



JOHN BROWNING

John Browning's contribution to the musical world is far-reaching and significant. This American pianist, heralded by *Life Magazine* some 30 years ago as a "golden boy in a golden age of pianists," has concertized world-wide, has added important new works to the repertoire, and embodies a commitment to the next generation of musicians. The *New Grove Dictionary of Music* observes that he is "blessed with one of the easiest, most brilliant techniques of any pianist before the public."

Browning's career was launched in the mid-1950's: in three consecutive years he won the Steinway Centennial Award, Leventritt Competition, and second prize in the Brussels Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition. He made his professional orchestral debut with the New York Philharmonic in 1956 and by 1960 was a familiar face on the international concert circuit.

Browning has made more than 20 European concert tours and has performed repeatedly with such orchestras as the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, Brussels Philharmonic, Halle Orchestra, London Philharmonic, London Symphony, and Scottish National Symphony. Four tours have taken him to the Soviet Union, and he has concertized in Japan, South America, and Africa. In this country he has appeared regularly with the orchestras of Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., to name only a few.

In 1962, Browning was soloist at the inaugural celebration at New York's Philharmonic Hall in the world premiere performance of Samuel Barber's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, which had been commissioned specifically for him by the publishing firm G. Schirmer, Inc. Since then, he has performed that work over 500 times throughout the U.S. and Europe and recorded it with the Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell conducting. He noted the 25th anniversary of the piece in May of 1987, performing it at Carnegie Hall with the St. Louis Symphony.

An artist who declines to specialize, Browning performs repertoire encompassing the piano literature of the classic, romantic, and contemporary periods.

Browning is a favorite of American festivals, and is heard regularly at such festivals as the Blossom, Hollywood Bowl, Ravinia, Saratoga, Sommerfest of the Minnesota Orchestra, and Tanglewood.



PHCD 105

JOHN BROWNING
PLAYS

SAMUEL BARBER RICHARD CUMMING
SONATA FOR PIANO 24 PRELUDES

Van Dyke

Samuel Barber was born in West Chester, Pa., on March 9, 1910, and died in N.Y.C. January 23, 1981. By the time he was six he was playing the piano and at seven he began composing. Admitted to the Curtis Institute of Music at the age of fourteen, he soon became known as one of the most gifted students and was allowed to study piano, voice and composition.

He has been a prolific composer working in all forms and, whether in the briefest song or chamber piece to a grand opera or symphony, he has always maintained his "integrity of craftsmanship, expressive intensity and stylistic development." Even when he used neo-classicism or post-Webern serialism he has never allowed mere technical devices to become ends in themselves. He has always been able to integrate these modern techniques with his own romantic aesthetic. This is self-evident in the powerful *Piano Sonata* (1949) in which he makes use of twelve-tone serialism, and which is the most important composition of the second decade of Barber's career marked by an intensity and a bigness of conception that stamp it as a mature work.

After the *Sonata's* first New York performance by Vladimir Horowitz on January 24, 1940, the following comments were made, "The *Sonata* is no affectation of modernism, but the natural language of modern music — or one of its phrases... a contemporaneous work of exceptional interest and a tour de force for the virtuoso." And again, "Mr. Barber's *Sonata*, which was warmly received was composed as a commission from the League of Composers. In four movements it is generally concise, has vigor and vitality, and while harmonically the idiom is of today it is relatively conservative; the structure is expert and ingenious particularly in the first movement where the musical ideas derive from the opening short germinal figure.

One anecdote must be retold. In 1943 Barber was inducted into the army where he received a commission to write a symphony. After the performance by the Boston Symphony under Koussevitzky in 1944 Barber received a memorable piece of fan mail — "Dear Corporal, I came to hear your symphony. I thought it was terrible, but I applauded vociferously because I think all corporals should be encouraged."

A First Prize winner of the National Federation of Music Clubs Young Composers Contest, his awards also include grants from the Wurlitzer and Ford Foundations.

Mr. Cumming has composed over 60 theatre scores for such organizations as the Phoenix Theatre in New York, the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, the Loretto-Hilton in St. Louis, California's Marin Shakespeare Festival, ESSO Repertory Theatre on nationwide TV, and the Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, R.I. for which he has served as composer-in-residence since 1966. When that company was the first professional American regional theatre to be invited to appear at the Edinburgh Festival in 1968, Mr. Cumming gained international notice with his score for their premiere production of Norman Holland's "Years of the Locust."

The following is a recounting of the work by the composer.

"*The Twenty-Four Preludes for Piano* are the result of a wish to write an extended piece for John Browning, a pianist I had admired for many years as indeed I still do. The first tentative thoughts of a piano sonata were discarded for the present choice which, considering its pitifully unexotic title, might have already suggested to even the most naive of musical detectives that I comprised 24 excursions into each of the major and minor keys. The first nine preludes were composed in Switzerland in an almost compulsively inaccessible Alpine village during three weeks of the summer in 1966 and the last one was finished a few days before the premiere at Philharmonic Hall in New York City on December 17, 1969."

"Mr. Browning's one request was 'Make them hard' — more for the purpose of musical interest than from any latent masochistic tendencies — and I have been led to believe that I have not totally failed him. Pragmatically, I wanted them to be usable individually or in smaller groups as well as in their entirety. I tried to explore a variety of pianistic techniques and musical style: ranging from the cafe to strict 12-tone (including a piece each for the right and left hand alone — E Flat Minor and B Flat Minor, respectively) and, to the best of my ability, express my own joy and respect for that lyric, noble and dynamic instrument I dearly love, the piano. And (if a descent into the vernacular may be allowed) in writing the Preludes, I also had one hell of a good time."

"One added pleasure was afforded me during the recording session (usually an experience to rival some of the worst excesses of the Spanish Inquisition) when Mr. Browning played through the Preludes twice, retaped two of them, and in slightly less than three hours produced what we have here — 24 individual performances without a splice, cut or patch; in itself as amazing a feat as some of the technical hurdles he leaps with such flawless ease."

Richard Cumming was born in Shanghai in 1928, raised in Manila and schooled on the West Coast. He studied at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and with Ernest Bloch, Arnold Schoenberg and Roger Sessions. As a pianist, he has worked with (among others) Lili Kraus and Rudolf Firkušný, has toured 49 of the 50 United States, Canada, Europe and the Far East as a soloist, Assistant Conductor of the Santa Fe Opera and accompanist for numerous instrumentalists and singers.