

Christopher Rouse: Concertos

Eric Berlin, trumpet · Albany Symphony Orchestra · David Alan Miller · Albany Records TROY1979

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ROUSE: *Heimdall's Trumpet; Oboe Concerto; Bassoon Concerto*

Eric Berlin, tpt; Katherine Needleman, ob; Peter Kolkay, bn; Albany Symphony/ David Alan Miller

Albany 1979—73 minutes

Several years after he died, first recordings of the music of Christopher Rouse (1949-2019) continue to appear. This one contains accounts of 3 concertos for wind instruments by David Alan Miller and the Albany Symphony.

Each of these concertos has fast movements of high energy, playful virtuosity, and breathless twists and turns. These are countered by introverted slow movements of tonal harmonies and a dash of sentimentality. Stephen Estep has written how these spates of “ultra-tonality” tend toward the obvious and aren’t always convincing, as with the Flute Concerto (BIS 1586, M/A 2010). And I think they are a bit of a missed opportunity for greater depth and meaning. Still, these are lighter works; situated as they are between outer movements that are like kaleidoscopic roller-coaster rides, I can forgive sentimental moments of reprieve.

The Oboe (2004) and Bassoon (2017) concertos both tend toward these formulas. Rouse categorized them as genial (or “recreational”) concertos, as opposed to his somber or serious ones. The middle movements are of the lyrical, populist type described above, but it’s the fast movements that dazzle, particularly in the imaginative and daring orchestration. Though many composers who write concertos for these instruments reduce the orchestral forces so as to not cover the soloist, Rouse does no such thing—there are many exciting, boisterous moments when the orchestra is let off the chain, yet the soloist is not drowned out or upstaged. Both concertos are playful in character overall; the bassoon concerto is humorous and impish, and the oboe concerto approaches an almost Mendelssohnian, pixie-like character. Oboist Katherine Needleman and bassoonist Peter Kolkay are game for Rouse’s tricks and give commanding, peerless performances.

The best of these 3 is the trumpet concerto, *Heimdall's Trumpet* (2012). Though Rouse would have probably characterized it as as one of his serious concertos, it has some of his most playful moments, including a short scherzo with sparkling writing for the celeste—I don’t believe I’ve heard such imaginative writing for the instrument this side of *The Planets*. The slow movement is not quite so sentimental as in the other two concertos; it has a tense tonal ambivalence as strings oscillate between major and minor harmonies. Rouse always excelled with program music, and the finale is no exception, depicting the apocalyptic Ragnarok of Norse mythology heralded by the call of Heimdall’s trumpet. Elements of the earlier scherzo return, but this time with a sinister, harlequinesque tone—nearly a *danse macabre* for the end of the world. The final moments building up to the release of Ragnarok bowled me over. Trumpeter Eric Berlin gives a great performance; the orchestra is also excellent, save for one moment in the finale where the ensemble very briefly but noticeably comes unglued. These are details, though—the concerto is fiendishly difficult for soloist and orchestra, and as a whole the performances are convincing and breathtaking. In any case, these are excellent first recordings of notable Rouse works.

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