

A Year in Classical Music: 1926, vol. 2

In 1896, American composer Howard Hanson had been born in a small Nebraska town, west of Omaha and north of Lincoln, called Wahoo (after a Native American word meaning “burning bush”). Hanson had studied music in New York and then at Northwestern University in Chicago, and in 1921 he won the *Prix de Rome* for his ballet score, *The California Forest Play*. He had lived and worked in Rome from 1921 to 1924, studying orchestration informally with Ottorino Respighi. Upon returning to America Hanson had attracted the attention of George Eastman, the magnate of the Kodak company, who attended a performance at which Hanson conducted his *First Symphony* in Rochester, New York. Eastman offered Hanson a job as director of the recently founded Eastman School of Music in Rochester – a position Hanson held until 1964.

Hanson was of Swedish ancestry, and while he worked with Modernist techniques in his scores up to a point (by including jazz-derived material in his *Piano Concerto* of 1948, for example), he was a Romantic through and through, following after Grieg and Sibelius. In 1926, Hanson completed an *Organ Concerto*, a solo piano piece called *Vermeland*, and a tone poem for orchestra entitled *Pan and the Priest*. The *Organ Concerto* isn’t heard today in its 1926 version; Hanson revised it in 1941 as his *Concerto for Organ, Harp, and Orchestra*, and it’s this version you can find on record. *Vermeland* does not appear to have been commercially recorded, but *Pan and the Priest* was committed to disc for the first time in 1999, by the Nashville Symphony under Kenneth Schermerhorn. It’s on an outstanding album of Hanson works that includes most critics’ preferred readings of the *First Symphony*, the *Merry Mount Suite*, and *Rhythmic Variations on Two Ancient Hymns*. The album was the Nashville Symphony’s premiere recording for a major label, and a landmark in the rise to prominence of an impressive American arts institution. The orchestra has a beautiful sound, distinguished by a warm, resonant tone from the string section. In 2011, they premiered a banjo concerto by Béla Fleck – something I’d very much like to hear, and something that Nashville seems uniquely qualified to have offered the world.

If the young composers designated by critic Henri Collet as “Les Six” represented the forward-looking leading edge of French music in 1926, fifty-one year-old Maurice Ravel was France’s senior composer – the dean of its musicians. That April he completed his setting of the *Chansons madécasses*, fulfilling a commission from the great American patron of classical music Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who had specified that the songs be composed for soprano, flute, cello, and piano. So, like de Falla’s *Harpsichord Concerto* of 1926, *Chansons madécasses* belongs to a genre of interwar music that has Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat* as its definitive piece. This genre emphasized chamber ensembles and economy of means, and a distinctive kind of counterpoint. *Chansons madécasses* is first-rate art song and it’s first-rate

chamber music, too. It's as refined, subtle, and expressive as music can be made to be, a piece I can't listen to enough times.

Chansons madécasses is French for *Songs of Madagascar*, the title of a prose poem written by the Creole poet Évariste De Parny in the late 1780s. De Parny was born in 1753 to an aristocratic French family, on a small island in the Indian Ocean about four hundred miles east of Madagascar named Bourbon, after the family that had supplied the succession of French kings since 1589. (In 1793 the Bourbon king Louis the 16th was executed in the French Revolution. The island of Bourbon was renamed Réunion, and bears that name today.) When he was ten years old, De Parny's father sent him to France for his education, in the course of which he would become a disciple of Rousseau. Ravel chose three passages from De Parny's *Songs of Madagascar* to set to music. The first is an erotic love poem, the second an anti-colonial passage that begins, "Beware of white men, dwellers on the shore," and the third a languid, atmospheric piece that begins, "It is sweet to sleep, during the heat, beneath a leafy tree, and to wait for the wind of the evening to bring coolness."

Most listeners would name Jessye Norman's performance under Pierre Boulez, on a 1984 album of Ravel's songs, as the best recorded performance of *Chansons madécasses*. I would agree. A close second is the late 1970's recording by Jan DeGaetani. Her reading is tender, lyrical, and Romantic. It's a classic. But Norman and Boulez offer the kind of abstract Modernist interpretation you'd expect from Boulez. It's a reading that heightens the music's sophistication and complexity, the counterpoint between the voice and the instruments, and what a magnificent instrument was Norman's voice! There's a more recent recording that's worth noting, too, by Magdalena Kožená. It comes on a 2004 album that includes songs by Shostakovich, Respighi, Schulhoff, and Britten – five different languages on one recital! Kožená gives a marvelous reading of the poetry in her rendition of *Chansons madécasses*, but it's both the strength and the weakness of her performance. She delivers the text like a great actor, but she's so preoccupied with the words that she overlooks the musical dialogue of the ensemble. The three instrumentalists don't have much left to contribute except to stay in time with her, their parts mostly coming across as an afterthought. I don't mean to be too harsh, it's an enjoyable reading; but I'll take Norman first, then DeGaetani, then Kožená.

As we've seen, Howard Hanson was born in rural Nebraska in 1896. Four years later, in 1900, his contemporary Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn, New York. In 1924 Copland returned to New York after three years of study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris – the same three years Hanson had spent in Rome. But where Hanson chose to make his living in academia, when Copland returned to America he chose the life of a freelance composer. Boulanger brought Copland's compositions to the attention of Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who thereafter championed the young composer. At the start of this association, Koussevitzky convinced

Copland to accept a commission for a piano concerto by agreeing to let Copland perform the solo part himself.

America was in the midst of the Roaring Twenties – the Jazz Age. Classical composers the world over were fascinated and delighted by jazz music. In America, George Gershwin had recently premiered two highly popular jazz-themed piano concertos: the *Rhapsody in Blue* of 1924 and the *Concerto in F* of 1925. In the world of jazz music itself, a watershed was underway at precisely the same time. Louis Armstrong had left New Orleans for Chicago to join King Oliver's band in 1922, and in 1925 had begun to record the sessions with his own band that mark the emergence of jazz as a music based on improvised solo playing. For a sample of Armstrong's work from those days I especially like *Cornet Chop Suey*, an instrumental that Armstrong first recorded in 1926. Remastered copies of the '26 recording are still available, and Wynton Marsalis gave a fantastic live performance of *Cornet Chop Suey* on the *Sousa to Satchmo* episode of his *Marsalis on Music* television series.

So, like many composers in America and in Europe, Copland had used elements of the jazz language in his compositions of the early- and mid-'20s. But at this early stage of his career, Copland's style was straightforwardly avant-garde (it would be the mid-1930's before he developed the simplified, populist style for which he is best known, the style of *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*). In composing his *Piano Concerto*, then, he didn't make use of the jazz language in the direct and obvious way that Gershwin had with *Rhapsody in Blue*. Jazz offered Copland a palette of rhythms and harmonies to be assimilated into a Modernist compositional vocabulary – though the *Piano Concerto* was the last composition in which Copland would employ materials derived from jazz, which by 1926 had taken him as far as he thought he could go with it. Copland wrote the concerto in 1926, but at its premiere in January of 1927 it was very poorly received, judged a scandal and a failure by critics and by the audience. It would not find its place in the repertoire until Leonard Bernstein began to champion it in the 1940s. The concerto is in two movements; the first is Andante and largely quiet and introspective, the second exuberant and up-tempo.

I couldn't be more convinced by the 1996 recording of Copland's *Piano Concerto* by Garrick Ohlsson and the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas: a soulful performance that pulls out all the stops. It's part of their album *Copland the Modernist*. One of my aims in creating *A Year in Classical Music* is to encourage people to listen to more Modernist music – *Copland the Modernist* is a great introduction to it for those who could use some initiation before they try Schoenberg and Boulez. It's Americana as Modernism: dissonant and asymmetrical, but without the angst and bleakness of so much European Modernism (all except for the *Orchestral Variations*, that is, which is a more abstract and challenging piece). You can get *Copland the Modernist* as part of a low-priced box set that includes *Copland the Populist* and a third disc of introductions and commentary for each piece. The box set is called *Aaron Copland: The Essence of America*.

The *Piano Concerto* demanded most of Copland's attention in '26, but there are a couple of minor works from that year too, both of them worth hearing. His minute-and-a-half long *Sentimental Melody* was the first of two blues he wrote for solo piano in '26, both of them derived from sketch material that he decided not to use for the *Piano Concerto*. Copland included the second of these 1926 piano blues as the first movement of his *Four Piano Blues*, which he completed in 1948. *Sentimental Melody* stands on its own, then, and if you didn't know otherwise you could be convinced Duke Ellington had written it – if the *Piano Concerto* makes use of the jazz language, *Sentimental Melody* sounds like jazz itself. It's an evocative and well-crafted miniature, and a good excuse to add Leo Smit's recording of Copland's complete solo piano music to your collection. Smit and Copland were long-time collaborators, and in fact Smit was the soloist on the first recording of the *Piano Concerto*, with Copland conducting. Copland's other minor work of 1926 was the *Two Pieces for Violin and Piano*, and you can find this work on violinist Maria Bachmann's album *The Red Violin*. Bachmann's album is a fantastic collection of American recital pieces for violin and piano. It offers pieces by Moravec, Corigliano, and Gershwin, too, as well as Ravel's *Violin Sonata no. 2*, which was heavily influenced by jazz. But don't be fooled, because the title *Two Pieces for Violin and Piano* doesn't appear on the track listing; you see the titles of the two individual movements, instead – *Ukelele Serenade*, a hoedown sort of dance movement that uses dissonance to great rhythmic effect, and *Nocturne*, which is an elegy with a sophisticated urban atmosphere about it, in the vein of the composer's well-known *Quiet City* of 1939.