

- John La Montaine
1. Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 9 (1958) (25:00)
 Karen Keys, piano
 Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra
 Guy Fraser Harrison, conductor
 2. Halsey Stevens: *Symphonic Dances* (1958) (18:00)
 London Philharmonic Orchestra
 George Barati, conductor

John La Montaine (b 1920, Oak Park, Illinois), though known among his professional colleagues for a decade as a highly gifted pianist, came into national prominence as a composer only in 1958, when the Piano Concerto recorded here received its world premiere on November 25 of that year with Jorge Bolet as soloist and the National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Howard Mitchell. The music, dedicated to Mrs. Faith Smeeth, had been commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra under a grant from the Ford Foundation, and in 1959 the score was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music.

The reasons for the deep impression made by the Concerto on both lay listeners and on critics and professionals is not hard to discover; for in common with his senior colleague, Samuel Barber, La Montaine has displayed in his music a flair for intensely dramatic lyrical utterance in combination with virtuosic effectiveness in the best sense of the word that makes for surefire listener impact. For a contemporary composer to accomplish such a feat in a large-scale piece, sticking within a relatively traditional framework, and avoiding the slightest taint of the meretricious is a feat of no mean order, and one attainable only by a composer whose stylistic persuasions are backed by a solidity of craftsmanship that has become second nature. In this connection, it is noteworthy that Mr. La Montaine's training, after studies in Chicago, was received from such institutions as the Eastman School of Music and The Juilliard School, as well as from Nadia Boulanger.

Since 1959, La Montaine has won two Guggenheim Fellowships and was named composer-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome. He also served as Visiting Professor of Composition at the Eastman School. His catalog of compositions is now well past the Opus 30 mark and includes the *Songs of the Rose of Sharon*, Op. 6 for soprano and orchestra; Piano Sonata, Op. 3; Sonata for Piano Four Hands, Op. 25; String Quartet, Op. 16; *Jubilant Overture* for orchestra, Op. 20; *Canticle for Orchestra*, Op. 31; and *Wonder Tidings* for chorus, soloists, harp, and percussion, Op. 23.

Regarding the musical form and content of Mr. La Montaine's Piano Concerto, the publisher has supplied a succinct summation: "The Concerto affirms both the lyric and virtuoso capabilities of the piano. The first movement is bold and decisive, classic in form, romantic in content. The second movement . . . is slow and introspective, and rises to an overwhelming climax. It is an elegy in memory of the composer's sister, Isabel La Montaine. The Finale, in quadruple meter, is brilliant, rhythmic, and march-like; interrupted twice by an extended songful passage of great intensity in triple meter. All the thematic and passage material of the final movement is derived from the opening of the first movement. . . ."

Halsey Stevens (b Scott, New York, 1908) was fresh out of the U.S. Navy when his First Symphony (CRI 129) was performed in San Francisco, winning praise from the eminent critic Alfred Frankenstein. By 1953, Stevens's gifts as a composer received solid re-affirmation in the form of a Louisville Orchestra commission for *Triskelion*, which was subsequently recorded as part of the Louisville First Edition series (his 1957 *Sinfonia Breve* has since appeared on LP under the same imprint). It was in the same year that Stevens also established him self as a first-rate scholar-biographer with his *Life and Music of Bela Bartók*, a volume which remains the standard English-language commentary on the great Hungarian master.

Though trained in his native New York State, Halsey Stevens's professional career has been pursued chiefly on the West Coast, where he has been head of the composition department at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. However, the Eastern sector of the professional musical community also received the benefits of Halsey Stevens's gifts as teacher and administrator in 1960-61 when he was Visiting Professor of Composition at the Yale University School of Music.

If John La Montaine can be labeled a modern romantic, then Halsey Stevens can be said to fall firmly into the modern classic category. However, Stevens's classicism, with its emphasis on linearity and closely reasoned structure, is amply tinctured with rhythmic patterns that mark his musical speech as distinctly American, as opposed to a faceless cosmopolitanism. His catalog of works is generous and varied, encompassing virtually all media save opera. Besides the two symphonies and *Triskelion*, Stevens's works include a Piano Concerto (1957); Septet (1957/ a Fromm Foundation commission); Viola Sonata (1950); three string quartets, three trios, and a series of choral works ranging from the intimate *a cappella* work *Like as the Culver on the Bared Bough* (1954/ CRI 102) to the *Magnificat* (1962) for chorus, trumpet, and string orchestra.

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

In the commentary that he supplied for the program notes of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra for the world premiere, Mr. Stevens observes: "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. The first movement opens with harp and pizzicato strings, with a thematic idea from which grow all the materials of the movement. . . . 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. This is a movement of strong contrasts, both dynamically and in scoring, solo instruments being juxtaposed with tutti, yet its effect is cumulative rather than fragmentary.

"The Adagio is simple in its outlines and somber in its coloring. It opens with an intense, disjunct melody in the solo trumpet supported by strings, horns, and bassoons. . . . The rhythmic character is rather like a sarabande. This is worked out at some length, mainly in strings and woodwinds, with the alto flute playing a prominent part. A central section with a pedal C sounding throughout is entrusted to a solo horn with divided strings; this is continued as a short canon by solo flute and bassoon. A return is effected, with the trumpet theme now given to the English horn, and the movement ends quietly.

"The final Allegro is ushered in with piano and muted trombone . . . a motif in strings, horns, and woodwinds . . . and a brisk continuation in the solo trumpet. . . .

"Though these provide the most important materials of the section, there are numerous other motifs of lesser significance. A subsidiary group introduces a new thematic idea, sharply syncopated, in strings spreading quickly to the full orchestra. . . . When this subsides, the piano theme—which began the movement—is presented as a four-part canon, *doppio meno mosso*, rising to a climax with trumpets and oboes, whereupon the canonic theme rolls over and continues in inversion. With the resumption of the original tempo, the opening materials are recapitulated but simultaneously amplified. A long coda begins brusquely in celli and violas, adding the violins, and breaking off abruptly to allow the piano, trombones, and contrabassoon to elaborate on the opening theme. The horns re-establish the original key, and the movement sweeps quickly to a close in which the subsidiary theme plays the greater part".

The composer considers the two outer movements to be in the key of A, while the second begins in C and ends in A. The keys, however, are neither major nor minor, nor even modal, but make free use of all the chromatic tones without negating the sense of tonality.

Karen Keys, soloist in the La Montaine Piano Concerto recorded here, met the composer on the occasion of the music's Washington premiere and subsequently worked with him in refining her interpretation of the solo part. There followed her highly successful performances with the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra with David Van Vactor, and then the one with the Oklahoma City Symphony under Guy Fraser Harrison, which was taped for CRI shortly thereafter.

A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, Miss Keys spent two years in Paris under a Fulbright Grant where she studied with Alfred Cortot. In recent years, she has toured Europe and the U.S.A. not only as soloist in her own right, but as keyboard collaborator with her concert flutist husband, Keith Bryan.

Guy Fraser Harrison came to the U.S.A. from his native England by way of an organist-choirmaster's post in Manila, in the early 1920s to join the staff of the newly founded Eastman School of Music. From 1924 until 1951 he was successively conductor of the Eastman Theater Orchestra and the Rochester Civic Orchestra, after which he took over the conductorship of the Oklahoma City Symphony. In this post he has not only won the affection of that city's music lovers for the way in which he has built up the orchestra in terms of musical maturity and expanded cultural service to the community, but he has won at least four major citations for his services on behalf of contemporary music and his work in the field of youth music education.

George Barati, who conducts Britain's renowned London Philharmonic Orchestra on this CRI recording of the Halsey Stevens *Symphonic Dances* is equally well known as composer and conductor. His *Chamber Concerto* won the Naumburg Recording award and was subsequently taped for Columbia, while his Cello Concerto is scheduled for release by CRI in early 1964.

Hungarian born, during the early part of his career, he was principal cellist of the Budapest Symphony Orchestra. Barati came to America in 1938, where he undertook a wide range of activities as conductor, teacher, and chamber ensemble performer. He also studied composition, culminating in work with Roger Sessions at Princeton.

Following wartime military service, Barati played in the cello section of the San Francisco Symphony, while becoming increasingly active as a conductor on his own; and in 1950 he was invited to assume his present post as musical director of the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, where he has achieved outstanding success in his dual role as conductor and composer.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)