

'Americans in Rome'

'Music by Fellows of the American Academy in Rome'
Includes works by **Barber, Beaser, Beeson, Bermel, Bresnick, Carter, Diesendruck, Foss, Giannini, Hanson, Hartke, Helfer, Hyla, Imbrie, Ince, H Johnson, Kernis, Lam, Lang, Layton, JA Lennon, Levering, Lindroth, Mobberley, Moravec, Naginski, Rochberg, Rakowski, Rush, Sessions, Shapero, Sowerby, Steinert, R Thomson, Wingate** and **Wyner**
Various artists

Bridge ④ BRIDGE9271A/D (4h 20' • DDD/ADD)

An extensive and enjoyable collection of American music nurtured in Rome



This wide-ranging set pays homage to the American Academy in Rome and the vast contribution it has made in nurturing American composers for more than three-quarters

of a century. The four well filled CDs offer a cornucopia of works by Academy fellows, both celebrated and obscure, performed from 1998 to 2007 at a variety of venues, with artistic director Donald Berman as pianist for most performances.

The first disc covers a wide range of vocal music, composed from 1920 (Leo Sowerby) to 2002 (Robert Beaser). Beaser's *Four Dickinson Songs* are given superb advocacy by the extraordinary Hila Plitmann, who is particularly inspired in "We never know how high we are", though the close balance is a bit relentless. Along with Ned Rorem, Samuel Barber remains our finest art song composer, and the four brief Barber settings receive such sterling advocacy by Susan Narucki and Chris Pedro Trakas that one wishes for more. A "songbook" follows of single settings by nine composers, with Trakas especially fine in Randall Thompson's lovely "Siciliano" and Derek Bermel's amusing "Spider Love"; Narucki shines in Vittorio Giannini's melodic "There Were Two Swans". Like so much music composed in the 1960s, the jauntily subversive excerpts from Roger Sessions's opera *Montezuma* betray their era. While not very vocal, the two tableaux are entertaining and Narucki skilfully handles the tortuous leaps of Malinche's aria. "Charming" is not the word often associated with Elliott Carter, but his early, rhapsodic *Warble for Lilac Time* (1943) is effervescent and irresistible, along with the more dramatic *Voyage*, written the same year.

Less epigrammatic by necessity than the vocal excerpts, disc 2 is devoted to just seven works. Aaron Jay Kernis's Mozart retooling morphs several themes into a kind of free-form barnyard dance for string trio, his "micro-mini variations" making its point economically in three minutes. Paul Moravec's *Passacaglia*, written for this project, gives us something much deeper, indeed the most substantial work of this set. It is cast in



The Academy: an Italian-American collaboration

the composer's closely argued style of astringent lyricism and given a full-throttle performance by Trio Solisti. Coming immediately after, Arthur Levering's moto perpetuo *Teserae* for viola and piano sounds a bit academic. John Anthony Lennon's *Sirens*, a moody, introspective single movement for piano trio, is more finely wrought.

With the majority of selections leaning toward living composers, it's nice to encounter Alexander Lang Steinert's graceful 1929 Violin Sonata, a dramatic, well crafted work, with a richly lyrical slow movement, that surely deserves to be better known. Martin Bresnick's *Three Intermezzi* for solo cello offers bravura opportunities but is less musically interesting. Stephen Hartke's *Beyond Words*, however, composed in the wake of September 11, 2001, is a powerful, darkly ruminative single movement for piano quartet, the sense of subdued tragedy most affecting in themes inspired from Tallis's *Lamentations*.

Neoclassicism has always been the defining characteristic of American piano music, a fact reflected on disc three, with Donald Berman in the solo spotlight. There's a swing element to Lukas Foss's wartime *Fantasy Rondo* too, and Walter Helfer's 1927 miniature *Nocturne* has a complexity that belies its swaying surface. A jazz element is also palpable in Tamar Diesendruck's *Sound Reasoning in the Tower of Babel* (1990).

Hunter Johnson's 1936 Sonata deserves wider currency with its aggressive opening movement and dramatic bite, and a slow movement with the elliptical solitary expression that imbues so much American music of the period.

Mark Wingate's *Sombras* (1995) uses real-time electronic filtering to create an amped quality that invests the work with a jumpy electric edge. Billy Jim Layton's *Three Etudes* (1957) inhabit the same type of syncopated vigour amid spare,

widely spaced notes. By contrast Loren Rush's *Ob, Susanna* (1970), based on the march from Act 3 of *Le nozze di Figaro*, is more sombre and less whimsical than the title and its performance-art inspiration suggest. All these wildly variegated works receive first-class advocacy by Berman.

The fourth disc in the set is devoted to piano and winds, offering the shortest measure and, frankly, the slightest music. Yehudi Wyner's *Commedia* for clarinet and piano is the stand-out, with a cheeky first movement and a pensive, expansive second part, played magnificently by Richard Stoltzman who seamlessly conveys both impish charm and introspective elements.

I haven't been able to warm to the music of either David Lang or Andrew Imbrie, and the same holds true here. The rude noises of Lee Hyla's two works for alto sax and bass clarinet are mildly amusing the first time around. Bun-Ching Lam's two solo flute movements have their moments, though James Mobberley's gimmicky *Beams* for trombone and tape soon wears out its welcome. Coming after, Howard Hanson's quite elegiac *Pastorale* for oboe and piano is all the more impressive. And Harold Shapero's witty *Six for Five* (movements, that is) for wind quintet is delightful, the Curiously Strong Winds bringing great vitality and character to the music. Only three movements (1, 2 and 6) are performed; unfortunate since it is one of the treasures of the set and there was room for the complete work.

Notes are comprehensive with detailed background on each work and full texts for the songs. There are plenty of worthwhile discoveries here: the Moravec, Hartke, Steinert, Wyner and Shapero works in particular, and all receive outstanding advocacy. How about a follow-up set of orchestral music from American Academy of Rome fellows? **Lawrence A Johnson**