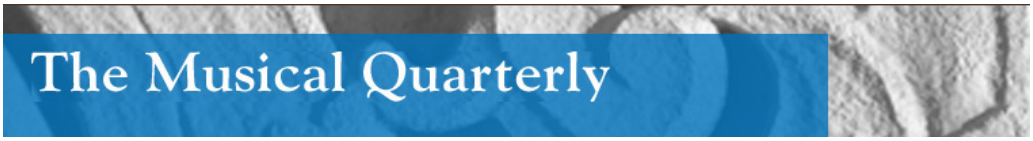

The Musical Quarterly, 1978

Essay-Review

RECORDED ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN MUSIC (New World Records)

On December 12, 1978, there was a reception at the Lincoln Center Library in New York to celebrate the completion of the "first phase" of the New World Records "Recorded Anthology of American Music" project. Self-congratulation flowed freely, and in this case was deserved. New World Records still has more work to do. But it has achieved its initial goal, which was to issue 100 discs of American music of every conceivable sort, "tracing the history of America through its music" (in the words of a press release) "in all its richness and diversity" (in the words of a brochure). Or, as Howard Klein of the Rockefeller Foundation said on that occasion, to capture in sound "what it's like to be an American."

The Rockefeller Foundation was represented because without its support of $3,900,000, there would be no New World Records. Conceived as part of the Bicentennial celebration, the company released its 100 discs between 1976 and 1978, making use of recorded materials previously released on commercial labels or recording its own productions. Complete sets (700,000 discs) were distributed free to educational and cultural institutions worldwide, and other such institutions could purchase the set for $195. In addition, those recordings that did not contain material upon which commercial companies had placed restrictions could be offered for public sale at normal prices (53 of the 100 discs are now available in that way); altogether some 200,000 records have been sold in one manner or another.

The anthology is not just a collection of great American music. According to the company's figures, more than 1,600 American musicians are represented on these records. For music before this century the performances are naturally contemporary ones, but for the past seventy-five years the phonograph has been used as an archival tool, and thus a wide body of historically important performances has been preserved along with the music performed.

Confronting such a mass of material from a critical standpoint poses certain problems — not least of which is the sheer bulk of time required to listen to 100 records. And ultimately one's notion of how well New World Records has done the job it set out to do depends on how one defines the nature of that job. The search for such a definition is complicated by a slight ambivalence either in New World Records' own self- image or between that image and the image that has been conveyed to a wider public. Perhaps falsely, one assumes these 100 records to be a sort of ultimate "greatest hits" collection — *the* cream of the American crop, the 100 finest and most representative records of American music of every sort that could be assembled. Sometimes the company's propaganda hints that that was the intention. But to be fair, its president, Herman Krawitz, and others speak more frequently of "filling the gaps." Thus instead of a set which one could passively absorb and feel one had digested the best of American music, we have a more complicated task. This is a collection of great American music not otherwise represented on disc. The potential listener is asked to muster a considerable degree of sophistication and selectivity, and to avail himself of the extensive notes, bibliographies, and discographies to fill out the complete picture. Just to give one of many examples, the only Charles Ives composition available here is on the first side of NW300 and consists of nine songs. No one felt the need to duplicate any of the symphonies, for instance, which are readily available on many other labels.

continued...

Beyond that issue, there are other criteria for trying to come to terms with New World Records' achievement. American music can be looked at as the product of several related dialectical polarities — European versus indigenous American, Classical versus vernacular, white versus ethnic, urban versus rural, the political left versus the political right. As a general observation it can be said that the "establishment's" view of what constitutes American music has gradually loosened up and shifted left over the past few decades, with an ever-greater weight being placed on the second half of all the above polarities.

New World Records, which is nothing if not a product of America's musical establishment, has moved an honorable distance away from the Northeastern conservatism that might have informed a similar selection if it had been made only a few years ago. If one still adheres to a conservative position on such matters, of course, the fact that 61 of the 100 discs are "non-Classical" (there are some borderline records, but that gives a fair idea of the proportions involved) could be construed as a lamentable erosion of standards. For others of us, the balance seems about right, in broad terms. The Classical records in this series are full of fascinations, even those made before the turn of the century. But by and large they reinforce the view that in American art music (and by that I mean to include jazz and artfully composed popular music) the bulk of what is really interesting has been created in the last seventy-five years, and that the roots of our serious music lie more in folk styles than in the industriously imitative Classical music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

So more power to the New World establishmentarians for including — to take a particularly obvious example — Alan Lomax as producer of several of these discs, when Lomax is affiliated with the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, and not Music. But at the same time, there are still various establishment biases that distort the picture of American music presented in this series. The distortion increases the closer we get to the present, and there are two reasons for that. One is that prejudices and subjective passions burn brightest during one's own lifetime, and only fade under the consensus of historical opinion. Another is more practical: for recent material (especially recent commercial material) it became increasingly difficult to obtain clearances from the major record companies.

Still, that does not really excuse, for instance, a strong bias for Broadway over Hollywood. Or the virtual exclusion of electronic music, or the post-Cageian experimental avant-gardists. In a collection of ethnic folk music, scant attention is paid to American Jews. Contemporary jazz is seriously underrepresented, although there is a fine Cecil Taylor record (NW201). Modern country music at least has one strong anthology (NW207). Rock and roll has only a single disc for the 1950s (NW240) and that was produced by Gary Giddins, a jazz critic not very interested in rock music. (There is, admittedly, a fine disc of the rhythm and blues antecedents of rock on NW201.) The fact remains that an enormous amount of American musical creativity over the past twenty-five years has been invested in the popular field, and that there is a large, knowledgeable and growing group of academic and journalistic experts who could have been called upon to document that creativity. New World Records' failure to make that effort is just lame.

In the Classical selections, stopping short of the present does have one interesting side effect, It focuses attention on the generation of composers who just precede the present. This music — by such as Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, Virgil Thomson, Vincent Persichetti, David Diamond, William Schuman, Samuel Barber, and others — has rather fallen out of fashion in recent years, as the tide of serialism and chromaticism produced by students of emigre composers took hold. But there are now signs that this music is returning to favor, and it is nice to be reminded how worthy much of it is. (Another advantage of a decreased attention to the present is that we are spared a too liberal helping of the sort of fare served up at most ISCM concerts these days, although we still get more of that than we do of most other kinds of contemporary music, Classical or popular.)

Although one applauds the attention paid to vernacular music, there is still a tendency here, I think, to regard folk and popular music as "resources" for an eventual reworking into "serious" art music. Perhaps that is a defensive bias of my own, or an unfair projection onto the New World Records' editorial committee. But except in the admittedly significant area of jazz, when the program notes show that this music is taken with a real seriousness, there is a hint that popular songs were either sociological or anthropological effusions or grist for Classical composers' mills, that Broadway was raw material for the as yet unborn Great American Opera, etc. If the series had had the boldness to include present-day popular music in all its diversity, we might better see that, largely unheralded, a whole, viable, new tradition of American art music in a commercial context has arisen, and that "fusions" between that tradition, older forms, and modern-day "Classical" experimentation are proceeding in a far less self-conscious way than the third-stream efforts and Broadway-operetta hybrids of a couple of decades ago.

The records in the New World series fall into two types. One is a record devoted to a single piece, artist, folksinger, church choir, or whatever. The other is a more obviously produced disc, in which the producer has had a determining say in the artistic impact of the record. Such records can range from fairly straightforward historical surveys (Hills and Home: Thirty Years of Bluegrass, NW225; The Music Goes Round and Round: The Golden Years of Tin Pan Alley, 1930-39, NW248; When I Have Sung my Songs: The American Art Song, 1900-1990, NW247, etc.) to far more ambitiously produced "concept albums." Here the producer strives to make a point by juxtaposing music in a way that reinforces a thesis; some of the most intellectually stimulating, purely enjoyable records in the series are a result of this process, particularly when the notes surpass the prevailing high standard of informativeness and lively literacy. Let's Get Loose: Folk and Popular Blues Styles from the Beginnings to the Early 1940's, NW290, offers a wonderfully pointed dramatization of the musical relations between blacks and whites. The Birth of Liberty: Music of the American Revolution, NW276, gives a real panorama of our variegated musical life 200 years ago. And Where the Home Is: Life in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati, NW251, is so graphic you almost feel you have intruded upon your great-grandparents in their living room.

The variety of production approaches gives us some indication of another characteristic of the series. The company's distinguished editorial committee and key staff members coordinated the overall production plans, laying out a large grid pattern and gradually refining the details. But individual records were turned over to individual producers,- and the amount of leeway such producers were able to exercise naturally varied depending on the stature of the producer and his clout with the editorial committee. This had an obvious

advantage: it freed independent- minded producers from excessive editorial supervision and constraint. But it also led to certain imbalances and self-indulgences. Lomax, for instance, is such a well-respected figure in the field recording of American folk music that he was allowed to devote entire records to material that might better (given the 100-record limit, the grid pattern, etc.) have been confined to excerpts the disc of Georgia Island Sea Songs (NW278), for instance, or the disc devoted to white spirituals from the Sacred Harp (NW205), although that record is so stirring and exciting that one can hardly complain.

Similarly, a record of American psalmody with the Oregon State University Choir (NW255), produced by Elizabeth Ostrow, director of research for New World Records, sounds a bit slick and excessive. Two discs of "forgotten" material jazz (NW275) and pop (NW240) — make one wonder, in a highly selective series, why one should bother with this material, unless it is so outstanding as to be remembered fervently by a strong consensus of aficionados. Presumably these two discs reflect the private enthusiasms of Gunther Schuller and the jazz contingent on the editorial committee on the one hand, and of Milton Babbitt, who produced the pop disc, on the other. Most glaring of all is an entire disc devoted to "the Jazz Sound of Ricky Ford" (NW204). Ford is a graduate of the New England Conservatory and played with the late Charles Mingus and. his record is actually quite pleasing. But with so little devoted to contemporary jazz, to give a decidedly marginal figure fully 1 per cent of the whole series suggests (no doubt inadvertent) cronyism.

But in spite of all this, one still has to recognize the magnitude of this achievement, and to consider the ways in which it can be used. The most obvious derives from the manner in which the whole program was set up. With 7,000 sets now presumably ensconced in libraries around the world, instructors (especially in smaller institutions) have a significantly increased pool of resources upon which to draw for educational purposes. The ways in which these discs can be used in the classroom are nearly infinite, and their usefulness will be in direct proportion to the sophistication of the instructor. Given the "filling the gaps" reality of this project, a blind assignment of the whole series to gullible ears as an ostensible representation of the totality of American musical culture would be a distortion. For most of the great creative works of American music are on other labels all duly noted in the New World Records discographies. And before 1900 much of "serious" American musical culture consisted of European imports, which by definition New World Records does not include. But used selectively, these discs can prove an invaluable resource to students.

Another way to come to terms with this set is on one's own, either simply listening for pleasure or private instruction to such records as catch one's fancy, or arranging them in sequences that seem amusing and productive. I listened first to such folk musics as might be considered to flow into jazz, then to jazz itself, then to other sorts of folk music and miscellaneous religious and secular musics, then pop, and finally "Classical" from the eighteenth century to the present. But that was an almost arbitrary choice, Fascinating comparisons could be made on a strictly chronological ordering, or according to instrumental groupings, or any other pattern one can dream up.

Listening to the records individually makes sense, too, in part because so much of the really strong, sturdy, and lasting American art music was made by rugged individualists — eccentrics, even who fought free of traditions (especially European) and built a music that was as long on substance as it was short on immediate, overt influence on subsequent composers. This was as true for William Billings or Anthony Heinrich as it was for Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, John Cage, Henry Partch, Conlon Nancarrow, or Lou Harrison.

In some ways the most painstaking records here are those on which a producer had to ransack private collections and record-company vaults to come up with just the archival material he needed to document his case or prove his point. Of those discs, the most dramatic, possibly the most important, and certainly one of the most enjoyable, is the disc devoted to a semireconstruction of Eubie Blake's black musical, Shuffle Along, of 1921 (NW260). There were no "cast albums" in those days, but a documentation has been assembled from period recordings by the composers and cast members. The result not only dramatizes the key role this musical played in allowing black culture to enter the white mainstream, but it suggests that Shuffle Along forced as radical a realignment of American popular sensibilities as did rock and roll in the mid-1950s.

Naturally, the recordings that attract the most attention are those in which New World Records itself has gone out and recorded heretofore neglected major American works. The most widely publicized example is Virgil Thomson's The Mother of Us All (NW288/289), which some of us consider the finest American opera, and its neglect by our major opera companies to be a national scandal. (It appears that New World Records will be the first to record a complete version of Thomson's Four Saints in Three Acts, too.) Unfortunately the Mother of Us All album, recorded in Santa Fe and using that company's cast, is marred by the eccentric decision to cast a mezzo-soprano in the soprano title role; this transforms the score's many shining high notes into occasions for strain. But the music is still there, available to be heard.

There are other important recording projects that New World Records itself undertook. There are some fine efforts by the Federal Music Society, offering such morsels as John Bray's The Indian Princess or La Belle Sauvage and Raynor Taylor's The Ethiop (NW232) and a selection of Music from the Federal Era (NW299). There is an unusual pairing of Heinrich's The Ornithological Combat of Kings and Louis Gottschalk's Night in the Tropics on NW208; a fascinating (if rather bland, in terms of actual musical pleasure) section of George F. Root's pastoral cantata, The Haymakers, on NW234; a fine recording under Schuller's baton of John Knowles Paine's powerful Brahmsian Mass in D (NW262/263); the ingenious recording of Cowell's remarkable Quartet Romantic on NW285; a lovely Griffes disc (NW273) and Roger Sessions' When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd on NW296.

Beyond these expensive recording projects, there is a host of worthy individual records, and it would serve little purpose to chatter on, gushing over my favorites. But aside from the records already cited, enthusiasm will not let me avoid mentioning a disc of Puerto Rican and Cuban music by New York immigrants (NW244); a lovely ragtime collection on NW235; a fine disc called The Roots of the Blues on NW252; a snappy collection of "club jazz" on NW250 with affectionate, informative notes by Nat Hentoff; a disc of small jazz groups on NW242; a stimulating juxtaposition of black and white religiosity on NW224; two collections of country music from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s that prove how slick most Nashville

modern-day country music really Is (NW236 and NW287); a charming collection of children's songs (and one of the several of the field recordings that really do make a musical impact) on NW291; a lilting assortment of popular dance music from the eighteenth century to the 1920s on NW293; a kitschy but amusing garland of sentimental pop piano stylings (NW298); Ivan Davis' The Wind Demon collection of nineteenth- century piano music (NW257); the Arthur Foote violin sonata on NW268; the Harris-Cowell-Shepherd disc on NW218; the Copland solo piano record (NW277); the Cowell-Cage-Nancarrow-Johnston disc on NW203; and Salvatore Martirano's moving a cappella Mass on NW210.

Needless to say, among the unmentioned records are many that provide great pleasure. And equally obvious, there are others that may sound a little austere or even grim, but still serve a needed documentary function. To my taste the worst is attained by the late-nineteenth-century material, both Classical and, especially, popular: Victorian/Wilhelmian culture tended to wallow in the bathetic and the (innocently?) racist, but nowhere did it wallow more happily than in America. It is to the great credit of New World Records that contemporary pieties are not allowed to launder the racism or purge the sentimentality, yet some of this stuff is still quite offensive treacle. No wonder America was ready for the Jazz Age.

But it is part of the charm of listening to these discs in bulk that, even on records that otherwise are perhaps only mildly interesting, the most remarkable gems crop up. For instance I enjoyed the delighted cackles and remarks like "Boy, oh, boy, that's good" that punctuate an otherwise rather clogged record of Indian chants on NW297; or "Starvation Blues" on NW256, or "Passion Flower" with Johnny Hodges and his Orchestra on NW274; or the Jaki Byard piano solos on one of the discs of "neglected" jazz, NW275; or the highly political Charles Mingus cut on NW242; the Lennie Tristano and Stan Kenton (especially "Mirage") selections on NW216; Me!item Roybal's Spanish-Indian violin playing on NW292; John White and Roy Smeck doing "Whoopee-Ti-Yi-Yo" on NW245; "Fox on the Run" and "Body and Soul" on NW225 (the bluegrass collection); Grant Rogers on an otherwise uneven disc of New England folk songs (NW239); "Bobby Halsey" on a collection of children's songs (NW291); the silly but endearing melodrama of "Beauregard's Retreat from Shiloh" on a Civil War collection, NW202; an extraordinary duet for Italian bagpipes recorded in New York around 1916 on NW264; the spirituals sung by Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson on NW247 (which, nicely enough, is devoted to The American Art Song); the John Alden Carpenter and John Powell pieces on NW228; Randall Thompson's Americana on NW219; Lou Harrison's Suite for Cello and Harp on NW281 and the Paul Chihara and Chou Wen-chung works on NW257.

From a technical standpoint, this is a generally admirable achievement. Occasionally some oddity intrudes, like sour pitch on my copy of NW208, or an inner page of notes sticking to the jacket and obliterating some text when it is torn loose, or occasional skipping. But by and large the new recordings are engineered in a manner competitive to major labels, and the remastering of the older material is handled with admirable care. The notes and other textual matter are. done with scrupulousness and style, although some are less good than others (e.g., the too breezy notes for the Irving Berlin record, NW238).

Now that the initial Rockefeller grant has been exhausted and the first 100 records have appeared, the New World Records organization has trimmed its 'staff, but it has no intention of disappearing. The Rockefeller Foundation has come up with a new $80,000 matching grant, and New World Records has launched a fund-raising drive to continue its operations on a more circumspect level, with contributions already received from fourteen sources. The company promises several new releases that should be out when this essay appears in print: a second Cecil Taylor record, a field recording of an Indian "turtle dance," a collection of twentieth-century piano music, and performance tapes in the Library of Congress. There is talk of the complete Charles Griffes, more nineteenth- century symphonies, more theater music. The policy of enlisting top-rank American artists and institutions, already so much in evidence in the first 100 records (e.g., Sherrill Milnes, the Boston Symphony), will continue with projects involving Zubin Tvlehta and the New York Philharmonic, John Nelson and the Indianapolis Symphony, etc.

As in any such endeavor, the totality is both more and less than the sum of the parts. On the one hand, whatever reservations one might muster about the exact delegation of individual assignments or the balance of ingredients in the overall stew or even any particular record, there are still surely a large number of discs in this collection that will give anyone pleasure. Even with the inevitable reservations, it is hard not to feel grateful and congratulatory about the New World Records project. Here, finally, is an instance of an idealistic, difficult undertaking that enough intelligent people cared enough about to pursue to a happy conclusion. Scholars, students, and music lovers will be in their debt for years to come.

—JOHN ROCKWELL