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CD Review by Henry Fogel

**WILLIAM MASSELOS: Marathon Carnegie Hall Concert** • William Masselos (pn); Virgil Thomson (nar); Max Wilcox, cond<sup>2</sup> • YVES ST-LAURENT 293 mono (2 CDs: 140:09) Live: Carnegie Hall, New York 12/11/1969

**RUDHYAR Granites. IVES Piano Sonata No. 1. WEBERN Variations, op. 27. COPLAND Piano Variations. B. WEBER Fantasia Variations. SCHUMANN Davidsbündlertänze. SATIE Sports et divertissements. CHOPIN Piano Concerto No. 2 in f**

& Brief commentary by Harold Schonberg

This mammoth recital (well over two hours of actual playing time) demonstrates unquestionably that William Masselos was one of America's great pianists, and at the same time demonstrates at least in part what may have kept him from achieving the fame that some of his colleagues (Cliburn, Graffman, Fleisher, for example) did. He insisted on acting as if the repertoire of the 20th century was actually part of the canon, worthy of being programmed alongside that of the 18th and 19th centuries. Add to that his lack of stage charisma, and you have the makings of a career more likely to appeal to the cognoscenti than the broader public.

Masselos was born in 1920 and died in 1992. His main teacher was Carl Friedburg, a pupil of Clara Schumann, and he was thus steeped in the German tradition, but advocacy for new music was a huge part of his artistry and career. This Carnegie Hall concert might serve as a symbol of his approach. With three intermissions it must have lasted well over three hours, a test of endurance for most listeners (except dedicated Wagnerians, of course). Listeners were invited to come and go as they pleased, to enjoy or avoid the music of their choice! The advantage of a recording is that we don't have to listen to it in one gulp, though I did once through in order to experience the impact of the whole. It was an overwhelming and extremely gratifying experience.

It might be fair to say that Masselos plays new music as if it were old music, and vice versa. He gave the premiere of the Ives Sonata (40 years after it was composed), and by the time of this concert had been playing it for 20 years, and thus was completely inside it. He recorded the Ives Sonata twice, once in 1950 for Columbia shortly after giving the premiere, and a second time for RCA in 1967, two years before this recital performance. Even Dane Rudhyar's *Granites*, a work very rarely played, comes across here with a natural ebb and flow. In all of the 20th-century works, knotty though they are, Masselos transcends the performance style found in many "modern music specialists," playing not only with the expected rhythmic precision and textural clarity, but also with grace, elegance, and warmth. He brings to these performances a delicacy in those moments when the music wants it that is often missing in performances of music of this nature. He also commands a very wide coloristic range, again something not always found in the playing those who specialize in music of the 20th and, now, 21st centuries.

One stunning example of Masselos's keyboard mastery is the fourth movement of the Ives, marked: "Allegro, a study in *Rag* for 5's, 3's and 2's together—presto, as fast as possible." The movement title says it all. Masselos's clarification of the cross-rhythms is perfect. This movement can sound, in other hands, disjointed and hectic. Here it has shape and direction, rhythmic propulsion without chaos, and manages at the same time to sound spontaneous and completely alive. Every note is given its proper weight, and that is all the more impressive given that we are listening to an unedited live performance.

Masselos also made two commercial recordings of Copland's *Piano Variations*, and he was a close colleague of the composer (he gave the world premiere of the *Piano Fantasy*). Again, Masselos finds the beauty and lyricism that is an important component of this music, while not minimizing its thorniness or its hard edges. He balances those elements perfectly, and there is just a tad more propulsion and impulsiveness here than in the Columbia recording (I don't have his one for RCA).

When we get to Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze*, we hear that same freshness of approach and thoroughness of understanding. The opening sections, *Lebhaft* and *Innig*, are marked by beauty of tone and a pearly touch. The tonal beauty throughout is a very special component of his playing, which is distinguished by his use of *all* dynamics, not just soft, medium, loud, and very loud. He displays infinite degrees and subtle differences of *piano* and *mezzo piano*, and nowhere is it more apparent than in the Schumann. Masselos encompasses everything in this suite—warmth, charm, humor, exultation, impetuosity, beauty, and earthiness. And he stitches it all together with remarkable unity. The sheer beauty of his playing is the next-to-last section, *Wie aus der Ferne*, will melt your heart. Masselos employs a subtle rubato along with a seamless legato.

Satie's *Sports et divertissements* is the least successful part of this recording, through no fault of Masselos or Satie. These are pieces for piano and narrator, and Virgil Thomson is an effective and witty narrator, but unfortunately is miked distantly, thus swimming in an echoey mist that makes him hard to understand. Again, Masselos's range of color is a real asset to the performance.

The Chopin Concerto (labelled No. 1 by Yves St. Laurent, but actually the one we know as No. 2 even though it was, indeed, composed first) is accompanied by a more than acceptable pickup orchestra conducted by famed RCA producer Max Wilcox. I wonder if Wilcox is responsible for the professional quality of the recording—obviously he must have had a relationship with the pianist. Masselos's playing is as has been throughout the marathon concert: rhythmically precise and solid, imaginatively phrased and shaped, and highly nuanced. The *Larghetto* may not quite rival Josef Hofmann in its freedom, but Masselos does employ substantial and very subtle rubato while always keeping the forward flow.

The release includes a brief (1:34) and enthusiastic review of the concert given by *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg, apparently on some radio station. The sound quality is superb, frankly studio-recording quality. Yves St. Laurent provides no notes or documentation of its source, but it certainly gives the impression of being a professionally made recording with a warm, full, natural piano sound. Norbeck, Peters, and Ford (norpete.com), which sells this label, indicates that the recording came from Masselos's own collection. Tracking information is poor for the first disc. The Rudhyar *Granites* is the first track (the piece has five very short movements), and then the Ives Sonata begins on track 2. But in the insert booklet it is marked as tracks 1–5, instead of 2–6, and then the Webern, Copland, and Ben Weber (as well as the Schonberg commentary) are all off by one track from their listings. (I saw a preliminary release, and am told this will be corrected before final publication).

But let me not end with that complaint. Yves St. Laurent (no relationship with the designer) is a company dedicated to finding performances that really merit public exposure and preservation, and to doing it with the highest possible audio quality. They accomplish this successfully, and in this case have made available a truly remarkable piano recital by a very great artist who never achieved the exposure his talent merited. **Henry Fogel**

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