



PROJECT MUSE®

The City (review)

Lars Helgert

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 630-631 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0303>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376419>

creates a vivid sound world, complimented on stage by the sets and costumes by Francis O'Connor.

Pinocchio, commissioned by Opera North with Sadler's Wells Theatre and Chemnitz Opera, had its world premiere on 21 December 2007 at the Grand Theatre and Opera House, Leeds. The resultant DVDs were recorded by Opus Arte at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on 29 February and 1 March 2008. Overseen by recording director Thomas Grimm, the recording is a pleasure both visually and aurally, with few flaws. While the close camera work throughout was useful in capturing the subtleties of the singers' expressions, certain scenes (such as the marionette scene) would have benefited from a wider camera angle. And, in the finale, the drum set

seemed overly loud in comparison to the rest of the orchestra. Still, these are minor issues. The entire cast (with mezzo-soprano Victoria Simmonds in the title role) gives a consistently fine performance, and their voices are well-balanced with the orchestra.

The extra features of this two-disc set include a synopsis, cast gallery, and enlightening interviews with the composer, librettist, stage director, and conductor. A useful booklet is also included. The high production values of this recording are all the more impressive given how quickly it was produced, and this opera, a welcome addition to the repertoire, is bound to please viewers of all ages.

RYAN EBRIGHT

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

The City. DVD. Angel Gil-Ordonez / Post-Classical Ensemble. Music by Aaron Copland. Directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Canada: Naxos 2.110231, 2009. \$17.99.

To Aaron Copland, writing music for Hollywood films represented an opportunity to reach a much wider audience than was typically possible for composers of concert music. Hollywood film scoring was, however, according to George Antheil, "a closed corporation" (*Modern Music* 15, no. 1 [November-December 1937]). Hollywood studios were reluctant to hire composers without previous film experience; Copland would therefore need a film credit, and documentary films were a viable path to the requisite credentials.

The City, made for the 1939 World's Fair in New York, was one of several Depression-era documentary films with a quasi-socialist message. There is no dialogue or plot; the rhetorical technique involves only visual imagery, music, and a narrator. The filmmakers advocate a new approach to urban planning by contrasting the conditions of an industrial mining town (shot in Pittsburgh) and the interior of a large city (shot in New York) with a new type of planned community (shot in Greenbelt, Maryland) that is "organized to make cooperation possible between machines and men – and nature," according to the narrator.

Copland's score features contrasting musical styles to support the on-screen images and rhetoric. Idyllic rural and suburban life

is represented by pastoral, consonant music, while urban conditions are shown to dissonant, rhythmically jarring portions of the score. Additionally, there is often a strong physical correlation between specific images and musical figures, such as the clarinet triplet passage that plays while the viewer is shown a water wheel.

The new recording of the score surpasses the original in many respects. There is greater dynamic range, more detail of orchestral color, and in general, the score works better as abstract music in the hands of the Post-Classical Ensemble. Yet one is also drawn to the charms of the original, also included on this DVD: period authenticity, nostalgia, and more seamless integration with the visual aspects of the film.

The DVD has numerous extras aside from the original version of the film, such as a seven-page booklet with liner notes by Joseph Horowitz, the artistic director of the Post-Classical Ensemble, photographs, and artist biographies. There is also an interview by Horowitz of filmmaker and documentary film historian George Stoney on topics ranging from Copland's career as a film composer to the visual rhetoric of *The City*, and a film made in 2000 for the Greenbelt Museum entitled *Which Playground for Your Child: Greenbelt or Gutter?* The

latter includes interviews with early residents of Greenbelt, one of whom was a cast member in *The City*.

This DVD release has much to offer in a variety of areas. It is important as a document of social history, reflecting Depression-era political thought and social activism. As music literature, Copland's score is a little-known work, although some portions of it were later used in the orches-

tral suite *Music for the Movies* (1942). This and Copland's seven subsequent film scores constitute a significant contribution to the art of film scoring, and this earliest of his efforts is worthy of musicological study for its innovative techniques.

LARS HELGERT
Shenandoah University

John Cage. 49 Waltzes for the 5 Boroughs, A Complete Video Realization by Don Gillespie and Roberta Friedman. DVD. [United States]: Mode Records, 2008, 1994. MODE 204. \$29.99.

In 1977, at the invitation of Edition Peters to contribute to a piano collection entitled "Waltzes by Twenty Five Contemporary Composers," John Cage composed *49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs*, scored "for performer(s), or listener(s), or record maker(s)." The score, in typical Cage fashion, consisted of a set of instructions to assemble, through unspecified chance operations, 147 addresses from any city and randomly arrange these into three groups. Beyond that, the work is left up to the performer. Cage's original though incomplete realizations were audio recordings of the ambient noise at a number of the addresses he prepared for New York City. After the composer's death in 1992, Don Gillespie, an employee of Peters, decided to resurrect this work to celebrate the memory of his late friend. Taking the option of "record maker(s)" as his cue, Gillespie set out with artist Roberta Friedman to make a video version of the *49 Waltzes*. Using chance operations to determine the length of time spent at each address, Gillespie and Friedman captured the 147 addresses over the course of the one year and compiled them into this two-hour DVD. The resulting work consists simply of shots and the ambient sounds of each location (cars, shouts, birds, etc.), with the option of turning on subtitles that display the address.

The first and perhaps most crucial issue the artists encounter in this project is where, at each address, one points the camera. Sound recordings can be more or less omnidirectional, giving one a panoramic portrait of the sound of that location (a special feature allows the viewer to listen to

an audio-only realization of the ninth waltz), but a camera must look at something. Gillespie and Friedman's solution is to keep the camera in constant motion, panning right to left and back for the duration of each scene. While this allows the viewer a greater understanding of the context of the location, it also has the unfortunate effect of disrupting an attention to the details of the location. We get the forest and not so much the trees. However, were the artists to fixate on a single spot for each address, the viewer would be robbed of the diversity of scenery one finds time and again in the different locations throughout the video. Included in the DVD is a purely audio realization of the ninth waltz.

The other striking aspect of this rendition is the timeframe in which it was set. Filmed between 1994 and 1995, this work provides an extensive portrait of life in New York—both the urban and suburban—in the early Giuliani years, both before 9/11 and the "cleaning up" of the city. As such the *49 Waltzes* serve as a particularly accurate and unbiased historical document, capturing the essence of a place in a specific time without the colorization of political and personal histories. In fact herein lays the strength of this particular piece. The work is in constant evolution, as are the cities it would map. Cage's original 1977 realization of the work, while using the same addresses would show a different New York City altogether, as would any version compiled today.

PHILIP WHITE
Princeton, New Jersey