AMERICAN PIANO WORKS RANKOVICH PHCD 143

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Tatjana Rankovich, *piano*

PHCD 143

PAUL CRESTON
(1906-1985)

*Piano Sonata, Op. 9 (1936)**
1. Allegro Appassionato
2. Allegretto grazioso
3. Andante
4. Presto scorrevole

*Six Preludes, Op. 38 (1945)**
5. No. 1—Moderately fast
6. No. 2—Tranquil
7. No. 3—Fast
8. No. 4—Moderately fast
9. No. 5—Moderato
10. No. 6—Moderately fast

VITTORIO GIANNINI
(1903-1966)

*Piano Sonata (1963)**
11. Allegro non troppo; Agitato
12. Molto adagio e cantabile; Piú lento
13. Allegro assai

NICOLAS FLAGELLO
(1928-1994)

Two Waltzes (1953)
14. Waltz in D—Andantino comodo
15. Waltz in B minor—Presto giocoso ma non troppo

Piano Sonata (1962)
16. Andante con moto e rubato
17. Rubato quasi recitativo; Sempre rubato ma lento alla barcarola
18. Allegro vivace quanto possibile

*World Premiere Recording

Walter Simmons
producer

Jeffrey Kaufman
executive producer

Joseph Patrych
engineer

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The three American composers represented on this recording belong to the group often described as "20th-century traditionalists"—those figures who rejected most of the tenets of Modernism–especially its emphasis on originality, rational objectivity, and experimentation, and its contempt for communication as an artistic objective. Rather, the "traditionalists" viewed themselves as inheritors of a living legacy, to which they sought to make their own individual contributions, with recourse to the full range of classical forms and techniques, and with the aim of personal expression and communication. Beyond their aesthetic affinities, Creston, Giannini, and Flagello shared an Italian ancestry, and spent most of their creative lives in the environs of New York City. Creston and Giannini were approximate contemporaries, while for many years Giannini and Flagello maintained a master-apprentice relationship. Each composer is represented here by a piano sonata composed at a different phase of his respective career. Creston's sonata is an early work, written before his language had reached maturity; Giannini's dates from the last years of his life, when his style seemed to be charting a new course; Flagello's sonata appeared at the midpoint of his career and the apex of his compositional development.

Paul Creston, whose original name was Giuseppe Guttoveggio, was born in New York City in 1906, the son of a poor house-painter. As a child he took lessons on the piano and later, on the organ, and began writing music on his own at the age of eight. Forced to leave school at 15 in order to earn a living, he attempted to compensate for the premature termination of his formal education by subjecting himself to a strenuous regimen of independent study, teaching himself music theory and composition, in addition to a number of other academic and artistic subjects. Creston vacillated between music and literature as career options for several years; not until 1932, at age 26, did he decide upon musical composition as a vocation. He supported himself during these

years by playing the organ to accompany silent films, and later took a position as church organist, which he held for many years.

The absence of formal training prevented Creston from being fully indoctrinated into the music world's conventional value system, leaving him free to develop his own aesthetic principles, together with a highly individual approach to composition. Many years later, when asked to name those composers who most influenced his development, he cited J. S. Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, Chopin, Debussy, and Ravel. Their traces are evident in Creston's earliest compositions, especially the Piano Sonata heard on this recording. Yet at the same time, Creston's own distinctive manner—a combination of Baroque patterns and textures and Impressionist harmony, suffused with a romantic temperament, and organized around the elaborate development of a few basic motifs—can be discerned as well. The inventive and rather idiosyncratic approach to rhythm that was to become the central element of his compositional style developed somewhat later.

Creston composed his *Piano Sonata* in 1936. The first movement, *Allegro appassionato*, opens with a brash vigor, immediately introducing several motifs, including one that soon develops into a luxuriantly lyrical second theme. These motifs undergo a lengthy and thorough development through a variety of contrasting emotions. A sense of urgency prevails, as Scarlatti-like running patterns continue throughout, never coming to rest until the end.

The second movement, *Allegretto grazioso*, is light and graceful, in the manner of a minuet. Some gently syncopated passages presage the rhythmic manipulations of Creston's maturity.

The third movement, *Andante*, displays the warm, smoothly rolling figurations of a barcarolle. As the music slowly builds in intensity, its rich harmonic

language expands with resonant voicings that suggest Creston's experience as an organist. The music reaches a powerful climax, and then recedes gently, drifting off with an ethereal chain of chords that remain unresolved until the end.

The fourth movement, *Presto scorrevole*, suggests the form of a rondo. It is lively and playful in tone, with scurrying patterns that proceed breathlessly from one section to the next, until an exhilarating conclusion is reached. Again the keyboard works of Scarlatti come to mind, along with a harmonic language that occasionally hints at the popular music of the time.

In view of Creston's isolation from influential musical institutions, his meteoric rise to national prominence is quite remarkable. In 1938 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 1941 he won the New York Music Critics' Circle Award. In 1942, Arturo Toscanini conducted his *Choric Dance No. 2* with the NBC Symphony, in 1943 Eugene Ormandy conducted his *Symphony No. 1* with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and in 1944 Creston completed his *Symphony No. 2*, premiered the following year by Artur Rodzinski and the New York Philharmonic. One of his most important works, this symphony brought him international acclaim; by this time Creston was one of America's most widely performed composers.

Shortly after completing his *Symphony No. 2*, Creston composed his *Six Preludes for piano*. By then, the composer had developed a fascination with the element of rhythm, to which he devoted special attention in virtually each of his works. He was especially fond of syncopated polymetric and polyrhythmic patterns and ostinatos, which he organized within a continuous,unchanging metrical pulse. Eventually he was to present his theory and analysis of the subject in a textbook, Principles of Rhythm (1964). The core of the book comprises an exposition of what Creston termed "rhythmic structures," described

as "five different plans [for] the organization of duration in ordered movement." He had developed this concept as early as 1945, as each of the *Six Preludes* was composed to illustrate one of the "rhythmic structures," with *No. 1, Moderately fast*, as an example of mixed methods. *No. 2, Tranquil*, illustrates "regular sub-division"; *No. 3, Fast*, illustrates "regular subdivision overlapping"; *No. 4, Moderately fast*, illustrates "irregular subdivision"; *No. 5, Moderato*, illustrates "overlapping"; and *No. 6, Moderately fast,* illustrates "irregular sub-division overlapping". Despite the underlying didactic aspect, each of the preludes conveys a sense of spontaneous expression.

Vittorio Giannini was born in Philadelphia in 1903 into a family of professional musicians. Deeply imbued with the values of a Eurocentric musical culture at an early age, he had completed four years of formal study in Milan by the time he was 14, and had already begun to compose. During the 1920s, when Creston was struggling to educate himself late at night while holding a series of clerical jobs during the day, Giannini was studying violin and composition at the Juilliard School. He first attracted attention during the 1930s, when his songs began to appear frequently on recital programs, and several of his operas were produced successfully in Europe, where he spent much of his time. His vocal music displayed the fluent lyrical warmth of Italianate late-Romanticism, although instrumental works revealed a mastery of contrapuntal technique and a concern with formal developmental processes.

Settling in New York City in 1939, Giannini continued composing prolifically, producing dozens of works notable for their effortless melodic warmth, high-spirited exuberance, and impeccable craftsmanship, although increasingly his music was regarded as "old-fashioned" by the proponents of Modernism. Serving concurrently at the Juilliard School, the Manhattan School, and the

Curtis Institute, he became one of the country's most active composition teachers, his name virtually synonymous with traditional Old World musical craftsmanship and discipline.

By the early 1960s Giannini's work was receiving little attention, his musical aesthetic seen now as the vestige of a bygone era. Yet at this point Giannini's compositional style took something of a turn. Although his approach to form remained unchanged, many of his works revealed a darker character, a greater depth of expression, and a more dissonant harmonic language. Whether this change reflected a bitterness about the fickleness of musical fashion, or concerns about his own deteriorating heart condition, or despair about a failed second marriage is uncertain. But what is clear is that many of the works that Giannini composed during the last five years of his life—such as the monodramas *The Medead* and *Antigone,* the *Symphony No. 5*, and the *Piano Sonata*—are among his finest achievements.

Giannini composed his *Piano Sonata* in 1963. The opening *Allegro non troppo* boldly proclaims a three-note motif that truly saturates the polyphonic texture of the entire movement, while re-appearing in the others as well. Several additional motifs are introduced during the exposition of this movement, all of which contribute to its unremittingly agitated and turbulent character; even the subordinate theme seems to wail in despair. All this material is subjected to a lengthy and rigorous development, until a major climax is reached during the recapitulation, after which the movement ends in snarling defiance. The second movement, *Molto adagio e cantabile*, presents a lament whose character is unmistakably funereal, and whose thematic material bears some resemblance to the motifs introduced in the first movement. After this D-minor lament has been elaborated somewhat, there is a sudden shift to D-flat major, and a new melody, marked "con gran dolcezza e tenerezza," is

heard, ending the movement with an almost Mahlerian poignancy. The meaning of this episode—and, perhaps, of the sonata as a whole–is illuminated by the following information: In 1963, Giannini's second marriage ended in divorce. That year Giannini composed what proved to be his last song, entitled *To a Lost Love*, to his own text. There the D-flat melody from the sonata appears, set to the following words:

> If you must go, my love,
> Go not in bitterness;
> Go with a gentle sadness.
> I, with tears in my eyes,
> Give you one last kiss on the lips,
> As a token of my love that shall abide with you forever.

The final movement, *Allegro assai*, of Giannini's *Piano Sonata* has the character of a scherzo-toccata, propelled by a driving triplet figure in perpetual motion. At the center of the movement the meter shifts and the three-note motif from the first movement re-appears in a new guise, pressing forward with grim determination. Then the opening triplet material returns, leading eventually to an intensified treatment of the three-note motif, which carries the movement to a decisive close.

Nicolas Flagello was born in New York City in 1928. With a remarkably similar family background to Giannini's, Flagello came from a long line of musicians. As Giannini's sister Dusolina had been a world-renowned soprano, Flagello's brother Ezio enjoyed an illustrious career as a leading bass-baritone. When young Nicolas, who was playing the piano in public before the age of ten, began to show an inclination toward composition, his family brought him to

the attention of Giannini. Thus began a long and deeply devoted apprenticeship that lasted until the older man's death in 1966. Giannini subjected Flagello to the sort of rigorous, demanding discipline that formed the basis of traditional European compositional study for centuries. Continuing his work with Giannini at the Manhattan School of Music, he was awarded a Master's Degree in 1950, at which point he joined the composition faculty, remaining there until 1977.

Giannini imbued Flagello with the enduring values of the grand European heritage, insisting that the answers to all matters of aesthetics lay in the unbroken chain of Western musical tradition, as it had evolved organically through the centuries. If this approach seemed old-fashioned for a middle-aged composer in 1950, for a young man like Flagello it seemed defiantly reactionary. As a result, little of his music was performed publicly during his own lifetime, although his work has developed a growing following since his death in 1994. In 1953 Flagello composed two waltzes for piano that he eventually incorporated into larger works. For this reason he did not include them among his official oeuvre. However, they are very pianistic and serve nicely as encores. *Waltz in D* is marked Andantino comodo, and displays a tender gracefulness reminiscent of Ravel. Revised some twelve years later, it became the slow movement of a *Suite for Harp and String Trio* (1965). The *Waltz in B minor* offers considerable contrast. Marked Presto giocoso ma non troppo, it is somewhat more dynamic, with a grotesque middle section that found its way into the Scherzo of the monumental *Symphony No. 1* (1968).

While Flagello may have adopted Giannini's musical aesthetic, his own temperament was much more volatile and highly charged than that of his teacher. After composing a substantial body of work in a luxuriantly romantic vein—including three operas, two piano concertos, concertos for flute, violin, and

several large orchestral works—Flagello turned in 1959 toward a darker, more intensely concentrated mode of expression. In fact, some have suggested that the influence of Giannini on Flagello reversed direction at that time, as the latter's stylistic shift seemed to precede the former's very similar move by about a year. This maturation of his compositional voice ushered in the most productive period of Flagello's life. During the 1960s, he composed more than 30 works—intensely emotional and often gloomy, turbulent, and tragic in character–maintaining a remarkable consistency of both vision and craftsmanship. In 1962 alone, he composed the *Piano Concerto No. 3*, the *Cello Capriccio*, a dramatic monologue called *Dante's Farewell*, and the first version of a *Te Deum*, as well as the *Piano Sonata* heard here.

Flagello's three-movement *Piano Sonata* wholeheartedly embraces the rhetoric and ethos of the romantic virtuoso legacy, but with a tempestuous character unique to the composer. Tightly constructed with an eye toward both expressive and motivic unity, all three movements are based on material that emphasizes the interval of a half-step.

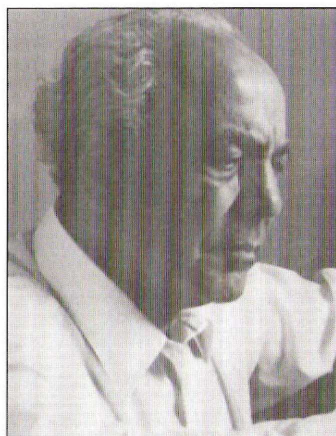
The first movement, *Andante con moto e rubato*, is a standard sonata-allegro form, except that instead of the usual two themes, one idea in F minor, built from two short motifs, serves to fill the roles of both, appearing at times restless and searching, at others, bold and defiant, and at still others, introspective and ruminative. The second movement begins with a soulful, recitative-like passage, which leads into a barcarolle—but a far gloomier one than Creston created for his sonata. The movement builds to a tremendous climax, and then subsides in dark resignation. The finale, *Allegro vivace quanto possibile*, happens to be a full sonata-allegro form, two themes and all. A whirlwind toccata in perpetual motion, this movement requires a pianist with tremendous stamina, able to sustain enormous technical demands without respite.

Program notes by Walter Simmons

Tatjana Rankovich was born in Belgrade, in the former Yugoslavia, where she won three first prizes in national competitions by the time she reached the age of 18. Coming to the United States the following year, she studied at the Juilliard School, where she earned Bachelor's and Master's Degrees and won the Judelson Award. Her teachers have included Josef Raieff, Benjamin Kaplin, Zelma Bodzin, and Clifton Matthews. Ms. Rankovich has concertized throughout the United States, Europe, and South America, winning awards at the Young Keyboard Artists International Competition and the Artists International Auditions. Her frequent appearances as soloist with the Belgrade Radio Symphony have been broadcast live on radio and television. Ms. Rankovich is currently on the faculties of the Mannes College of Music and the Dalcroze School of Music.

Although she is a gifted interpreter of the standard piano repertoire from Bach through Ravel, Ms. Rankovich has also become an enthusiastic advocate for American music, featuring little-known masterworks on her recital programs and recordings. She is the first pianist ever to play the Second and Third Piano Concertos of Nicolas Flagello, recording them with the Slovak Philharmonic, Kosice, under the direction of David Amos. Ms. Rankovich's performances and recordings of American music have received lavish praise. A Fanfare critic wrote, "More than simply an accomplished pianist, she is an intelligent artist, capable of bringing to life a work that has never been played before, and making it sound like an established masterpiece." These sentiments were echoed by Internet critic Steve Schwartz, who wrote, "The performances communicate marvelously. Rankovich strikes me as a thinking musician, rather than as a set of fingers." The American Record Guide found her performances of the Flagello concertos "thrilling," while the Scranton Times described them as "stimulating, technically adept and convincing."

Flagello with Giannini c. 1955



Paul Creston

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