

RECORDING REVIEWS

Frederick Converse, *American Sketches, Song of the Sea, and Festival of Pan*. BBC Concert Orchestra, Keith Lockhart, conductor. Dutton Epoch CDLX 7278, 2011. George W. Chadwick, *Adonais, Cleopatra, A Pastoral Prelude, and Sinfonietta in D Major*. BBC Concert Orchestra, Keith Lockhart, conductor. Dutton Epoch CDLX 7293, 2012.

On this enterprising pair of compact discs, U.S. conductor Keith Lockhart leads the BBC Concert Orchestra in world-premiere recordings of six symphonic works by George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931) and Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940). The chance to finally hear these century-old scores should be of immense interest to scholars of American Romanticism. Why it has taken so long for some of these works to receive a first recording is not readily apparent. (Only Chadwick's Sinfonietta has previously been recorded.) Particularly when performed at as high a level of technical and interpretive accomplishment as Lockhart and his BBC musicians achieve, the quality of the music itself is clearly not the issue. Indeed, the selected repertory fills significant gaps in each composer's extant discography, offering compositions that marked key turning points in the careers of bothmen.

Of course, the reputational damage afflicted upon Chadwick, Converse, and others of their generation in the years following their deaths is surely one significant factor. Younger Americans, eager to assert their own primacy as leaders in the establishment of an American identity for art music composition, seemed to miss no opportunity to diminish their predecessors' significance. Leonard Bernstein, for instance, patronizingly referred to this earlier era as “the kindergarten period of American music; our composers then were like happy, innocent little kids in kindergarten.”¹ Aaron Copland complained, “They loved the masterworks of Europe’s mature culture not like creative personalities but like the schoolmasters that many of them became.”² For Virgil Thomson, these composers “were the grandfathers of us all . . . merely ancestors. For all the charm and competence of their music, it is a pale copy of its continental models. Its thin perfume is of another time and place than twentieth-century America.”³ With such dismissiveness coming from these mid-century tastemakers, is it any surprise that essentially

¹ Leonard Bernstein, “Young People’s Concert: What is American Music?” television script, original airdate 1 February 1958, http://www.leonardbernstein.com/ypc_script_what_is_amERICAN_music.htm. In what was only the second telecast in the series, Bernstein went on to say that “we had a very fine composer named George W. Chadwick, who wrote expert music, and also deeply felt music, but you could almost not tell it apart from the music of Brahms, Wagner, or other Europeans.”

² Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (New York: Mentor Books, 1952), 107. In Copland’s defense, he did later admit to a certain admiration for Chadwick, after examining some of his works in the Harvard Library: “I was quite surprised by how smoothly written his scores were. The technique was really first class. It wasn’t very original, but it was certainly good music of its time. I don’t think it would hurt us occasionally to hear some piece from that period. Who knows, there may be some dark masterpiece, rotting away, waiting to be rediscovered!” See “Conversation with Edward T. Cone (1967),” in *Aaron Copland: A Reader*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2004), 351.

³ Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 2.

all of the music by both Chadwick and Converse—with the possible exception of Chadwick’s *Symphonic Sketches*—would have disappeared from American orchestras’ active performance repertory? (This attitude is, of course, despite the fact that contemporaneous, European-composed works continue to comprise the bulk of what they do perform.) One cannot help but feel that most of our orchestras are, if not forsaking an obligation, then at least failing to seize an opportunity to preserve, protect, and prosper the symphonic heritage of the United States.

Whereas orchestral concert programming seems to be failing, the recording industry is at least doing a better job of making the music of this generation of American composers available. Neeme Järvi with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (Chandos Records), José Serebrier with the Czech State Philharmonic (Reference Recordings), Theodore Kuchar with the National Radio Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, and Kenneth Schermerhorn with the Nashville Symphony (both Naxos) have all issued modern, digital-era Chadwick recordings, while JoAnn Falletta and the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (Naxos) have released an album devoted to Converse’s music.⁴ On the present pair of CDs, Lockhart collaborates with the BBC Concert Orchestra, for whom he is currently the principal conductor. (Is it yet another missed opportunity for an American ensemble, Lockhart’s Boston Pops, to have taken the initiative?) Both albums offer a representative cross section of each composer’s range and scope within diverse orchestral genres and trace a similar stylistic trajectory. Chadwick and Converse both progress from compositions rooted in the Germanic models they studied abroad to a style that is freer and more distinctively personal.⁵

The earliest work recorded here is Chadwick’s *A Pastoral Prelude* (1890). Eschewing both the rusticity of a Beethovenian pastoral and the rural rumination one might find in Ralph Vaughan Williams’s approach, Chadwick instead produced a stand-alone movement of unabated cheerfulness. The characterful woodwind solos, contrasts of liveliness and repose, and a central climax that presents a memorably soaring lyrical melody over a more rhythmically active accompaniment are among the work’s key strengths. A great contrast of mood comes in Chadwick’s *Adonais* (1899), a score that the composer considered to be among his finest efforts.⁶ He

⁴ Järvi recorded Chadwick’s Second and Third Symphonies, the *Symphonic Sketches*, and several programmatic pieces. Serebrier’s Chadwick recordings also include the *Symphonic Sketches*, in addition to the *Suite Symphonique* and other programmatic works. Kuchar’s disc couples the Second Symphony with the *Symphonic Sketches*. Schermerhorn’s disc rounds out the picture of Chadwick’s orchestral output, focusing on his ancient Greece–inspired concert overtures and symphonic poems. Note that with the lone exception of the First Symphony, all of Chadwick’s numbered symphonies and multi-movement, symphony-like compositions are now currently available on compact disc. Falletta’s Converse album includes three programmatic orchestral scores: *Endymion’s Narrative*, *The Mystic Trumpeter*, and *Flivver Ten Million*. (This summary ignores the few “classic” recordings from the LP era.)

⁵ Chadwick studied composition with Salomon Jadassohn and Carl Reinecke in Leipzig and with Josef Rheinberger in Munich from 1877–79. Converse first trained under John Knowles Paine at Harvard and later Chadwick himself at the New England Conservatory before also travelling to Munich for Rheinberger’s tutelage from 1897–99.

⁶ Remarking upon the fact that *Adonais* remained unpublished, Chadwick explained in February 1900: “Lest some fool scribe should jump at the conclusion after I am dead when it will be played that I did not think it was near enough my own standard to be worth publishing, I will put on record my

subtitled the work “Elegiac Overture,” mourning the death of a close friend. A listener today may find Chadwick’s expressiveness too emotively reserved, particularly with Samuel Barber’s now-ubiquitous *Adagio for Strings* serving as the unofficial vehicle for national mourning, but Chadwick’s long-breathed melodies—especially a brass chorale over an accompaniment of pizzicato strings—attain an earnest nobility in their overall restraint.

In *Cleopatra* (1904), Chadwick intentionally explored what was, for him, the new potential of an expanded, modern orchestra. Inspired by the “advanced” tone poems of Richard Strauss, Chadwick constructed a programmatic arc that outlines the tragic romance of Antony and Cleopatra. The aural impact of the composer’s larger orchestra is immediately apparent, with a woodwind section enriched in range and color, and the distinctive combination of harp, celeste, and percussion serving as one of the score’s most recognizable stylistic fingerprints. The composer creates themes representing Cleopatra’s floating barge on the Cydnus River and Antony’s martial splendor. A love melody contrasts with dramatic battle music, and a grand finale contrapuntally combines the themes of Cleopatra and Antony to represent their joint burial in the same grave. Despite the composer’s express intent to follow the examples of Richard Strauss, Chadwick is not quite willing to fully relinquish the sonata-form classicist that he is at his core. Franz Liszt and Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky ultimately seem the more relevant comparisons. Although his melodic materials are not quite memorable enough to raise the work into the top tier, this world-premiere recording nevertheless exposes a heretofore-unheard facet of Chadwick as an intentionally “modern” tone poet.

The strongest work on the Chadwick disc is undoubtedly the *Sinfonietta* in D Major (1904). As the name suggests, this twenty-minute work is indeed a symphony in miniature. The composer is operating at his highest level of inventiveness in terms of melodic memorability, structural cogency, and distinctive orchestration. An exotically colored secondary theme graces the opening sonata-form movement. A modal, archaic-sounding mood of solemnity in the second movement contrasts with the rhythmic interplay of the scherzo, while the finale undergoes a process of transformation from a whispered opening to a triumphal conclusion. As a 1901 reviewer noted, “These movements are as distinctive, as peculiarly ‘American,’ one may say, as Richard Strauss’s music is peculiarly German [or] as d’Indy’s is French.”⁷ In his recent biography of the composer (2012), Bill F. Faucett suggests that the *Sinfonietta* might have functioned as something of a “demonstration work” for the “enlightening [of] his composition students.”⁸ Given that Chadwick composed the work expressly for the New England Conservatory orchestra, and that the score is available online in the *Petrucci Music Library* and in print from Kalmus, our

opinion, formed after hearing several performances and many rehearsals, that it is as good as I have ever been able to do and is in some respects the best of my works.” Quoted in Bill F. Faucett, *George Whitefield Chadwick: The Life and Music of the Pride of New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012), 200.

⁷R.G.G., writing for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, 3 December 1901; quoted in Victor Fell Yellin, *Chadwick: Yankee Composer* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 125.

⁸Faucett, *Chadwick*, 216.

collegiate orchestras would do themselves great credit were they to add this fine score to their repertory.

Whereas Chadwick's music is already more of a known quantity, the discoveries to be had from the Converse disc are arguably the more exciting ones. *Festival of Pan* (1899) is one of two so-called "romances for orchestra" inspired by John Keats's "Endymion." (The other, *Endymion's Narrative*, immediately followed *Festival of Pan* and can be heard on Falletta's recording.) In comparison to Chadwick's output, from even the first measures it is apparent that Converse's will present his listeners with a more sophisticated harmonic palette. *Festival of Pan* contrasts music representing Endymion's melancholic withdrawal from the world with music for the spirited festivities happening around him, although the composer sought to discourage any specifically narrative interpretation of the music. Ruth Severance, writing in a 1932 master's thesis, which because of the composer's direct input often serves as a mouthpiece for Converse's own views on his music, aptly noted the work's "rugged strength, its pulsating life . . . its simple grandeur, and quiet beauty."⁹ The score was premiered by the Boston Symphony in 1900, published by G. Schirmer in 1903, and subsequently conducted by Henry Wood in London in 1904, making this work the composer's principal introduction to the international music community. Given such a position of importance within Converse's output, its premiere recording was doubly overdue.

The remaining works on the Converse album come from later in the composer's career. *Song of the Sea* (1923) is somewhat of a puzzling listen upon first encounter. Despite the title, Converse chose not to produce any kind of maritime soundscape. Instead, the score translates into music the affective content of Walt Whitman's poem "On the Beach at Night" from *Sea Drift*. Unlike *The Festival of Pan*'s loose narrative connections to Keats, *Song of the Sea* instead closely mirrors the form and progress of Whitman's text.¹⁰ In the poem, a child, observing the night sky with her father, becomes more and more frightened as the stars disappear from view behind what she imagines must be destructive clouds. Converse begins with a chromatically unstable slow introduction, made ominous by the bass instruments of the orchestra playing in their deepest registers—a perfect musical realization of Whitman's "burial clouds, in black masses spreading." Converse then drives the orchestra to a climax of powerful intensity before introducing a reassuringly lyrical string melody, as the father in the poem soothes his frightened daughter. From here, the incomprehensible mysteries of Whitman's "vast immortal suns and the long-enduring pensive moons" are mirrored in a passage of shrouded whole-tone harmonies before a new melody arrives in a triumphal, diatonic climax, effectively conveying the poet's assurance of "something . . . more immortal even than the stars." It strikes the listener today as quite the cinematic experience, and indeed

⁹ Ruth Severance, "The Life and Work of Frederick Shepherd Converse" (MA thesis, Boston University, 1932), 18.

¹⁰ With this world-premiere recording, one can now easily trace the development of Converse's compositional style from his much earlier Whitman-based symphonic poem *The Mystic Trumpeter* (1904), as recorded by Falletta, to *Song of the Sea*. *The Mystic Trumpeter* is likewise a close musical parallel to the shape and content of Whitman's eponymous poem.

Converse employs the harmonic and expressive vocabulary that we associate with the filmscores of Hollywood's "Golden Age." That style, of course, is usually credited to European-born immigrant composers working in the 1930s and 1940s (Erich Korngold, Max Steiner, Miklós Rózsa, etc.), and yet here is an American, working with the same musical ingredients, an entire decade earlier in the concert hall.

Finally, Converse's *American Sketches* (1929) present what for me is the most compelling musical discovery of all six world-premiere recordings under review. This work is fully symphonic in terms of its length, scope, and artistic ambition. Its four movements offer "suggestions rather than pictures," to use the composer's phrase, of different American locales.¹¹ Converse takes his listeners to Manhattan, the Mississippi River, a fiddle-led barn dance, and the Grand Canyon. Ferde Grofé was of course doing much the same sort of thing, with his *Mississippi* and *Grand Canyon* suites (1925 and 1931 respectively), but unlike Grofé, Converse avoids any "light music" associations. Ottorino Respighi's *Pines of Rome* (1924) seems like a more relevant comparison. The opening movement, "Manhattan," according to Severance, is "expressive of the grandeur, the turmoil, and the loneliness of a great city."¹² It is no celebratory glimpse of a beloved city, but rather a grim portrait of modern urban living. The city's architecture seems to be captured in the few moments of "grandeur," but mostly the music focuses on "turmoil" and "loneliness," through themes that are in turn threatening, dissonant, oppressive, or bleakly lyrical. It is the soundworld of a *film noir*, minus any jazz references, but again Converse appears to have crafted it decades before Hollywood did. A welcome contrast comes in the second movement's noble depiction of the Mississippi River, entitled "The Father of Waters." Converse alternates a melody of his own creation with the spiritual "Levee Moan," taken from Carl Sandburg's collection *The American Songbag* (1927). The initial presentation of the spiritual melody on a solo English horn suggests that this movement might be yet another American reclamation of the pattern established in Antonín Dvořák's *New World Symphony*. The all-too-brief third movement, "Chicken Reel," provides a scherzo-like series of variations on another tune from Sandburg's *Songbag*. The composer explains that his finale, "Bright Angel Trail," "is an attempt to portray feelings engendered by the Grand Canyon of Arizona, its mysterious depths, its ever-changing lights, its grand vistas, and at last a suggestion of the legendary birth of the Hopi Indian race from its profound abyss."¹³ The addition of an organ to the already large orchestra heightens the drama of the processional-like buildup during the movement's second half, leading to a resoundingly climactic conclusion. The strengths of this masterful composition suggest that the revival of Converse's five unrecorded symphonies could indeed yield many musical rewards.

For the Chadwick disc, the composer's tireless advocate Bill Faucett has contributed liner notes that once again capitalize upon the same New England

¹¹ Quoted in Robert J. Garofalo, *Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940): His Life and Music* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 79.

¹² Severance, "Life and Work," 110. Severance's commentary on *American Sketches* derives from conversations with the composer, as the score had not yet been performed.

¹³ Garofalo, *Converse*, 80.

Conservatory archival materials, most especially Chadwick's own diaries, that made his recent biography of the composer such a valuable contribution. Faucett carefully navigates the issue of "modernism" as it relates to the admittedly conservative "experiments" found in Chadwick's later output, explaining how what sounds to us today as a typically traditionalist style might have appeared to American listeners of the time as something strikingly advanced. Lewis Foreman contributes notes to the Converse disc, and although clearly not as intimately informed about his subject as is Faucett, he nonetheless provides a biographical summary and detailed musical descriptions that will helpfully orient listeners for whom Converse is perhaps an unrecognized name. Particularly considerate is the inclusion of the complete Whitman poem upon which *Song of the Sea* is based.

The technical quality of both albums achieves what one would expect from modern digital productions. The engineers have captured Chadwick's and Converse's colorful and creative orchestration in great detail and clarity, even in the most densely scored passages. The London Air Studios venue used for the Converse disc allows for a slightly fuller sound picture, with a vivid stereo placement of the various orchestral contingents, than does the Watford Colosseum used for the Chadwick disc. There, the recording yields a very close listening perspective that consequently sacrifices a degree of sonic impact overall and richness in string tone in particular. Nevertheless, the BBC Concert Orchestra appears fully comfortable with scores that were surely *terra incognita* to every musician. They display an impressive degree of virtuosity when required, most notably from the resonant brass section and the distinguished woodwind solo contributions. Even with only three days of recording sessions per album, the music could ask for no better podium advocacy than that provided by Lockhart. Despite the absence of recorded comparisons or an established performance tradition, his interpretations come across as cogently organized, carefully structured, and emotionally charged when appropriate. He convincingly presents these scores in the best possible light. Despite their historical neglect, Lockhart proves that the all-too-often-overlooked compositions of the century-spanning American late-Romantics can indeed deliver rich musical rewards for those who care to invest in their revival. One can only hope that these albums will garner enough success to inspire further such projects under Lockhart's baton.

Aaron Ziegel

