



George Graves

Classical

**Mason Bates *Children of Adam*
 Ralph Vaugh Williams *Dona Nobis Pacem*
 Richmond Symphony; Steven Smith, Cond.
 Michelle Areyzaga, soprano; Kevin Deas, bass-baritone
 Reference Recording / Fresh FR-732**

I WAS BORN in Richmond, A, and even though my family moved to Northern Virginia when I was three years old (just outside the DC "Beltway"), my relatives remained in Richmond, and we used to visit them often as I was growing up. When I graduated college and moved to California, my father retired and he and my mother moved back to Richmond. So, as an adult, when I visited my parents, it was there that I visited them.

In the 1970s and early '80s, my college roommate was still attending the university in Richmond, working toward his eventual doctorate in psychology, so my yearly visit to my parents also included a visit to my ex-roommate.

I had heard my "roomie" complain on the phone for a number of years about what a musical wasteland Richmond was in those days. He often talked about having to make the roughly 100-mile trip

northward in order to visit Washington, D.C. to hear the National Symphony Orchestra perform or to attend one of the many weekly concerts of the President's Army, Navy, Marine Corps or Air Force symphonic bands. I had heard that Richmond had a civic symphony orchestra, and my friend started to laugh when I asked him about it. "They're terrible," was his reply. "My high school band played better."

One summer Sunday, while visiting my parents, I noticed in the paper that the Richmond Symphony was putting on a concert in the big Richmond park called “Byrd Park” (after the famous political family of Virginia). The venue was an amphitheater named Dogwood Dell, in the park. Having nothing else to do, I decided to attend and hear for myself what the Richmond Symphony sounded like. The first piece the orchestra played was Mozart’s “Overture to the Magic Flute.” I don’t know what the other pieces on the program were, because I left, totally appalled, in

operation with a fine feel for naturally recording classical music. This Richmond Symphony recording was recorded live at the Carpenter Theater in Richmond. When I was growing up, this venue was the prestigious Loew’s State movie palace about two blocks from the Virginia Statehouse. As a kid, I fondly remember seeing “Ben-Hur” and other MGM movies there. Being a fancy movie palace, they had a huge “theater” pipe organ where the console rose magically from the orchestra pit to stage-level to play between features. Even then, I was an audiophile, and I recall the

ing full advantage of the old movie palace’s exquisite acoustics. This one’s a real keeper.

“Dona Nobis Pacem” by Ralph Vaughan Williams is another choral work, written for the Huddersfield Choral Society on the occasion of its 100th anniversary. Composed as Europe girded its loins for yet another world war, the second in a generation, for the text of this work, Vaughan Williams chose a portion of the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) from the Roman Catholic Mass, coupled with passages from the prophets of the Old Testament, a speech given in the House of

Soundmirror of Boston has a true talent for recording classical music. On these two works, they thrive.

the middle of the Mozart! I did not know that a symphony orchestra could play that badly. Well, I sort of did. A friend of mine had gotten hold of a British recording of a group calling itself the “Portsmouth Symphonia.” This “orchestra” consisted of players picked up on the street, and handed instruments that they had never played before (at least that’s how the liner notes on the record described the group). Anyway, they were almost as bad as the Richmond Symphony, but because their lousy playing was all in fun, the Portsmouth group was much more entertaining.

Fast forward more than 30 years to the present. I went to my mailbox one day and found a package from San Francisco’s Reference Recordings. Opening it, I was flabbergasted to find a CD of the Richmond, Virginia Symphony Orchestra playing works by composers Mason Bates and Ralph Vaughan Williams! “Oh, this I gotta hear,” was my first reaction after regaining my composure.

The Recordings

This recording was undertaken by Soundmirror of Boston. This East Coast organization has recorded most of Reference Recordings’ “Fresh!” series since its inception. While most of the parent label’s recordings are made by Professor Keith O. Johnson, the Fresh! series is farmed-out. This reviewer has found Soundmirror to be a first-class

acoustics of that theater to be excellent. I can’t imagine a better re-use for this theater than as a concert hall.

The Music

“The Children of Adam” is a collection of “celebrations of the creation” for orchestra and chorus and was written specifically for the Richmond Symphony’s 60th anniversary. The texts come from various American poets and Native American folklore. The title comes from a Walt Whitman poem and is repeated throughout the piece in the form of choral “fanfare intermezzos.” Between the intermezzos, each of the seven movements offers a different perspective on creation. Normally, this reviewer is somewhat wary of modern, contemporary compositions because they tend to be quite avant garde and not very accessible by a concert-going audience. I’m happy to say that this composition by Mason Bates (who was born in 1977) is simply delightful. While fresh and original, Bates music is very tuneful and the orchestration is at once exotic with lots of percussion and lush with great string sound and a wonderfully wide sound stage with great image specificity. The orchestra (somewhat to my chagrin) plays superbly and the Richmond Symphony Chorus is extremely professional and sounds as good as any recorded chorus that I have ever heard. The sound is sumptuous, tak-

ing full advantage of the old movie palace’s exquisite acoustics. This one’s a real keeper.

Commons during the Crimean War by John Bright, and three stunning poems from the composer’s favorite poet, Walt Whitman (“A Sea Symphony”).

Vaughan Williams was a master at writing choral music, and he cut his teeth on revising the English C of E hymnal which, according to him “Contained some of the best and worst tunes in the English musical tradition.” This gave him ample experience at arranging for chorus.

Again, the Richmond Symphony and Chorus are in great form. They are joined here by soprano Michelle Arezagaya and bass-baritone Kevin Deas. Again, Steven Smith conducts the orchestra and Erin R. Freeman is the choral director.

This composition is not as free-wheeling was the Bates “Children of Adam”, but it — like most of RVW’s music — is a showcase for both the orchestra and the chorus and is lots of fun.

Conclusion

Add this CD to your shortlist to purchase! You won’t regret it. The performances are excellent, spirited and the sound is among the best I’ve heard on any recent recording. I’m sure that this is, in part, due to the excellent acoustics in the old Loews State theater, but I must also tip my hat to producer/recording engineer Ed Thompson, mastering engineer Mark Donahue and all the folks at Soundmirror for another job well done. Highly recommended.