

RECORDS



STEFAN WOLPE
ENACTMENTS
CONTINUUM



ENACTMENTS/FROM HERE
ON FARTHER/SECOND
PIECE FOR VIOLIN ALONE
Stefan Wolpe
Nonesuch 78024

SCHOENBERG:
ERWARTUNG
WOLPE: SYMPHONY
Orchestra of the 20th Century
Composers Recordings Inc.,
CRI SD 503

By Kyle Gann

Hey, listen! You won't believe it. Get this—they've finally recorded Wolpe's *Enactments*! After all these years!...Well? Don't give me that blank look! Didn't you

hear what I said? Wolpe's *Enactments*, for gosh sake!

Aside from several riot-causing scandals, hardly any musical world premiere of this century has left such an intimidating legend in its wake as the 1955 New York premiere of *Enactments* for three pianos by the German/Israeli/American composer Stefan Wolpe. Massive, complex, and thoroughly abstract, the work was rumored to have achieved a new plateau in American music's independence from tonal and rhythmic conventions, and made the same kind of breakthrough that the first large drip paintings of Jackson Pollock had made in American art just a few years earlier. I had inquired about the piece of people who had been present at the premiere, each of whom sighed and smiled faintly as if I had asked for information concerning the Ineffable. And yet, three decades after its composition, this historical monument had not been recorded.

At last, thanks to the talents of Cheryl Seltzer, Anne Chamberlain, and Joel Sachs, and the forward-looking programming of Nonesuch Records, the Ineffable has been brought to vinyl, and the mystery made manifest. Frankly, I am a little disappointed; but only because I had been led to expect miracles. *Enactments* is indisputably one of the greatest works in the multiple-piano repertoire. It is massive in every sense. It does represent, within American music, an unprecedented departure from both melodic and systematic conceptions of music. Nevertheless, its origins are obviously human; for

all its power and logical advances, *Enactments* is still marked by a residue of the oppressive density of Wolpe's early works, and its subtlety remains mundane in comparison with the Mozartean clarity of his last two piano pieces.

In five movements lasting 31 minutes, *Enactments* is a forbidding jungle of thick piano textures. Eschewing themes, regular beats, and even motives (aside from a recurring repeated-note motive with which the work ends), the piece gives the same impression of astrophysical chaos that the paintings of the abstract expressionists (some of them friends of Wolpe) must have given in the 1940s. Points of interest are highly localized, and long-term connections elusive. Yet for all its density, *Enactments* does contain some of Wolpe's clearest moments, such as the anticlimactic descending scale near the end of the fourth movement. Such epiphanic moments as the sudden, magical stasis of the third movement reveal the work's meaning bit by bit, and the listener shouldn't be daunted if the first few minutes sound like a chain of explosions in a piano factory. Wolpe's form, like that of Ives, tends to move counter-intuitively from complexity to simplicity, and in this respect *Enactments* is the spiritual successor to Ives's *Concord Sonata*.

Lacking a score, one must take much on faith in judging the performance of so complex a work. This performance seems confident and well paced, and the monochromaticism that is its only flaw seems less a deficiency of perform-

ance than a vestige of Wolpe's 1930s German style.

The pieces that fill out the record are well chosen. The *Second Piece for Violin Alone* is one of Wolpe's clearest and most supple works, played here by Marilyn Dubow with sensitive attention to Wolpe's classic nuances. Beginning with the notes G, A, and B played five times, this static piece consists of myriad shifting, almost-repeating forms, each slight chromatic change suggesting a new perspective on the well-defined materials. *From Here on Farther* (1969), for violin, clarinet, bass clarinet, and piano, is a mature showpiece for Wolpe's delicate interplay of melodic forms, and for his dialectic of movement and stasis. The cute little diatonic melody that appears in the violin about halfway through seems to characterize in miniature Wolpe's often ironic attitude toward his materials.

Hard on the heels of *Enactments* comes an equally important new release on CRI, the first recording of Wolpe's one symphony. This 1955-56 work uses the largest ensemble of any of Wolpe's late works, and the inflexibility of large ensemble performance seems to force his fluid personality into a slightly more conventional mold. If the colors are less subtle, the palette is certainly much wider, and the chameleon orchestration elucidates Wolpe's ideas with more accessibility than in the composer's other major works. The counterpoint, derived from the opening bassoon line, is very straightforward, and the frequent use of drums creates a bombast that is

rarely found in his mature music. The *Symphony* is remarkable, even for early Wolpe, for its unflagging energy, and despite its constant motion, its relatively regular rhythmic profile will make it much easier for many listeners to follow than his more mercurial works.

The performance of the *Symphony*, with Arthur Weisberg conducting the Orchestra of the 20th Century (I love that title), is dynamic, well-controlled, and intense, if something short of magical or subtle. The percussion effects are very striking (sorry), but the strings and woodwinds are unfortunately somewhat overshadowed. I've heard Weisberg do better—but the piece comes across quite well, and no one should pass up this recording waiting for another to come out.

It is unusual for CRI to devote an entire record to dead composers, and it is difficult to justify the pairing of the Wolpe *Symphony* with Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, since there are much better performances on record. Not that this performance with Susan Davenny Wyner is bad, by any means. It is a solid, well-argued piece of work. But in terms of fiery spirit, orchestral clarity, and recording quality, it falls so far short of the magic of the Silja/Dohnanyi recording (London LDR 71015) that CRI surely cannot expect to sell the record except on the basis of the Wolpe.

Magnificent as *Enactments* is, I would not recommend it as a candidate for one's first Wolpe record; it is simply too forbidding. (I would recommend the other two

continued on page 31

RECORDS

continued from page 14

works in that capacity, but they occupy less than a quarter of the record.) The Symphony is much

more colorful, and more likely to make a good first impression, but it is uncharacteristically frenetic, and not well recorded. Someone seeking initial exposure to Wolpe under the most ingratiating circumstances would best start off, I think, with either the *Piece in Two Parts for Six Players* (Argo ZRG 757; difficult to find), the Chamber

Piece no. 1 (Nonesuch H-71220), the Trio (CRI 233 USD), or the Quartet for Trumpet, Tenor Sax, Percussion, and Piano (Nonesuch H-71302). Or, if one can find the old Columbia Collectors' Series album (CML 5179), the haunting *Ten Songs From the Hebrew*. If those fail, the only surefire cure I know for Wolpe-apathy is to take piano

lessons and learn to play *Form*.

For those, however, who already think of Wolpe as one of the most subtle and original musical personalities of our century, both records are important additions to the canon, and well worth having. The program notes on the Nonesuch album are excellent, and conducive to intelligent listening;

CRI is unconscionably desultory in this respect. The pieces on Nonesuch were recorded with exquisite clarity, and my pressing was virtually spotless. The CRI pressing was almost as good, but the Symphony sounded as if it had been recorded off the radio (it wasn't), and the hiss is frequently distracting.

in it), but now we must put up with Barbara Scharres and Peter Keough as well. Keough's reviews make some sense, you can get the gist of whether or not he liked the movie and why, but Ms. Scharres makes no sense whatsoever.

I'm sure that cinematographer Robby Müller will appreciate the nice tribute that Scharres has given him in her review of *Body Rock* [October 5], but if a person reading the article wanted to know what the movie was about, they would have had to have looked elsewhere. Not only didn't she give any clue to the movie's plot, but she didn't justify why she gave it a one star rating.

Might I suggest that you hire writers who pay attention to the action on the screen as well as the

technical effects, or send all of your movie critics to Hollywood and let them work behind the camera, where their fantasies obviously lie.

Willie Holmes
S. Saginaw

Color Correction

To the editors:

The recent controversy over black history [Letters, August 10, 24, 31, September 7; The Straight Dope, September 7] buttresses the theory espoused by a local black leader. Was it Jesse Jackson, who noted that Chicago politics was a white-controlled game, the rules of which changed just as blacks started winning? If so, the Reverend Jackson is a master of understatement. Life in the U.S.A. is a white-

controlled game and the language we speak, our ideas about ourselves, our morals, our politics, everything, must follow rapidly changing rules.

For centuries in the United States anyone with a drop or more of "Negro blood" was classified as Negro (black, Afro-American, colored, etc). These mixed people tilled the soil and cleaned the house with the rest of the slaves. They sat in the back of the bus, drank from "Negro" drinking fountains, and went to "Negro" schools (unless they were light enough to "pass"). The scientific community acquiesced in their classification and these practices. Yet something came over the scientists when they looked at north Africa. If "Negro blood" was the key to racial classi-

fication then what of ancient Egypt and its glorious civilization? It was conquered by the blood of the Cush! Hard to believe there was no coffee mixed in with the cream. What of the Arabic culture of the Moors (more heavily mixed with blood from the south—the great west African civilizations were building at the same time you know—than Cecil lets on)? If these glorious African civilizations were controlled by Negroes, as Americans would have named them, then Negroes had made great, and highly visible contributions to world history. Well they couldn't have it said blacks did all that! So presto-change! Mixed people in northern Africa were white! The ruins of great civilizations in southern Africa were attributed to whites! Infor-

mation about great central African empires was hushed up! Of course mixed people in the good old U.S.A., were still "Negro" for discrimination purposes.

The practice is ongoing. When I took my first black history course (the 60s) Crispus Attucks was a "Negro." Two years later the text called him a "mulatto." Last year some book I saw described him as part Indian, part Irish, part Afro-American (the text inferred this was the smallest part). If I see his name again he'll probably be a blond-haired, blue-eyed Norwegian! So you see it is not that blacks have made few or no contributions to world history; blacks who contribute are simply reclassified.

Jacqueline Jones
Hyde Park



Dental Hygiene Package

Smile Brighter!

Thanks for your enthusiasm!

- Most Modern Equipment & Techniques
- Friendly, Relaxed Atmosphere

Clearing — Exam — X-Rays — Consultation
All \$22.50 • Free Toothbrush & Floss

- Emergencies Welcome • Evening Hours
- Lab on Premises • Cosmetic Dentistry

Dr. A. E. Urban, D.D.S., Director
Northwestern University Dental School Graduate
CHICAGO
6352 N. Lincoln Ave., CALL: 478-0704
CALL NOW

Selected Japanese Textiles

Handwoven
19th & 20th
Century
Country Garments

Friday, October 19th
through Sunday, November 4
Opening reception
Friday, October 19, 5-7pm



**The Weaving Workshop/
Textile Arts Centre**
916 W. Diversey • 929-5776
Monday through Friday, noon-7;
Saturday, 10-5; Sunday, noon-5



Chicago Fur Outlet

The Furry Godmother says,

"It's no trick
to treat yourself
at the Chicago
Fur Outlet."

We buy or consign your furs.

Specializing in one-of-a-kind,
new and resale, fur fashions
for men & women at
enchancing prices.

445 W. Diversey at Pine Grove
Phone anytime 348-FURS.

