

Three Piano Concertos

It's surprising how many wonderful American piano concertos there are, and how woefully unknown and underperformed they are. And the three concertos presented on this CD are three of the best and most interesting, for differing reasons. Two of them, the Robert Ward and Lee Hoiby are loaded with stunningly beautiful melodies, real tunes, and that real American sound. The third, by Marc Blitzstein, is a little different but equally wonderful in its own way. Thank goodness they were recorded and that we all have the chance to enjoy their numerous pleasures.

We begin with the Robert Ward Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. It was commissioned by the Powder River Foundation for pianist Margaret Mitchell. The premiere performance took place in June of 1968 with Ms. Mitchell as soloist. It was later recorded with Mitchell and William Strickland conducting the Stuttgart Radio Orchestra. I was pleased to have this be the very first CD we issued back in 1988 on our then-brand new label Bay Cities. I'd been a huge fan of Robert Ward's *The Crucible* opera and while we couldn't do that one at that time, we were able to issue a wonderful CD of the concerto and two of Ward's symphonies.

The first time I heard the concerto I was bowled over by its gorgeous melodies. And in the almost thirty years since we released that CD I cannot count the number of times I've listened to it. It is, in fact, completely addicting. For a concerto written in the latter part of the 1960s, when there was a lot of noise coming from composers, the Ward was refreshingly old-fashioned, but in a good way. And I could not believe that this beautiful work was almost never performed. To me, that's criminal. But Ward had many, many admirers including Stephen Sondheim, who was a fan. Add to that the fact that Ward was also a genuinely nice and warm person and you understand why his music is a reflection of who he was.

About his concerto, Ward said, "During each major period of music history,

certain forms have emerged as characteristic. Perhaps the only wholly new idea of our time is that which has grown out of 12-tone music. Another common procedure today is that of using older forms in new combinations. My Concerto is an example of the latter. Critics have described the work as being 'in the grand manner.' Certainly it was my intention to follow in the tradition of those concerti which fully utilized the potential of the piano in the broad lyric sense."

Lee Hoiby's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra was commissioned by G. Schirmer in 1957. The first performance featured John Atkins, the wonderful soloist on this recording. The first issue on CD was back in 1989, the third album released on Bay Cities. At that time, we were licensing a whole slew of CRI recordings of American classical music. Most of those recordings had music that was new to me, so it was a whole musical education learning about composers I simply had no knowledge of – my world of American composers were the usual suspects – Copland, Bernstein, Hanson, and Robert Ward – I'd heard others and enjoyed the music, but I was still an American classical music novice in many ways. So, hearing the Lee Hoiby concerto for the first time was a real ear-opener – such beautiful and haunting themes throughout, beautifully orchestrated and sounding like a distant cousin of Rachmaninov, but with a distinctly American quality. Here's Hoiby's description of his concerto:

"The piano begins with a quiet statement of the principal theme, which is then exchanged with the orchestra and led through several keys, without transition, directly to the second subject, in tempo giusto. There is a closing section, wherein two new motives appear at the same time. Development of all this material follows, leading to a solo piano cadenza, and a brief summarizing recapitulation with coda.

"The lento second movement is by turns lyrical, contemplative, and rhapsodic,

with an embellished cadenza prominent in the early pages.

"The allegro vivo finale offers a dancing 7/8 solo piano figure by way of main theme, which is counterpointed by a separate rhythm for muted brass. This theme is alternated with two contrasting sections in sonata-rondo fashion. The last pages of the concerto are marked by steadily increasing momentum leading to a fortissimo close."

And finally we have the oldest concerto of the three – Marc Blitzstein's Piano Concerto, written in 1931 when he was only twenty-five. But the piece was not premiered until 1986, when the Brooklyn Philharmonic finally brought the piece to the public. Prior to that it had been heard only twice and both times in a two-piano reduction. When composer David Diamond, who had been a page-turner for one of those performances, requested the score to peruse and for possible performance, he received a nice note from Blitzstein that read, "All my thanks about the Piano Concerto, which I don't think I want done now." And so it remained unperformed while Blitzstein found success in musical theatre and opera. But the concerto is a unique and original work, one filled with interesting ideas and unusual touches but one that is still extremely accessible and attractive. Of the concerto, Blitzstein said, "It follows the 19th century model, except that it begins with an extended prelude for the solo instrument. The last movement is a double passacaglia in which two themes are deployed alternately and simultaneously, affording considerable opportunity for many types of contrapuntal devices and treatment."

So, here we have three piano concertos, three American piano concertos, and three completely addictive piano concertos brimming with invention and beauty, in great and definitive performances.

— Bruce Kimmel