


Barber

New

Excursions, Op. 20. Piano Sonata, Op. 26. Souvenirs, Op. 28. Nocturne (Homage to John Field), Op. 33. Ballade, Op. 46. Three Sketches. Interlude (1929). Interlude (1931).

Leon McCawley (piano).

Somm Céleste SOMMCD0108 (medium price, 1 hour 9 minutes). Website www.somm-recordings.com  Producer Siva Oke. Engineer Ben Connellan. Dates September 27th and 28th, 2010.

Comparison:

Browning (Nimbus) NI2528 (1993)

Steven Osborne's recent survey of Ravel's piano music managed to trump previous 'complete' accounts in finding and including a tiny Menuet in C sharp minor – a mere 45 seconds in length – which Ravel penned into a pupil's exercise book. John Browning's disc of Barber's piano music (now on Nimbus, previously released by Music Masters in 1993) was termed 'complete' for its inclusion of a world première recording of the *Interlude* No. 1 (1929), yet Leon McCawley has here managed to add a further 15 minutes to Barber's diminutive oeuvre of piano works. There is another *Interlude* (of 1931), just shy of two minutes long, but notwithstanding its brevity is a very welcome addition, with passagework of frenzied élan and *precipitato* writing. It provides the first hint among these early works of the virtuosity that Barber was to summon up to answer Horowitz's request for a brilliant finale to follow the introspective *Adagio* with which Barber had originally intended to finish his longest and most complex piano work, the Piano Sonata Op. 26 (1949).

McCawley also includes three short and charming miniatures by the 14-year-old composer – the *Three Sketches* (1923-24), just a minute each, the second poignantly entitled 'To my Steinway (To Number 220601)' – as well as the rather more substantial suite of six *Souvenirs*, Op. 28 (1950), originally written for four hands. These light-hearted works are, in Barber's words, 'a divertissement in a setting of the Palm Court of the Hotel Plaza in New York, the year about 1914, epoch of

the first Tangos; *Souvenirs*, remembered with affection, not in irony or with tongue in cheek, but in amused tenderness'. They include elements of the tango, the waltz, Scottish dance, and provide a fine example of the multi-faceted and eclectic stylistic range of Barber's compositional language, closing with a delightful romp, a galop, constantly at risk of being tripped up by its own rhythmic ingenuity.

The *Souvenirs* are in many ways in the same vein as the earlier *Excursions*, Op. 20 (1944), which concentrate on native American elements, from western, to blues and boogie-woogie: indeed, it's hard to think of Horowitz giving its première in 1945. He famously gave another Barber first performance in 1950, in the Carnegie Hall, of the Piano Sonata. Barber's solution to the 'finale problem' was to create a fiendish four-part Fugue, of which Poulenc remarked that it 'vous met knock-out en cinq minutes!' McCawley dispatches this with phenomenal clarity and accuracy and a powerful sense of line, attributes that he demonstrates with similar forcefulness in the second of the *Interludes*. He is no less impressive in the light-hearted numbers, the *Souvenirs* and the *Excursions*, or in the poetic and nostalgic works such as the *Nocturne*, Op. 33 (of 1959, dedicated to John Field), or the late *Ballade*, Op. 46, commissioned as a test piece by the 1977 Van Cliburn Competition.

There is no denying the musicianship and the authority of Browning's Grammy Award-winning account – Barber's Piano Concerto was dedicated to and premièred by Browning for the opening of the Lincoln Center in 1962 – but there is a dry and percussive quality which will not be to everyone's tastes. With the inclusion of a further 15 minutes of Barber's piano works McCawley's must now be the survey of choice, and the Somm engineers have perfectly captured all the clarity and warmth of tone that McCawley conjures from his Steinway.

Pierre Brévignon (author of *Samuel Barber ou le malentendu*; Bleu Nuit, 2010) provides brief but beautifully expressive and sensitive notes (and interestingly their intricacies have been translated by another of Somm's house pianists, Mark Bebbington). *Nicholas Salwey*