

CD REVIEW 115

PAUL CRESTON Symphonies 1, 2 and 3
NSO of the Ukraine/Theodore Kucher.
Naxos 8.559034 (72.39)

I have known and loved these symphonies for over forty years. I possess scores and, in fact, discussed the symphonies with the composer face to face many years ago.

Because the composer told me that Howard Mitchell's recording of Nos 2 and 3 were 'definitive performances' and that it 'was inconceivable that they would ever be performed better', I acquired this Westminster LP and studied the performances with the scores. There is absolutely no doubt that Mitchell accurately realises all the composer's intentions. The composer said so; the scores say so and I concur.

In the opening movement of Symphony No 2, Mitchell gives the music its essential space whereas Kuchar is too fast; the music does not breathe and thereafter the Song is not cantabile at all. Both Kuchar and David Amos (Koch - International) have exaggerated performances in which sforzandos are painfully caricatured in the style of Simon Rattle. The balance is awful on the Naxos disc... for example, some of the bass drum entries are so strong that they obliterate the equally important remaining orchestral detail. Naeme Jarvi is better but only second best to Mitchell who is miles in front. The Pierre Monteux broadcast has its good points but, quite frankly, all these performances are seriously lacking compared to Mitchell.

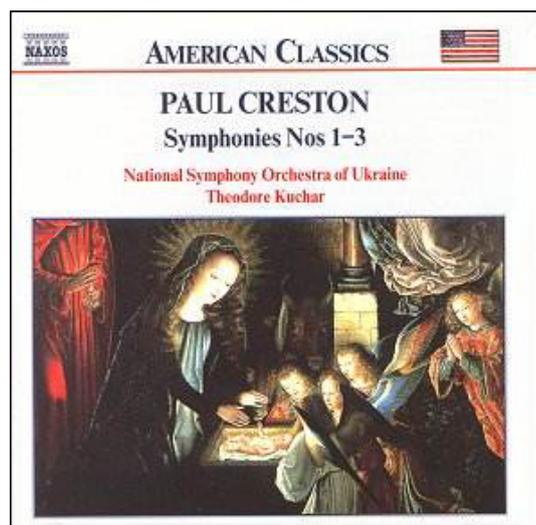
The second movement's main section is a Latin-American dance and the Naxos version has absolutely no idea of the composer's intentions. The rhythmic drive is lost in Kuchar's performance and the important piano obligato is missing and yet Rob Barnett states that the symphony is played exactly as it is written. Absolute nonsense. Imagine Shostakovich's Symphony No 1 without the piano part and you will appreciate what I mean. The Mitchell version honours the composer's intentions and how magnificently he achieves the orchestral balance and respects Creston's instruction to make the high violin cantilena sing. Only Mitchell has the incursive attack as clearly indicated by the composer.

Pierre Monteux's performance is a good attempt at this colourful music but even this is lack-lustre compared to the Mitchell sound.

I was bemused by Rob Barnett's review of this disc. His comparison of Creston's music to that of Bax has no currency at all. I was also confused by his reference to Creston's music having a Hansonian delirium, whatever that is. There is nothing incoherent or hallucinatory in the text of Creston's music. The 'ecstasy' of the second movement is only caught (and kept) by Mitchell. I doubt whether Howard Hanson would want to be referred to as delirious! He was a very level-headed man.

Rob refers to this second movement as Gothic. It certainly is not. There is nothing Western European about it and the music is certainly not barbarous or uncouth. Neither is it a dynamic stomp nor can it be compared to E J Moeran's Symphony; the finale of that symphony is structurally unsound. Paul Creston told me that he 'came to Copland late' which may refute Rob Barnett's claim that Creston would surely know Danzon Cubano and El Salon Mexico.

The Symphony No 3 is, according to Barnett, influenced by Vaughan Williams 'clod-hopping mode',



whatever that is, and other influences such as Franz Schmidt, Stravinsky, Max Roger and Arthur Bliss. This attack on Creston's originality is both unfair and unfortunate as well as being more nonsense. Paul was a devout Roman Catholic and saw this work as 'an unworthy homage to God' and that 'true spirituality would be its only influence'. What we have is a deeply-felt personal and original religious quest. It is a 'factual' music-picture, not an emotional one. Both Amos and Kuchar miss the point, failing to understand the music's profound utterance as did George Lloyd in his hopeless and embarrassing account with the BBC Philharmonic some five years ago. In fact, that performance was threadbare and served to depopularise this very fine symphony. Lloyd, the so called English Schubert, highlighted the melodies at the expense of the harmonies, counterpoints, subtle modulations and so many other features.

Mitchell captures what no other conductor does... the mystery of the Nativity, the stillness and wonder of Bethlehem's night, the rejoicing shepherds. In the Crucifixion there is no pessimism in Mitchell's version but the acceptance of the vital purpose of the death of Christ and in the Resurrection, the sunlit morn and the disciples rushing to the empty tomb is so alive, so real and not exaggerated. The 'Hallelujah Chorus' is of quiet celebration, that inward joy that does not froth. Again, only Mitchell captures that.

The Symphony No 1 did come out on an LP in the 1950s, complete with the Saxophone Concerto and Trombone Fantasy, which I have.

I am further bemused by Rob linking Creston, Thompson, Giannini, Hanson and Menotti as melodists on the one hand and, on the other hand, Sessions, Carter, Mennin and Piston who branched 'into impoverished territory'. Why does he talk such utter nonsense? How can he be the editor of a music site and edit reviews when he is so inaccurate and cannot read music? Melody is only one possible ingredient in music and the originality of Sessions and Carter is admirable. Mennin's Cello Concerto is possibly one of the finest concertos for the cello of the twentieth century and his last three symphonies are both powerful and magnificent. Impoverished territory?

Kuchar's version of Creston's Symphony No 1 is frankly awful because it is cheap. It is a performance of sentimental Hollywood proportions and is too fast in the first movement, Majesty, too slow in the second movement, Humour, and so on. Kuchar's performance is schmaltz.

Since writing this I have followed the Naxos performances with the scores and listed over 40 errors and flaws in each of the symphonies' performances. They are very poor performances.

These are great symphonies, probably some of the best American symphonies of all but I urge you to acquire the Mitchell performances and avoid disappointment. Only the best will do. The Ukrainians sound as if their performances are first rehearsals; they certainly do not understand the music or where it is going.

(1030)

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