

Fanfare

Tenaflly, NJ

Bi-Monthly

September – October 2009

TRANSMIGRATION • Robert Spano, cond; Nmon Ford (bar);¹ Atlanta SO² & Ch;³ Atlanta SO CCh;⁴ Gwinnett Young Singers⁵ • TELARC 80673 (71:06)

ADAMS *On the Transmigration of Souls*.^{1,2,3,5} HIGDON *Dooryard Bloom*.^{1,2} CORIGLIANO *Elegy*.²
BARBER *Adagio for Strings*.² *Agnus Dei*⁴

I've heard my share of thematically organized recording projects that seem conceptually forced, whatever other attributes they exhibit. Not so with this disc, which excels in every conceivable way. The theme is carefully and consistently maintained with a roster of high quality works by American composers, the performances by Robert Spano and the ASO are spotlessly and thoughtfully realized, and the recorded sound should easily meet audiophiles' highest standards.

The disc title derives from John Adams' landmark *On the Transmigration of Souls*. The other works also respond to grief at some level, although the opener, Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, hasn't always worn its elegiac associations so indisputably. Spano's opening bars suggest a slowish reading, but the pacing overall is sensible, far quicker than Bernstein's famously sluggish traversal and the recent live performances of podium phenom Gustavo Dudamel. The ASO's strings are marvelously transparent and precisely balanced, and if his tempos aren't extreme, Spano coaxes a wide dynamic range from his forces, especially in the gloriously hushed closing bars. There are more intensely raw accounts of the chestnut, but this surely ranks among the more completely absorbing.

Just as Barber transferred the *Adagio* from string quartet to string orchestra, he later re-worked it for choral forces in the *Agnus Dei*, incorporating the four short lines from the mass. Spano shaves over a minute off his string version, no doubt a concession to his singers' lung capacity. The ASO chorus has lost none of its legendary clarity and luster, and their angelic performance is almost reason enough to own the disc.

Adams' *The Transmigration of Souls* from 2002 is the most durable and conspicuous musical monument to the terrorist attacks, and garnered waves of recognition, including the 2003 Pulitzer Prize and a rare trifecta at the Grammy awards. It is also one of the finest American works of the last decade, adding considerable weight to Adams' argument that new music has an obligation to maintain a relevance to current events, an uncontroversial postulate in the other arts, but oddly suspect among some in our world of "serious" music. It has been correctly remarked that the trumpet solo from Ives' *Unanswered Question* makes an oblique, non-literal appearance a few minutes into the 25-minute tone poem, certainly an apt reference, given the subject matter. But I also hear other, more subtle references to the American icon, including some linear and texturally layered sections during which time seems temporarily suspended. It may be coincidental, but Adams had been conducting Ives' Fourth Symphony not long before his work on this composition. A more notable departure from his standard practice is the use of prerecorded text that includes disembodied voices and ambient city sounds, adding still another stratum to an assemblage that includes orchestra, chorus, and children's chorus. His language is tonally more ambiguous than most of his earlier works, and dissonances are a bit more prevalent. Other than a few climactic moments about two-thirds through the piece, his minimalist roots play a minimal role.

If you don't own a disc of the work (shame on you!) and are comparing this version to the original New York Philharmonic/Maazel reading, consider these frank remarks from the composer's recent memoir (*Hallelujah Junction—Composing an American Life*), in which his opinion of the work rose considerably after hearing Spano and the ASO: "[T]he piece did not seem as compromised and uneven as I had previously thought." There are certainly no obvious faults in the debut recording on Nonesuch,

but Spano has woven the disparate elements together more seamlessly, the chorus is peerless, and the recorded sound is appreciably better than the serviceable live recording in Avery Fisher Hall.

The other large work on the disc is Jennifer Higdon's *Dooryard Bloom*, taken from her adaptation of Walt Whitman's poem "When Lilacs last in Dooryard Bloom'd," a lamentation on Lincoln's death (though his name is not mentioned) and a common source of musical settings. Higdon's 2005 piece is scored for baritone and orchestra, sung here by the Nmon Ford. The singer gets to the heart of the mournful texts with a warm, soothing, and ardent delivery. Unlike the fragmented texts in Adams work, Higdon spins a real-time delivery of the poem, paced not dissimilarly from a spoken recitation. Textures are relatively spare, giving ample space for clear declamation from the voice. The musical language ranges from a soothing, clear-eyed Americana (alluding perhaps to Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*) to more ambiguous tonal wanderings and misty atmospherics that mirror the shifting moods of the text. It's an engaging work, though it succeeds better as a vehicle for a landmark poem than a musical masterpiece.

If Adams moves out of his comfort zone, John Corigliano's *Elegy* comes from a less risky era of his career. This is no doubt due to two factors: the early date of its genesis (1965, while he was still firmly under the spell of the American Romanticists) and its history as an excerpt of instrumental music for Wallace Fry's play *Helen*. He is under Copland's spell here; that is, the portentous and mildly combative Copland more than the lyrical one, though in the notes he mentions the effect of Barber, Piston, and William Schuman (for the record, I detect nary a hint of Piston). By turns, the eight-minute work is soothing and soaring, easily achieving its modest aims—an impressive first orchestral work for the young composer.

I rarely describe a disc as "must have," but this time I'll make an exception. I suppose there may be some who would object to the consistently slow tempos and cheerless mood as disqualifying factors, but if they do, they are ignoring a key aspect of music's ability to move souls. Loss is part of life, and this lovingly conceived project makes that point clearer than any other I have heard.

-Michael Cameron