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American 78rpm Rarities

Genesis Suite - Piston Symphony No. 2

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The two works presented here were both conceived and written at around the same time in the USA. Walter Piston's Second Symphony was written in 1943 and received its first performance on 5th March 1944. The present recording is the symphony's second performance, which took place about a month later and was preserved by the US Office of War Information for distribution to its Overseas Branch on vinyl 78rpm discs, which would have been broadcast to forces serving during World War II. Vinyl was still in its infancy, quality-wise, but was preferred for its lightness and unbreakability by comparison to shellac 78s. The discs themselves were "to be destroyed at the termination of the emergency", yet a rare set survives from which I have taken the present transcription. A great deal of work has been necessary to overcome surface noise and distortion, so although the tone is full and the performance enjoyable, the listener will have to allow at times for the shortcomings of the original media. That said, given the sound heard on the discs themselves during initial transfer, it is astonishing what modern restoration technology has permitted me to achieve.

The Genesis Suite was conceived in 1943 and written by its various composers between 1943 and 1945. It is known to have received two live performances, and the present recording was made shortly after the première. The project was overseen by its creator, composer Nathaniel Shilkret, who had planned to sell the completed recording to one of the major record companies. Unfortunately these companies failed to show interest in the project, and Shilkret went into partnership with some businessmen associates to create "Artist Records", who pressed and issued the recording.

Its success was limited, to say the least, and financial irregularities and a falling out caused Artist Records to be wound up, sales halted and remaining stock to be destroyed, leaving the very few existing sets of this release as among the rarest commercially issued 78rpm album sets in the USA. Thereafter the orchestral recording, which had been recorded separately from the narration, was issued with a new narrator on a Capitol LP, copies of which are also rare enough to fetch three-figure sums today. By all accounts the new narrator was no Edward Arnold! The Genesis Suite quickly fell into neglect.

A resurrection of the piece took place early in the 21st century with a recording issued by Naxos of a reconstructed version of the piece, following evidence that most of the parts had been destroyed by fire. It now appears that original copies do still exist in the Shilkret archive, as prepared by Shilkret, as is the original score as submitted by Castelnuovo-Tedesco in 1944. The work has also received a further live performance, which took place in 2008.

In its original form, the work opened with Schoenberg's "Prelude" movement, but fearing a hostile response to the music's perceived difficulty and modernity, Shilkret repositioned it on the final disc (alongside the other "difficult" composer, Stravinsky") and retitled it "Postlude" for the Artist Records release. He also apparently felt his own "Creation" movement, which now took first place, was far preferred by audiences (even though at this stage it had only had one performance!) - Shilkret's letters suggest he was not a man overcome by modesty. I have elected to retain the running order and titling as presented on the Artist Records 78s.

The discs themselves are not perhaps the finest pressings in the history of shellac. Many of the openings presented difficulties in replay which may still be heard, together with high initial surface noise, making side joins particularly tricky. Thereafter in general the sides were fine. The aural tone of Edward Arnold's narration changes significantly between works, and this has been retained. XR remastering has helped to enhance and fill the orchestral tone, which retains a distinctly 1940s Hollywood flavour, especially in some of the more filmic movements.

Andrew Rose

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American 78rpm Rarities

VARIOUS COMPOSERS: Genesis Suite

Janssen Symphony of Los Angeles, conducted by Werner Janssen, 1945

PISTON: Symphony No. 2

Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by G. Wallace Woodworth, live 1944



American 78rpm Raritiess

VARIOUS Genesis Suite (1943-45)

- 1. **Creation** (Nathaniel Shilkret) (9:36)
- 2. **Adam and Eve** (Alexandre Tansman) (10:06)
- 3. **Cain and Abel** (Darius Milhaud) (5:10)
- 4. **Noah's Ark** (Mario Castenuovo-Tedesco) (9:42)
- 5. **The Covenant** (Ernst Toch) (5:12)
- 6. **Babel** (Igor Stravinsky) (5:23)
- 7. **Postlude** (Arnold Schoenberg) (5:44)

Narrator Edward Arnold

Chorus director Hugo Strelitzer

Janssen Symphony of Los Angeles Werner Janssen

PISTON Symphony No. 2 (1943)

- 1. 1st mvt. - Moderato (9:30)
- 2. 2nd mvt. - Adagio (10:50)
- 3. 3rd mvt. - Allegro (4:21)

Boston Symphony Orchestra G. Wallace Woodworth

XR remastering by **Andrew Rose**

Front cover artwork detail from Artist Records 78rpm cover
(uncredited)

Rear photograph of **Nathaniel Shilkret**, by unnamed
photographer in employ of Bain News Service, circa 1920s,
purchased by the Library of Congress in 1948

Genesis Suite

Recorded 11 December 1945, narration recorded circa June
1946. Transfers from Artst Records set JS 10, 1101-1110

Symphony No. 2

Recorded live, Symphony Hall Boston, 8 April 1944
Transfers from Office of War Information vinyl 78s
Contemporary American Series No. 34
Disc numbers 1009-1 - 1009-4

Pristine Audio is grateful to Al Schlachtmeyer for the
generous donation of all of these discs

Total duration: **75:32**

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