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 **ROREM Sonatas: No. 1; No. 2; No. 3** • Thomas Lanners (pn) • CENTAUR 2874 (43:39)

 **ROREM Recalling. A Quiet Afternoon. Barcarolles. 8 Etudes. Song without Words. Another Little Song without Words. For a Perfect Sister. 60 Notes for Judy. 99 Notes to the Millenium. Song and Dance** • Thomas Lanners (pn) • CENTAUR 2980 (71:16)

Ned Rorem has always written for the piano, and after hearing both of these discs, I agree with Thomas Lanners. “These works deserve wider acclaim than they currently enjoy . . . a significant body of captivating works that musically inquisitive pianists would be wise to explore.” Such curious musicians will surely appreciate that the music, however demanding, always seems to lie well under the hand (that’s my impression, anyway, as I haven’t seen the scores). Besides the idiomatic writing, Rorem is as at home in the larger forms as he is in the smallest—his range extends from sonatas to pieces of under a minute’s duration—and he’s a disciplined, resourceful composer. Everything is highly polished, never



  
 Ned Rorem  
*The Three Piano Sonatas*  
 Thomas Lanners, piano

Ned Rorem: The Three Piano Sonatas

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overblown or distended, whether forcefully dramatic, scintillating, lyrical, spare, or sentimental. As has often been noted, Rorem's strongest formative influences were French, not surprising in a composer who reputedly fell in love with Ravel and Debussy at age 10, and I couldn't hear Sonata No. 2's (1950) first movement, Overture, without thinking immediately of Poulenc. The combination of an almost childishly simple theme with sonata form and development is entertaining *and* sophisticated, and reflects Rorem's idea that "The best music intends to beguile, and that goes for even Beethoven and Schoenberg at their most 'serious'; don't let any academic tell you otherwise. Insofar as music lacks charm it lacks greatness." The Sonata continues with a sprightly Tarantella ("a whirlwind of triplet figuration"), a Nocturne inspired by Billie Holiday (some of the harmony is a bit jazzy), and a tart, non-stop Toccata—"a pianistic tour de force" written for and dedicated to Julius Katchen—that nonetheless includes flowing, arpeggio-based episodes: it leaves an impression of bustling wit and enthusiasm in its wake.

Lanners considers Sonata No. 3 (1954) more "dissonant and gritty" than the other two. Certainly, it doesn't begin in the same carefree fashion as Sonata No. 2. Instead, the first movement's aggressive chordal punctuations and rapid right-hand figures suggest a subtle sarcasm (Prokofiev lite?). The delicate melody of the slow movement gradually builds to several climactic episodes embellished with scale figures and strong accents. The melody's gradual rise and fall, coupled with the steady, sonorous pace of the accompaniment led me to imagine allusions to "La cathédrale engloutie." I also thought I could detect a veiled Asian sensibility here and there. The Scherzando reminds me of the second movement of Barber's Piano Sonata: there's a similar fey, will-o'-the-wisp lightness, disappearing in an accelerated, upward-moving passage. A *Molto allegro* ends the Sonata energetically (I hear humor, as well), mixing scampering figures with crashing chords. Lanners calls it a toccata in all but name. Sonata No. 1's (1948) first movement balances an initial thematic reserve (austerity is Lanners' word for it) with forceful passages



reminiscent of Debussy, as well as with more forthrightly lyrical sections. The second movement Adagio (Theme and Variations), in which each successive variation increases in speed until the penultimate fourth, “return[s] to the opening tempo and mood for a more richly harmonized [final] variation.” Next, a swirling Toccata focuses initially on the upper register and then becomes increasingly dramatic as the thematic material shifts to the bass for the rousing conclusion.

Recorded in 2006, the sonatas can now be thought of as Vol. 1 of Lanners’ two-disc survey of Rorem’s piano music. Vol. 2 (2007) includes works composed around the same time as the three sonatas, as well as others from much later in Rorem’s career. The three *Barcarolles* share the traditional 6/8 meter and are primarily gentle and soothing, although Rorem’s harmonies, in keeping with the date of composition (1949), sound appropriately modern (nothing extreme, however). The second is the slowest of the three, and at first suggests that Rorem’s boat is becalmed; the forward motion picks up as it continues. The third is the liveliest, with bursts of speedy figuration propelling the vessel across the waters. *A Quiet Afternoon* (1948) is a suite of nine short pieces for children. The music is serene, playful, and wistful; it’s a pleasant addition to the genre. Fast-forward almost 30 years to 1976 and the *Eight Etudes*: conceived as a group, they naturally pose various challenges, including the rarely encountered one of an etude for the right hand alone (parallel motion plus simultaneously conflicting rhythms). Others include (in Rorem’s words) “a study in softness . . . [one] for speed without pedal . . . [and one for] slow tune with fast filigree.” There are also studies for fourths, sevenths, loud contrary motion, and a novel concluding etude that’s “a disguised medley of all the preceding ones.” This is an exciting and imaginative set in a modern idiom—“fiendishly difficult but exceptionally well-crafted for the instrument”—that deserves a place alongside such famous 20th century etudes as those by Bartók, Messiaen, and Ligeti. The five brief pieces that Lanner performs after the *Eight Etudes* were written for friends of the composer (for example, *Sixty Notes for Judy* celebrates singer Judy Collin’s 60th birthday). These are all more or less cut from the same cloth: slow, evocative, harmonically interesting, occasionally with more dynamic variety than one would expect in such a short span (the longest only takes 1:42). *Recalling* (2003) is in three parts. The first, “Remembering Lake Michigan,” begins mysteriously, and then startles the listener with a sudden, fortissimo crash. This pattern, repeated several times, gives way to a driving series of bass and treble flurries, also periodically

interrupted by crashes. It's an unforgettable opening to the program. In "The Wind Remains (Remembering Paul Bowles)," Rorem (in his own words) "quotes the descending minor third—the dying fall—as utilized by Paul Bowles" in his opera of the same name. The piece is very similar in mood (as well as thematically and harmonically) to "Remembering Lake Michigan's" slower moments. To Rorem, "Remembering Tomorrow" defies explanation, as indeed does any music." Paradoxical title aside, it's interesting that the piece begins with a 12-tone row. (I'm taking Lanners' word for that, as I didn't count. I just heard it as an unexpected use of pointillism, perhaps symbolic of the future?) Combined with scurrying figures in both hands and references to the earlier movements, the result is an exciting piece that "races towards its crashing conclusion." *Song and Dance* (1986, commissioned as a competition piece) combines jazzy syncopation and sweet-toned lyricism: it ends amusingly with a bland major cadence that drops in out of the blue. The piece is "appropriately flashy and crowd-pleasing"; it would make a great encore. Lanners plays it to the hilt, as he does all the virtuosic pieces, and he's also a sensitive musician who communicates the essence of Rorem's varied moods. Additionally, his album notes are so "spot on" that I felt obliged to quote him throughout my review. Recommended. **Robert Schulslaper**

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