

# American Record Guide

independent critics reviewing classical recordings and music in concert

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**Critics' Choice 2015**



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**HINDEMITH:** *The Long Christmas Dinner*  
Camille Zamora (Lucia), Sara Murphy (Mother Bayard/Ermengarde), Catherine Martin (Genevieve), Kathryn Guthrie (Leonora), Jarrett Ott (Roderick/Sam), Josh Quinn (Brandon), Glenn Seven Allen (Charles), Scott Murphree (Roderick II); American Symphony/ Leon Botstein  
Bridge 9449—49 minutes

American author Thornton Wilder refused to allow his two major plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* to be made into operas. Ned Rorem's operatic *Our Town* was composed after Wilder's death. But in 1960 Wilder himself supplied the libretto for Paul Hindemith's setting of his one-act play "The Long Christmas Dinner". This recording was made in 2015.

The opera, less than 50 minutes long, depicts the Bayard family through 90 years of existence by showing scene after scene at the family Christmas dinner. The movement of years is shown by family members entering the door representing birth and exiting through the door symbolizing death. Since the play and the opera are so much the same, I'm sure the operatic version is as effective dramatically as the play. The vocal line is mostly recitative, though one can find recurring themes at various spots. One such effective moment comes in a trio near the beginning, 'How long have we been in this house?' For each repetition of the question, the character singing guesses a larger number of years—a clever device to show the passage of time.

The spot where music most effectively portrays what words cannot comes in a sextet where Sam, a young soldier, heads off to war (and death). He asks his family to act normally for Christmas Day while he tries to remember their actions. Musically the family continues singing their everyday prosaic words, while Sam, in a different musical motif, tries to hold onto the family picture before him. This wonderful musical moment not only enhances the action, but also recalls the attempt of Emily in Act III of *Our Town* to hold onto the small things in life as they whirl by—one of Wilder's great themes.

This is a welcome recording of a work that should have a life, especially in conservatory programs. The music is not too demanding and should be ideal for young singers. All the singing on this recording is quite good, especially the mezzo Catherine Martin, who displays a rich, warm voice as Genevieve. There is a complete booklet—essays, full text, bios.

SININGER