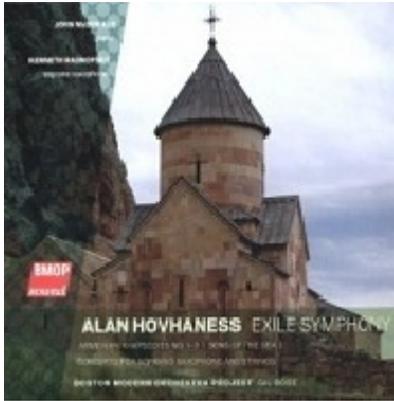


CLASSICAL CD REVIEW

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HOVHANESS: Armenian Rhapsodies 1-3, opp. 45, 51, 189 (1944). *Song of the Sea* for Piano and Strings (1933). Concerto for Soprano Saxophone and Strings, op. 344 (1980). Symphony No. 1 "Exile," op. 17/2 (1936). John McDonald (piano); Kenneth Radnofsky (soprano saxophone); Boston Modern Orchestra Project/Gil Rose. BMOP/sound 1020 TT: 67:39

Imagined Armenias. Undoubtedly, Alan Hovhaness stands as an American original. He has taken from very few. He sounds like nobody else. You can tell a Hovhaness work within a few seconds. Others have even made use of his innovations without, of course, his unique poetry or giving him any credit at all. Hovhaness composed music easily -- like writing a letter, as he put it. Forget Mozart and the *Marriage of Figaro* overture. Hovhaness, dissatisfied with a symphony in rehearsal, did turn out an entirely new movement in a night.

He produced, for a Modern composer, a huge catalogue of work, including 67 symphonies. He'd meant to stop at Symphony No. 26, but he kept getting commissions. I consider some of his scores better than others. Indeed, I don't think much of some. But all of it obviously issues from the same mind. It's become almost *de rigueur* for writers either to ignore or to patronize Hovhaness, especially the Bright Young Things of the Sixties and Seventies, so ignorant of their own history, they had no idea how much they owed to him. I once knew a fabulous poet (you haven't heard of him), a virtuoso craftsman who produced 10,000 poems in a form he invented. Awestruck, I mentioned this to a writer, who sniffed, "Yeah, but only one in ten is any good." Which means, of course, that the first poet had written 1,000 good poems. Hovhaness's percentage I think much higher, and several masterpieces make the cut.

Hovhaness began strongly influenced by Sibelius. Indeed, critics once dubbed him the "American Sibelius." However, he disowned this part of his output (although not Sibelius himself) and went to the extreme of destroying early scores. He felt the need to find himself, which he did in the musical heritage of his father's Armenia. Nevertheless, this did not entail straight borrowing. Hovhaness's idiom is his own construction, although it may sometimes use (as in the Armenian Rhapsodies) traditional tunes. It mixes long, melismatic lines with Baroque-inspired counterpoint, several rhythmic pulses going on at once, and an individual and unpredictable sense of harmony. Later, Hovhaness became interested in Asian music in general, particularly Japanese and Indian traditional music. This wasn't a matter of musical tourism, but of a deep immersion in the sensibility of Asian cultures. In Hovhaness's music you get both the grand visions of the Vedas and the Zen intense feeling for and awareness of nature.

Almost all the music here comes from Hovhaness's early period. The *Song of the Sea* interests me the most, purely from an historical standpoint, because it seems to me to lie closest to the music Hovhaness wrote before his maturity. It itself is not a mature work, but you hear the characteristic Hovhaness struggling to get out. As it stands, it seems caught between the Middle East and Celtic Twilight. A great of it doesn't sound like what we've come to think of as Hovhaness at all.

The saxophone concerto appeared in 1980, but it does harken back to his music of the Thirties and Forties, more consonant and rhythmically and melodically simpler than much of his later stuff. The composer had no problems revisiting himself. Hovhaness often conceives of a concerto along lines different from the Romantic model. He's not only uninterested in virtuosity for its own sake, he sometimes seems to forget he has a soloist at all, or rather the soloist appends matter to the orchestra. The first movement consists of a Hovhaness chorale (a genre instantly recognizable to listeners familiar with his work), a graceful dance dominated by the soloist, and a fugue in which the soloist hardly takes part, except at the end. The second movement intermezzo surprises with its Romantic references. It wouldn't startle you to learn some Romantic figure had written it, perhaps Sibelius or Lars-Erik Larsson in a relaxed mood. I admit it jars me, although it, by itself, delights. The finale, "Let the Living and the Celestial Sing," begins as yet another chorale, a bit more solemn than that of the opening movement. Hovhaness's chorales, often very beautiful, make their effects very simply, with one harmonic surprise after another. It leads elegantly into a rapt slow fugue. This movement shows off the composer at his best. Nothing seems tossed off, with everything in its perfect place. The fugue leads to a slow and easy song for the sax and suddenly ends, like the burst of a soap bubble.

The "Exile" Symphony, his official First, represents Hovhaness's composing breakthrough. It initially met with incomprehension from some influential musicians but nevertheless earned the composer the credit he needed to gain a foothold. A network of Armenian friends, William Saroyan among them, pushed his music to Stokowski, among others. One should, incidentally, take Hovhaness's subtitles with a grain of salt. The Armenian diaspora inspired the symphony, but so did Hovhaness's admiration for the English essayist Francis Bacon. At least, the composer admitted this, although it's probably impossible to separate which was specifically responsible for what. Again, Hovhaness has his own idea of symphony, much closer to Elizabethan fantasia than to Beethoven. He tends to avoid development, and yet the symphonies hang together.

The "Exile" sets out his approach. The first movement, in three sections (slow-fast-slow), spins out long arabesques of melody, occasionally punctuated by a repeated-note stamp. The second movement begins in dance -- solo winds against a mass of plucked strings and harp. The tonal center doesn't change for a very long time. Hovhaness keeps interest by shifts in texture and by one hypnotic melody after another. Toward the end, the basic rhythm shifts to something like a slow jig and then ends abruptly. After an introductory recitative for solo alternating with full orchestra, the third movement consists of three main elements: a long melody full of ornamental curlicues, a quick vamp (derivable from the repeated-note figure in the first movement) against which he puts another chorale. The chorale picks up more and more counterpoint leading to a fugue based on the chorale theme. One final blast of the chorale and we're out, on two fading clarinets. Hovhaness juxtaposes and alternates these elements, rather than develops an argument. Nevertheless, the movement coheres and manages to strike deep.

I commend the Boston people on their choice of repertory. You can't call any of these selections over-recorded, although Schwarz and Seattle did do the symphony for Delos (not currently available) and you can still get Stokowski's 1942 premiere. This will, however, more than suffice. *Song of the Sea* isn't up to the rest of the program, but for Hovhaness fanatics like me, it's well worth a listen, if only to get a glimpse of where he started. The performances are excellent. I really like this BMOP series. Not all their releases have made a hit with me, but their winners are often spectacular.

S.G.S. (December 2011)