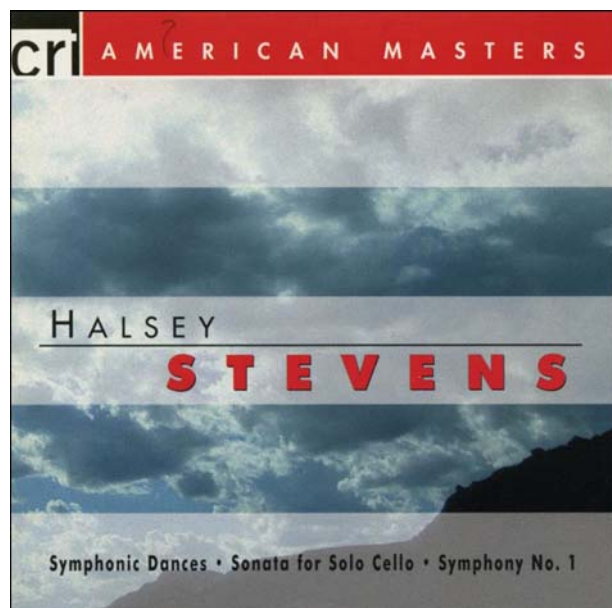


# Halsey Stevens



Symphonic Dances (1958) .....	(19:04)
1. I .....	(5:58)
2. II .....	(6:23)
3. III .....	(5:13)
London Philharmonic Orchestra; George Barati, conductor	
Sonata for solo cello (1958) .....	(23:18)
4. I .....	(4:51)
5. II .....	(4:39)
6. III .....	(2:18)
7. IV .....	(4:40)
8. V .....	(3:50)
Gabor Rejto, cello	
9. Symphony No. 1 (1945) .....	(14:54)
Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra; Akeo Watanabe, conductor	

Total playing time: 53:21

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## Notes

**Halsey Stevens** (1908-1989) represents an exceptional blend of talents and attributes. In some ways he is the quintessential American composer at mid-century. He reaches his mature mastery at a moment that places him on the cusp of several different aesthetic and cultural currents. While his music is largely tonal, it does not shy away from the modernist influences which swept across the twentieth century. Resolutely American in its sound and rhetoric, his music nevertheless maintains a certain level of abstraction that derives at least as much from neo-classicism as from nationalism—Stravinsky is as deep an influence as Copland. Stevens was a man of the new media: a program annotator for the Los Angeles Symphony, a critic, a radio commentator. He was a scholar as well, chairing the music department at the University of Southern California for decades, and producing the still-definitive book on Bartók. And he was a Californian (adoptive, like so many), but his work still owes more to Europe than to Asia or Hollywood.

Stevens projects a remarkable blend of openness, taste, and scrupulous technique. He is blessed and cursed by his historic and cultural “in-between-ness.” Blessed, because he came to prominence before the battles, between the serial and experimental avant-garde, and the American nationalist camps, erupted in the 1960s. As a result, he was able to write exactly what he wanted; cursed, in that his work would be too little of one extreme or another for the tastes of a conflictual time, an aspect compounded by his being far from New York.

If there are any composers of whom Stevens reminds one, they are Paul Cooper (whose music can be discovered on CRI 687 and 776), who spent a fruitful but less visible career in Houston, Texas; and Boston’s Irving Fine (CRI 574 and CRI 630), perhaps the most brilliant of all younger American neo-classicists, whose early death in 1962 deprived the culture of one of its potentially greatest lights. These composers beyond categories and camps are due for a reassessment; they hold lessons of integrity and synthesis for composers today.

Halsey Stevens was born in Scott, New York, in 1908. His musical education included studies with William Berwald at Syracuse, and Ernest Bloch at Berkeley. Almost immediately thereafter, he gained a teaching post in 1948 at USC, where he remained for the rest of his life. His first important works received exposure at this time, and by the time his magisterial *Life and Work of Béla Bartók* was issued in 1953, by Oxford University Press, he had established himself as one of the leading figures of a new compositional generation; visiting-professorships at Yale and Williams, two Guggenheims, consistent commissions, and recordings, rounded out an enviable career, ending with his death in Los Angeles in 1989. Stevens is a composer whose music is deeply expressive, but also essentially modest. It refuses to show off; its brilliance is in using only essential materials for maximum impact. It effortlessly alternates between play and gravity. It gives pleasure in its rightness at every turn. Not a bad legacy.

—Robert Carl

Robert Carl is chair of the composition department at the Hartt School, University of Hartford; he co-directs the Boston new music ensemble Extension Works, and writes extensively on new music for *Fanfare* magazine.

### *Symphonic Dances* (1958)

*Symphonic Dances* is almost a three-movement symphony; certainly the motivating dances for each movement are abstract, and the piece projects more a “choreographic spirit” than any specific references. Two composers definitely stand in the wings here: Stravinsky in the outer movements, Copland in the middle. Throughout, the brilliant, prismatic, orchestration bespeaks a love of clarity and sharply etched ideas, emanating from the practice of the former composer, the spacious gestures and achingly simple melodic lines of the latter (such as the horn solo in the second movement). Yet this doesn’t mean that Stevens’s piece is just a knock-off of the work of more famous composers. This is fresh and inventive music that stands on its own and sports a few surprises, the

greatest of which occurs in the third movement, where a broad-phrased four-part canon suddenly seizes the stage. The sound, so fully and unabashedly American in the midst of what has been a brittle, almost cubistic rhythmic web, takes the music to a new level that marks the composer's confidence, and willingness to take risks beyond safe and previously-tested models.

Although of dance-like character throughout, the work is in effect a short symphony, depending—especially in the outer movements—upon thematic transformation and development for its organization... Outwardly the movement has the shape of a sonata-allegro, though there are no full-fledged themes of the traditional type, and development is continuous from first note to last, even in the section which functions as recapitulation.

—from *Halsey Stevens's*  
program notes on *Symphonic Dances*,  
for its world-premiere (from the  
original LP jacket, CRI SD 166).

*Symphonic Dances* was commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 1958, under a grant from the Ford Foundation to the American Music Center; it was performed for the first time by that orchestra under Enrique Jorda's direction, on December 10, 1958.

Sonata for solo cello (1958)

If any composer hovers in the background of the sonata for solo cello, it is Bach, an obvious choice considering the medium. The five movements follow an arch-form of fast-slow-fast-slow-fast. The language, while chromatic, is tonally centered, based on a triadic structure (first and fifth movements centered on A; second and fourth on F#; third on D). Stevens is masterly in creating a language that seems as natural and fluid as that of the eighteenth century, even when it incorporates far greater dissonance. High points of the sonata are its two slow movements, which project a severe grace and sobriety that is all the more poignant for their restraint. The second movement, *Ciaccona*, a set of ten variations arranged into a ternary form, is a perfect example of such formal balance.

... grand in scale, beautifully balanced in the sequence of its five movements, very taxing in its virtuoso demands, yet reserved and poised in total effect. Above all, it is apparent that the composer was totally absorbed and delighted in imagining these sounds, and pursuing the logic of his rhythmic, melodic, and tonal design; and this sense of absorption and delight is fully communicated to his hearers.

—*Alfred Frankenstein*,  
critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*,  
after hearing the sonata played by  
Gabor Rejto in June, 1959, at the  
University of California in Berkeley  
(from original LP jacket, CRI 208).

Sonata for solo cello was written for, and dedicated to, Gabor Rejto. Its first performance was January 5, 1959, at one of the Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles.

Symphony No. 1 (1945)

Stevens's first symphony is in a single movement, and certain aspects suggest Stevens's love for, and the influence of, the music of Bartók. Though completed in 1945, some of the symphony was composed as early as 1938. It is a taut, single-movement work, driven by propulsive rhythmic ostinati. Its instrumental color is stark and powerful, driven by orchestral doublings which are full, in the manner of film music, but

never overly thick or lush. The symphony is only fifteen minutes long, but nothing is wasted, and it projects a span that seems to exist on a larger time-scale. One section flows seamlessly into another, which suggests another composer whose influence at the time is still probably underrated: Sibelius. The longest section of the symphony is a growing lament in the middle of the work, which finally reaches a tremendous climax, and breaks into a tempestuous, almost barbaric, dance, which ends the piece with a flourish. With its rigor, economy, and darkness, the symphony sounds like little else in American music written at the time. Composers such as Martinů and Honegger more likely come to mind, another "middle-stream" of twentieth-century composition, which is only now coming to greater prominence.

A new composer made his appearance in San Francisco this season, and the town sat up and took notice. His name is Halsey Stevens, and he was deposited with us by the United States Navy... He is a very talented man, and if you haven't heard of him already, you are going to. His first symphony, which he conducted at a concert of the San Francisco Symphony, was one of the most dynamic, compactly meaningful, and finely shaped scores of the year.

—*Alfred Frankenstein*,  
critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*,  
in the Spring 1946 issue of *Modern Music*  
(from original LP jacket, CRI 129)

The first performance of Symphony No. 1 was on March 7, 1946, by the San Francisco Symphony, with the composer conducting. The initial performance of the revised version (the version on this recording) took place on March 2, 1950, with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under the direction of Alfred Wallenstein.

**Akeo Watanabe** (1919-1989) made his professional conducting debut in 1945, as one of three directors of the Tokyo City Symphony Orchestra. He was appointed conductor of the Tokyo Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra in 1947. In 1956, Watanabe, together with Shigeo Mizuno of the Bunka Hoso Broadcasting Co., founded the Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra. Watanabe went on to become music director of the Kyoto Symphony Orchestra (1970), and of the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra (1972), before returning in 1978 to the Japan Philharmonic, with whom he celebrated forty years of conducting in 1985.

A distinguished cellist, conductor, and composer, **George Barati** (1931-1998) came to the United States in 1938 from Hungary. In 1946 Barati joined the San Francisco Symphony as cellist. He was also a member of the California String Quartet and founding conductor of the Barati Chamber Orchestra of San Francisco. From 1950 to 1968, Barati was music director of the Honolulu Symphony and Opera. During this period he also began an extensive international conducting career that included guest and visiting conducting appearances with some eighty-five orchestras on five continents, including Japan, Europe, and Latin America. On this recording, Barati conducts the world-renowned London Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 1932 by Sir Thomas Beecham.

Born in Budapest, **Gabor Rejto** (1916-1987) came to the United States in 1939, making his home on the West Coast. He was cellist of the Alma Trio, and associated with the Lener and Gordon string quartets. Rejto headed the cello- and chamber-music departments at the Eastman School of Music, and was chairman of the string department of the School of Music at the University of Southern California.

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## Production Notes

Digitally re-mastered by Adrian Carr, Music Design Masters, New York City, on February 12, 2002.

*Symphonic Dances* originally released on CRI SD 166; Sonata for solo cello originally released on CRI SD 208; Symphony No. 1 originally released on CRI SD 129.

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Executive Director for CRI: John G. Schultz

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