

COPLAND Violin Sonata. Pieces for Violin and Piano (2). *Vitebsk*.¹ Preludes for Violin and Piano: No. 1; No. 2. Duo for Violin and Piano. *Rodeo: Hoe Down*. *Billy the Kid: Waltz and Celebration* • Peter Zazofsky (vn); Paul Posnak (pn); Ross Harbaugh (vc)¹ • NAXOS 8.559102 (75:52)

Aaron Copland's Violin Sonata, written upon the death of the composer's friend Harry H. Dunham during WW II, may seem, with its spare textures and reiterations of simple, plaintive gestures, too austere for its genre; but it also sports Copland's almost defiant jaggedness, especially in its more kinetic last movement—though it relies less heavily than do some of his most popular works on rhythmic patterns cheekily—and stubbornly—shifted off the beat. Violinists haven't made a repertoire staple of it, although Isaac Stern recorded it with the composer at the piano, and it's a natural for recitals of America music (Gil Shaham and Anne-Akiko Myers shoehorned it, without much effort, into such programs). The Two Pieces for Violin and Piano, "Nocturne" and "Ukulele Serenade" (which the composer recorded with Jacques Gordon), jazzier and more suggestive (Daniel Felsenfeld's notes cite their bitonality and Milhaud's influence, although the low-down atmosphere effectively masks influences and technical devices), represent an earlier, more opulent style, through which the later Copland's musical personality only occasionally peers. By comparison, *Vitebsk* (recorded by the composer with Ivor Karman and David Freed), in which cellist Ross Harbaugh joins the violinist and pianist, sounds severe and almost pugnacious. The Two Preludes, the earliest works on the program, offer serious, unyielding musical statements that, although they're wrought from familiar tonal elements, never themselves sound quite familiar. The notes relate that Copland rescored a duo for flute and piano (written for William Kinkcaid) for violin (the Duo for Violin and Piano) in the late 70s. Its idiom seems at times all too suggestive of its different, though cognate, instrumental origin. The "Hoedown" from *Rodeo* and the "Waltz and Celebration" from *Billy the Kid* effectively represent the Copland who insinuated himself into American popular musical consciousness.

Peter Zazofsky and Paul Posnak invest these varied pieces with a fresh enthusiasm that keeps Copland's oft-repeated devices from sounding stale or mannered. Zazofsky's smoothly ingratiating tone may not be the perfect complement to Copland's more jagged barbs; but in filing their teeth, it opens new vistas nevertheless; and the trio renders *Vitebsk's* rhythmic insistence downright infectious, while Zazofsky elevates the end of the Second Prelude to a luminous transcendental serenity. Yet he also enters into the spirit of *Billy the Kid*, suggesting the yearning of a fiddler's waltz without ever sounding like a fiddler; and if his reading of *Rodeo's* "Hoe Down" is a bit fastidious, he brings raw energy to "Celebration" from *Billy the Kid*. Naxos's engineers have neither smothered the musicians in reverberance nor left them unclothed on the sound stage. Welcome though it may be simply as a collection of Copland's music for violin and piano, Zazofsky and Posnak's program includes individual performances of sufficient merit (the Preludes and selections from *Billy the Kid* outstanding among them) to earn it a more general recommendation.

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