



PROJECT MUSE®

Made in America. Tambor. Concerto for Orchestra (review)

Ann McCutchan

American Music, Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2009, pp. 117-118 (Review)

Published by University of Illinois Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/263309>

NOTES

1. In Ben Ratliff, *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), 93–95, 101.
2. In LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), 180–211.
3. In Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 108.
4. In Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: DaCapo, 1994), 132; John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958* (New York: Quill, 1984), 152; Frank Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* (New York: Pathfinder, 1998), 322–23.
5. In Robert Palmer's liner notes to Albert Ayler's *The Village Concerts*. Two LPs (Impulse Records, 1978).

Joan Tower. *Made in America. Tambor. Concerto for Orchestra*. Nashville Symphony Orchestra. Leonard Slatkin, conductor. Liner notes by Gail Wein. 2007. Naxos—American Classics 8.559328

Winner of the 2008 Grammy awards for Best Classical Contemporary Composition, Best Orchestral Performance, and Best Classical Album, *Made in America* is a triumph for every individual and institution connected to the recording. The sweep represents the first Grammy for the Nashville Symphony, previously nominated for recordings of works by Elliott Carter, Amy Beach, and George Whitfield Chadwick. *Made in America* is also the Nashville Symphony's first recording under the venerable American music champion Leonard Slatkin, its music advisor, and its first produced in Nashville's new Schermerhorn Symphony Center. The performances, recorded in June 2006, and Naxos's recording quality of them here, are excellent; the three compositions offered (both *Tambor* and *Made in America* in premiere recordings), are among Tower's very best, and well served by this recording.

The title composition is shot through with the verve and color listeners have come to expect of Tower, who celebrated her seventieth birthday in 2008. *Made in America*, a fantasia on "America the Beautiful," can be heard as a succession of glittering sonic impressions portraying our most beloved myths: the hardy pioneer, the underestimated loner, the ambitious dreamer, the self-made success. But it is not a gallery of rogues and heroes, Copland-style, nor is it a set of variations on a theme. Although "America the Beautiful" is present, at least in spirit, throughout the work, the tune is rarely alluded to openly. Instead, Tower deftly combines its familiar lyricism with her own lively, textured, often aggressive response to the idea of American freedom. In a recent conversation, she said, "It was very hard to write. I thought, here is a sacred tune I'm dismantling and regurgitating! Yet everything 'me' comes right out of that tune—even 'America the Beautiful' couldn't dislodge that."

It is worth noting that Tower's *Made in America* is the first product of a sixty-five-orchestra commissioning consortium whose chief resource is the Ford Motor Company Fund, called Ford Made in America, with major support by the National Endowment for the Arts, and additional funding from the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, JPMorgan Chase, Argosy Foundation Contemporary Music Fund, and the Amphion Foundation. Most of the orchestras involved are smaller, regional ensembles that could not have afforded a commission otherwise. Tower was skep-

tical about the project until she spoke with a violist who played in several small professional orchestras and who convinced the composer that such groups play with pleasure and commitment. The Glens Falls Symphony Orchestra in New York presented the work's first premiere, among many, in October of 2005. (By April 2007 *Made in America* had been performed in all fifty states.) When Tower traveled to hear dozens of these local premieres, she was impressed by the quality of American orchestras throughout the country. She was also treated "like a rock star" wherever she went. "These orchestras were the home team," she said. "Being part of this program elevated them. Many of them received state or national press coverage for the first time."

The second work on this recording, *Tambor*, was commissioned by Mariss Jansons and the Pittsburgh Symphony and first performed in 1998. Inspired by the vibrant drumming in Bolivia, where she grew up, Tower deploys a large percussion section in three ways, as she puts it: "to underscore the different timbres and rhythms of other sections of the orchestra, to act as counterpoint to the orchestra, and to serve as sectional soloists in several major and minor cadenzas throughout the work." Where *Made in America* expertly negotiates a series of contrasting moods, some of them dream-like, *Tambor* exploits rhythmic propulsion, at once rooted to earth and jetting forward.

While Tower wrote *Made in America* mindful of the limitations smaller orchestras might present, she spared no player virtuosity in her 1991 Concerto for Orchestra, a joint commission by the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, and the St. Louis Symphony. Like Bartók's classic work, Tower's Concerto showcases instruments in solos, twos, and larger groupings. And, like much of Tower's music, the work is often underpinned by a driving pulse and complex, ever-changing rhythms. This might be the time, though, to salute this composer's beautiful "slow" music; for instance, the first six minutes of the Concerto's second section, which features leisurely, lyrical violin, English horn and tuba solos. Comparisons with Bartók's "night music" would be too easy, though by association, one cannot help but hear a little of the predecessor. What stands out here is the rightness of the section's relationship to the rest of the work. A great deal of late twentieth-century music, it seems to me, has been freighted with lengthy, lifeless adagios, the equivalent, perhaps, of the navel-gazing memoir in literature. Tower's mastery—not just of rhythm and color, but of shape, proportion, and weight—is no more evident than in the Concerto.

In a previous conversation, Tower told of discovering her voice in the 1976 chamber work *Black Topaz*. "My composer colleagues thought I had flipped out, gone totally nuts," she said. "But it was a real gutsy move for me. It meant that I had to stand up for myself and say, 'Hey, I like rhythmic energy—I like simple colors!' This was a time when you didn't do anything simple. It was a real door-opener for me, because after that, my own voice started to take shape. It's a move everyone has to make if they're really serious, because you have to stand alone."

It has been more than thirty years, now, since *Black Topaz*. I trust I am not the only one who admires and appreciates the meaning and spectacular results of that turning point.

Ann McCutchan
University of North Texas