

OPERA NEWS

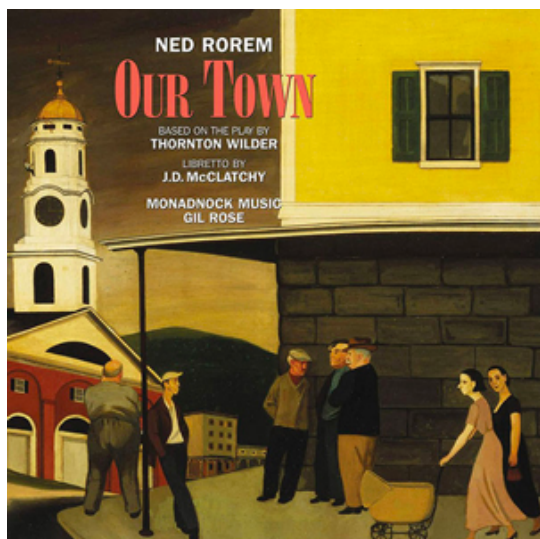
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ROREM: *Our Town*

CD Rood, River, Gooch, G. Arroyo; DiBattista, Buckley, Wilkinson, Kravitz, Wilson; Monadnock Music, Rose. English text. New World Records SOMMCD 80790-2 (2)



YOU PROBABLY HAVE some idea of what an opera based on Thornton Wilder's beloved play *Our Town* would sound like—lots of Coplandesque Americana. As it happens, the score to the 1940

movie version of *Our Town* was written by Copland! But in 1951, Thornton Wilder said no when Rudolf Bing, then general manager of the Met, asked if Copland could adapt and expand his film score into a full-length opera; Wilder didn't think the play would benefit from the addition of music. However, Tappan Wilder, the playwright's nephew and literary executor, decided almost half a century later to grant permission to his friend, poet and librettist J. D. McClatchy, to create an opera version, and McClatchy tapped Ned Rorem, the living master of American

art song, to compose the score. The work received its premiere in 2006 at Indiana University; this is its first recording.

Rorem's score for McClatchy's skillful, faithful adaptation definitely tips its hat to Copland, but Rorem has a more urbane, international quality. Born in 1923, he spent most of the 1950s in France (as chronicled in his book *The Paris Diary*), and his music is infused as much with Gallic flavors as with American ones: the influences of Poulenc and Satie are as evident as those of Barber and Copland (with whom Rorem studied), not to mention Prokofiev and Scriabin, plus some bracingly original passages that can only be described as pure Rorem. The opera has Romantic sweep, to be sure, but the orchestrations are predominantly transparent, and the harmonies slither from consonance to dissonance and back again, encapsulating the regret, fragility and even dread that underpin the nostalgia. Rorem also makes sophisticated use of that other musical staple of small-town America, the hymn. Not only do the opera's

hymns feature sly reharmonizations; they become building blocks for some elaborate musical layering, moving deftly from foreground to accompaniment when the opera's main characters take over the action with sung dialogue.

It can be challenging for trained operatic voices to sing in an American vernacular style without sounding stilted, but this cast does it superbly. Margot Rood, as Emily, is particularly good; the essence of the wholesome girl next door pulses at the core of her lovely soprano. Managing to combine girlish lightness with cushiony fullness, she shows appealing self-certitude on lines such as "Mama, I made a speech in class today, and I was very good." In Emily's "Goodbye" aria at the end (a great standalone piece), Rood fills Rorem's wide intervallic leaps and demanding tessitura (up to a high C) with marvelously sustained vocal consistency and a sincerity that avoids the maudlin.

Tenor Brendan Buckley, a good partner for Rood, is ardent and appealing as George, Emily's true love, particularly when he concludes one scene by singing earnestly, "So I guess this is an important talk we've been having." As Dr. Gibbs, George's father, Donald Wilkinson has a powerful, enveloping bass-baritone and is gratifyingly strong in his low range. Krista River, as Mrs. Gibbs, matches him beautifully with her shimmering mezzo; their duet—Rorem at his best—is soaring and lyrical, but the accompaniment contains edgy, pungent dissonances, as if haunted by its own impermanence.

As Mrs. Webb, Angela Gooch has the same attractive clarity as Rood, making her eminently credible as Emily's mother, and her heart-tugging aria projects very nicely over the chorus at the wedding. David Kravitz's Mr. Webb is affable and muscular of tone—a perfect New England salt-of-the-earth type with great natural diction. Matthew DiBattista is an engaging, welcoming presence as the Stage Manager. Glorivy Arroyo is a standout with her broad comic characterization of Mrs. Soames; she dials it way down to pronounced effect in the Act III scene among the dead. (These scenes deliver a powerful emotional punch, much as they do in the play.) The full-of-character tenor Stanley Wilson is amusingly put-upon as Simon, the long-suffering and slightly inebriated choir director. ("Music isn't good when it's loud. Leave loudness to the Methodists.") The strings of Monadnock Music are not quite seamless, but Rorem's colorful orchestrations are rendered brightly and vividly, and ensemble playing is very good under the precise, authoritative conducting of Gil Rose. —*Joshua Rosenblum*