

Howard Hanson

An American Romantic

World Premiere Recordings remastered from Original Analog Tapes





Howard Hanson (1896-1981) was a distinguished American composer, educator, and pre-eminent advocate of American music. He belonged to that select group of American composers born in the last decade of the nineteenth century - Walter Piston (1894), Roger Sessions (1896), Randall Thompson (1899), Roy Harris (1898), Virgil Thompson (1896) and Aaron Copland (1900) - who personified the emergence of American classical music as a distinctly national, as opposed to European, cultural force to be taken seriously. He was the leading practitioner of American musical Romanticism, much in the tradition of Jean Sibelius, Edvard Grieg and Carl Nielsen in Scandinavia. Hanson dedicated his professional life to the encouragement, creation and preservation of beauty in music, believing it to be an art form possessing unique power to ennoble both performer and listener and, by extension, mankind:

“Music has a strange physiological and psychological power. We rediscover music not only as a tremendous emotional force in the lives of men but as a sociological force in education. We realize that these simple vibrations which proceed from the elastic string of the violin are potent, potent both for good and ill. We ponder upon the intricacies of the human mind and the unfathomed depths of the human soul. We salute music not as an abstract art but as a great social force. We call upon ourselves to utilize this force for the benefit of mankind. We call upon the spirit of beauty to make clean our hearts that we may be fit servants of so great an art... a divinely great art. We study an art which is a part of infinity itself. It is tangible, it is intangible. It is science, it is art. It is emotion, it is intellect. It is a part of society, yet it carries us to heights where we exist for a moment in the fearful and awesome isolation of interplanetary space. It calls for our deepest emotional development, the greatest use of our intellectual powers and a supreme devotion to beauty.”

~Howard Hanson, speaking at an Eastman School Convocation in 1936.

Throughout his career, Hanson never departed from his cherished ideals of beauty, clarity and simplicity of utterance and his conviction that musicians and audiences would respond openly to each other on this basis. He abhorred ugliness in music, dismissed as worthless intellectual abstraction for its own sake, and fought what he perceived to be the growing alienation between composer and audience. A lifetime of composition reflects this conviction, as did his lengthy tenure as a teacher and administrator.



The years following his retirement in 1964 were a time of increasing frustration and bitterness for the composer and teacher who saw his lifework and ideals rejected as hopelessly old-fashioned by his erstwhile academic colleagues. His death in 1981 came, alas, before personal vindication through the successes of such Hanson champions as Leonard Slatkin and Gerard Schwarz, whose recordings of Hanson's music have found a receptive and enthusiastic public.

Hanson's place in music history is inextricably linked with that of the Eastman School of Music. In 1924 George Eastman, the inventor of Kodak film and founder of the Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, personally picked Hanson to head the University of Rochester's fledgling Eastman School of Music. Eastman knew little about music but was a shrewd judge of talent in others. His judgment in the case of the young Hanson would have profound consequences not only for the Eastman School but also for the whole course of American music and music education. Hanson would hold the post of Director at Eastman until his retirement forty years later and during that remarkable tenure would elevate the school to a commanding position in the American musical community, the leading force behind the cultivation and propagation of American music.

Dozens of musicians who have since become well-known composers and educators themselves were trained by Hanson and his staff. His annual American Music Festivals became the proving ground for works by such as Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, David Diamond, Virgil Thompson, Peter Mennin, Randall Thompson, Roger Sessions, Roy Harris and Leo Sowerby. All told, during his tenure in Rochester, Hanson presented works by over 700 composers, featuring over 1,500 different compositions, a remarkable record by any estimation!

During his Eastman years, Hanson composed four additional symphonies beyond his Symphony No. 1, *Nordic* of 1923. These were No. 2, *Romantic* (1930), which became his most well-known work; No. 3

(1938); No. 4, *Requiem* (1943), dedicated to the memory of his father; and No. 5, *Sinfonia sacra* (1954). The symphonic cantata *Lament for Beowulf* was a major work for chorus and orchestra, as were his Whitman settings, the *Songs from Drum Taps*, *Songs of Democracy* and *The Mystic Trumpeter*. His masterpiece, the opera *Merry Mount*, dated from 1933 and was dedicated to the memory of his mentor, George Eastman, who had committed suicide two years earlier. *Merry Mount* enjoyed a successful run at the Metropolitan Opera under the baton of Tullio Serafin, one of the few American operas so honored. After retirement from Eastman in 1964, Hanson continued to compose, producing his Symphony No. 6 for Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic in 1968. Hanson's final symphonic work, his acknowledged valedictory musical statement and a moving meditation on mortality, was the Symphony No. 7, *A Sea Symphony* (1977) on words of Walt Whitman.

A few works emerged from Hanson's pen during the remaining three and one-half years of his life, including two heard on this recording, the *a cappella* motet *Prayer of the Middle Ages* and the **Nymphs and Satyr Ballet**. The short ballet suite was written in 1979 on commission from the Chautauqua Institute of western New York, the artists' retreat famed nationwide for its summer music festival and lecture series, which served many years as the summer home for Hanson and his wife PEGGIE. The Chautauqua Ballet premiered the work in the summer of its composition; less than a year, on 24 February 1980, the Rochester premiere was given by the artists heard on this recording, with the composer in attendance. Hanson adapted the ballet from an earlier sketch for a solo clarinet Fantasy and scored it for two clarinets, one bassoon, two trumpets, two horns, harp and strings. The work epitomizes Hanson's lifelong fascination with nature and his distinctive style of pastoral musical tone painting, in this case evoking the forested hills and fjords of Scandinavia in all their imposing majesty.

The Prelude opens with an upward-rising fanfare, the inversion of which becomes a grand chorale that appears in various instrumentations in the Fantasy. This movement's bucolic tunefulness is tempered with a wistful sense of longing. Of particular note is the theme of the Scherzo, which contains one of Hanson's most ingratiating melodies, played first by the solo bassoon and strings in a playful canon and later picked up by the horns. The origin of this marvelous tune is a jingle that Hanson invented to sing his Irish terrier, Molly, while feeding her favorite dog biscuits! The Epilogue opens with the same fanfare that began the piece, leading to a quietly serene coda. The short synopsis provided by the composer at the Rochester premiere of the work is as follows: "Destiny moves the nymphs on a journey. As they travel they express their joy of life. Satyr is touched on the shoulder by Destiny and he joins the nymphs in their expression of happiness. At the end, Satyr is left alone, contemplating life and friendship."



David Fetler, conductor of the Rochester Chamber Orchestra

The **Concerto for Organ, Harp and Strings** in its final form is a revision and arrangement of the earlier Organ Concerto of 1926, which included thematic material from the even earlier symphonic poem *North and West* (1923). The original Concerto, for organ and large orchestra, was given its first performance by Harold Gleason, organist at the Eastman School, with the composer conducting, on 6 January 1927 in the Eastman Theater. The present arrangement was made by Hanson in 1941 in response to requests for the work to be provided with a reduced orchestration, making it more practical for concert use as well as giving it a clearer texture and more compact form.



David Craighead, organist

The work is cast in Hanson's favored one-movement fantasia-like structure divided into several sections. The opening *lento* starts softly and mysteriously with an arpeggiated figuration in the harp accompanied by sustained strings, all based on the interval of the fifth. When the organ enters, it is treated as part of the orchestral texture with sustained chords before announcing and building up the first two lyric themes, with its rhythmic interjections, the second being folk-like. The themes are first presented in the natural minor key, later becoming modal with emphasis on the Dorian, Phrygian and Lydian modes, all combined with wide modulations. The second main section, marked *allegro e marcato*, emphasizes a fast, rhythmic ostinato, first presented by the organ and then shared by the orchestra. This leads to a combining of the themes of the first section with the ostinato, culminating in a *bravura* cadenza for solo organ pedal. A tranquil recapitulation follows, followed by a return of the *allegro* material. The coda begins with a strong, march-like theme, which modulates and becomes intensified through slower rhythms. The quieter folk-like theme is heard again through a long diminuendo section, with the final measures of the concerto bursting out in a modal cadence and *fortissimo* chords in the Mixolydian mode.

The **Concerto da Camera**, for Piano and String Quartet, is an early work dating from 1917 while Hanson was on the faculty of the College of the Pacific in San Jose. It should not be confused with the still earlier Piano Quintet of 1916; nor has it received the exposure of the later String Quartet (1923), which has become somewhat better known. The Concerto is in one continuous, fantasy-like movement. It opens with a majestic, chordal statement by the strings in c minor, which is answered by the solo piano in rhythmic, martial octaves. Surging arpeggios, ascending scales and frequent cadenza-like passages for the piano contribute to the arch-Romantic atmosphere of the work. A

pleading motive characterizes the second theme, which evolves into a passionately forceful episode. Following more transitory material, Hanson introduces a third thematic group, typical of large expanded one-movement forms such as this. The piano appears in an improvisatory solo at this point. The development features a fugal passage demanding great virtuosity from both the strings and the keyboard. At its climax, the second theme reappears, announcing the recapitulation. A grand pause ushers in the calm, quiet coda and the *Concerto da Camera* ends in a mood of repose.

Hanson was never shy about being specific with his musical intentions. In the handwritten score, he adds verbal comments such as, "Be sure and make the Adagio slow enough," and "Change to Allegro sharp and definite" (Hanson's underlining). In this one movement work, the bold motto spins off music in opposite expressive directions. On the one hand is music of great vigor including a particularly energetic fugal section, and on the other hand is music of extreme tenderness. Between these poles, Hanson chooses to resolve the work quietly and introspectively, instructing the musicians to play with the "greatest simplicity and purity." The opening motto echoes one last time in pianissimo as the music little by little ebbs away.

At the top of the manuscript score to the *Concerto da Camera*, Hanson wrote this quotation from the Psalms: "Unto Thee lift I up mine eyes O Thou that dwellest in the heavens" with the instructions to print the quotation on all programs as it "serves as the motto of the composition."



With its wide range of emotion and unabashed virtuosity, this work is clearly the inspiration of a young man. That Hanson valued this *Concerto* is borne out by his later revision (1922) for string ensemble, which was premiered in Rome at the American Academy under the composer's direction. In addition, his later (1950) score, *Fantasy Variations on a Theme of Youth*, gave Hanson a chance to recycle the main theme of the *Concerto da Camera*, which the composer recalled with affection, describing it as being "as fresh today as it was when it was written well over thirty years ago."

The **String Quartet in One Movement** is a dramatic work that showcases Hanson's early compositional voice, which in this case includes a significant amount of dissonance – very much uncharacteristic of his later compositions. The scope of the music contains both searching, romantic melody and rugged rhythmic vigor, often emphasizing strong irregular and asymmetric meters to an extent that is not typical in later works. Many commentators suggest influences of Grieg, Sibelius, Elgar, and Vaughan Williams, but what stands out is the bracing, almost orchestral textures (especially his use of tremolo) that Hanson asks of the string quartet, contrasting with his desire to

write extremely expressive, plainspoken melodies. In 1936, one critic remarked on the “...relief of a lush melody, frank in its sentiment, even bordering on the sentimental, a tune to be carried away and to haunt you.” The Quartet plays out almost as a fantasy, growing from a simple, pianissimo, scalar motive that traces up and down presented first by the solo viola. As the sections unfold, the motivic material is inverted, rearranged, and treated contrapuntally to produce an intriguing range of emotion, drama, and orchestration.

The String Quartet was completed in 1923 under commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, during Hanson's time in Italy. Although comprising a single movement, it is a work divided into smaller sections. There are two dominant themes, related to each other, and in different tempi, marked Tempo I and Tempo II. Neo-Romantic in style, it is a highly lyrical and emotional work full of passionate romanticism and occasional acerbic dissonance. The individual movements play *attacca*, but the finale, which starts around the 14 minute mark, definitely shows the influence of Maurice Ravel. At other times the work projects a very British intensity, reminiscent of Benjamin Britten's first quartet, in particular.



During his early years of composition, Hanson wrote a number of short, occasional pieces for piano. The **Two Yuletide Pieces** date from 1920 and are among his first published works. These two bagatelles are contemporary with his *Scandinavian Suite* for piano solo and *California Forest Play*, written for open-air performance at the Redwood National Park. The naturalistic atmosphere and youthful spirit that carry through into Hanson's mature style appear in these two works. The second of the two pieces, the *Carillon* in G, has achieved some popularity as a band work under the title *March Carillon*, in an arrangement by Erik Leidzen, which was approved by the composer.

Throughout his career, Hanson composed shorter works for chorus on various Biblical or Christian texts. His upbringing and personal conviction as a deeply religious man contributed to his desire to write such works, many of which underwent several stages of revision, demonstrating his continuing interest in the genre. In these shorter works the influences of Palestrina and Bach are flavored with Hanson's Scandinavian heritage in the Lutheran Church and the harmonic language found in his orchestral writing. As texts, the Psalms, medieval poetry, and the words of Walt Whitman attracted

him in several instances, most notably in the large-scale symphonic choral masterpieces *The Lament for Beowulf*, *Cherubic Hymn*, and *Song of Democracy*.

A Prayer of the Middle Ages is scored for eight-part mixed chorus *a cappella*, the only such work in Hanson's catalog. This is surprising, considering the composer's love for the sound of massed human voices as seen in his several large-scale works combining chorus with orchestra. Nevertheless, Hanson's natural predilection for lush sonorities is evident in his use of dense chordal writing and symphonic blocks of sound, even while limiting his palette to the relatively austere unaccompanied chorus. One of Hanson's unforgettable, ineffably beautiful themes appears towards the end of this work at the words, "Thou, who madest heaven and earth...". It was written in 1976 as a commission for the 150th anniversary of Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, and is dedicated, like many of Hanson's works, to his wife Peggie. The text is taken from an anonymous eighth-century poem in a translation by James Francis Cooke.

Psalm 121, I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes, is scored for baritone solo, four-part chorus and organ, and is marked *andante semplice*. It was written in Chautauqua, New York, in October 1967, during one of the composer's annual retreats to that western New York artists' colony. As with the earlier Psalm 8 - as, indeed, with many of the composer's works - Hanson prepared several versions of the piece, including a later, fully orchestrated one. This recording features the original version, which must be counted among Hanson's smaller masterpieces, displaying as it does his talent for symphonic scope and drama, distinct melodic profile, and unabashed Romanticism tempered with spirituality, all compressed within a six minute time frame. Its form is that of an extended *scena* for baritone solo with brief interjections from the chorus. The first entrance of the choral "alleluia" is grippingly dramatic, emerging like a ray of sunlight through thinning storm clouds. After a reprise of the baritone solo, Psalm 121 ends with a chordal setting of "alleluia," the theme of which was taken from the earlier Psalm 150.

Psalm 150, Praise Ye the Lord, dates from spring, 1965, and exists in versions for men's chorus or mixed chorus, with piano, organ, or orchestral accompaniment. The version heard here, scored for mainly four-part chorus and organ, was written for the sesquicentennial celebration of the First Presbyterian Church in Rochester, where it received its first performance on 2 May 1965 under the direction of George Corwin. It is marked *allegro con brio* and opens with a trumpet fanfare on the organ. The choir enters with the first of several imitative phrases as dictated by the text, generating a mood of jubilation which continues throughout in Hanson's most public and optimistic style. The work builds without pause to its climax at the words, "Let everything that hath breath praise Him..." and concludes *pianissimo* with a subdued "alleluia," the theme of which would be borrowed two years later for the ending of Psalm 121.

The printing of Psalm 121 and Psalm 150 in a single edition by Hanson's long-time publisher Carl Fischer reflects the composer's view of the affinity of the two works.

Psalm 8, How Excellent Thy Name, is scored primarily for four-part chorus, with occasional *divisi* to eight parts, with organ. Its first version for women's voices was commissioned in 1953 by the Sigma Alpha Iota national music society for its program of American music. This recording features the revised version of 1956, prepared by the composer for the Eastman School's Cantata Singers under the conductor David Fetler. Psalm 8 features extensive passages of chant-like *recitative* for the full chorus or soprano section alone, interspersed with polyphonic treatments of "alleluia." In a fashion similar to the other two Psalm settings heard on this recording, Psalm 8 ends with a *pianissimo* setting of "alleluia."

Notes by John Gladney Proffitt
Member, Board of Directors, of the Bruckner Society of America.



HOWARD HANSON, AN AMERICAN ROMANTIC

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|-------|--|---------|
| [1] | Concerto for Organ, Harp, and Strings (1941) | [16:05] |
| | Ballet Suite, Nymphs and Satyr (1979) | |
| [2] | Prelude and Fantasy | [07:35] |
| [3] | Scherzo | [03:06] |
| [4] | Epilogue | [02:40] |
| [5] | Concerto da Camera for Piano and String Quartet (1917) | [14:59] |
| [6] | Carillon, from Two Yuletide Pieces for Piano Solo (1920) | [02:21] |
| [7] | String Quartet in One Movement (1923) | [17:16] |
| [8] | A Prayer of the Middle Ages (1976) | [04:01] |
| | Three Psalm Settings | |
| [9] | Psalm 121 I will lift up mine eyes (1967) | [05:49] |
| [10] | Psalm 150 Praise ye the Lord (1965) | [04:08] |
| [11*] | Psalm 8 How excellent thy Name (1956) | [05:00] |
| [12*] | Impromptu, from Two Yuletide Pieces | [03:05] |

[1]-[4] Rochester Chamber Orchestra, David Fetler, conductor
David Craighead, organ; Eileen Malone, harp
Recorded in Asbury United Methodist Church Rochester
Austin pipe organ

[5]-[6] Meliora Quartet Rochester
Ian Swenson, v; Calvin Wiersma, v;
Maria Lambros, vla; Elizabeth Anderson, vcl.
Brian Preston, piano
Recorded in Parmenter Chapel, Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, NY

[7] Lyric Art Quartet Houston
Kenneth Goldsmith, v; Albert Muenzer, v;
Lawrence Wheeler, vla; Terry King, vcl.
Recorded in the chapel of St Luke's United Methodist
Church Houston

[8]-[11] Roberts Wesleyan College Chorale, Robert Shewan, conductor
Theodore Sipes, baritone; Barbara Harbach, organ
Recorded in First Lutheran Church, Lyons, NY
Schlicker pipe organ

[12*] Brian Preston, piano

Tracks 11 and 12 are bonus selections for this Download, which exceed the length of a burned CD

All selections produced and recorded by John Gladney Proffitt