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News

Recording release date: August 13, 2021

Leo Sowerby's 1920s Symphonic Jazz Works Receive World-Premiere Recordings August 13 on Cedille Records

**Commissioned by celebrity bandleader Paul Whiteman
and first heard alongside Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue,'
Sowerby's 'Synconata' and 'Symphony for Jazz Orchestra'
re-emerge on new album with Chicago's Andrew Baker
and the Andy Baker Orchestra**

**Avalon String Quartet and guest artists
play Sowerby chamber rarities
from the same era**

Nearly a century after their first performances, American composer Leo Sowerby's symphonic jazz works, written for celebrity bandleader Paul Whiteman and his orchestra during the Roaring Twenties, receive their world-premiere recordings on a Cedille Records album available August 13, 2021.

Leo Sowerby: The Paul Whiteman Commissions & Other Early Works features Sowerby's *Synconata* and *Symphony for Jazz Orchestra* ("Monotony") with British-born, Chicago-based trombonist, composer, and conductor Andrew Baker leading the Andy Baker Orchestra, an ensemble of professional musical theater and classical instrumentalists recruited specifically for the project (Cedille Records CDR 90000 205).

The Whiteman commissions bookend three Sowerby chamber works from the same period: his *Serenade for String Quartet*, recorded only once before and no longer in circulation, and the world-premiere recordings of his *String Quartet in D minor* and *Tramping Tune for Piano and Strings*, all performed by the Avalon String Quartet, quartet-in-residence at Northern Illinois University's School of Music, joined in the last work by pianist Winston Choi, who heads the piano program at Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra principal double-bassist Alexander Hanna.

Among the challenges Baker and the Avalon Quartet confronted in preparing their respective Sowerby works for the recording were decoding and reconstructing the composer's unpublished scores and individual parts, which exist only in manuscripts and sketches.

Baker, clinical assistant professor of music at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Avalon violist Anthony Devroye discuss the extensive research and educated guesswork this entailed — and much

-more-

more — in a wide-ranging podcast interview with Cedille Records founder and president James Ginsburg, streaming at <https://bit.ly/3hUoFoZ>.

‘Revolutionary Concerts’

Sowerby (1895–1968) was among the leading young American classical composers Whiteman commissioned to create fresh repertoire incorporating jazz and other native idioms for the bandleader’s landmark series of “Revolutionary Concerts” — a roster that also included George Gershwin, Ferde Grofé, and Zez Confrey.

Synconata premiered at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House on Dec. 28, 1924, a month after Whiteman premiered Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* at New York’s Aeolian Hall. *Synconata* “was warmly received by audience and critics, and the piece was taken on a 100-city transcontinental tour,” Francis Crociata, Leo Sowerby Foundation president, writes in the album’s liner notes. The *New York Sun*’s critic admired “Sowerby’s impressive rushes of chords . . . often amusingly interrupted by ironic chuckles and snickers from the muted clarinets and saxophones.”

In the wake of *Synconata*’s success, Whiteman commissioned a larger work for the next season’s tour. Sowerby’s four-movement Symphony for Jazz Orchestra (“Monotony”), originally staged with vaudeville-style visual elements and a 6-foot 5-inch-tall metronome behind the conductor, received its first performance on Oct. 11, 1925, in Chicago’s Auditorium Theater. The *Chicago Herald Examiner*’s critic praised its “brilliant contrapuntal technique, with a gorgeous sense of color. . . . It is clever, racy, daring, funny without being grotesque.”

The Whiteman commissions were to have been paired on the album with Sowerby works for orchestra or concert band and released in 2020 for the 125th anniversary of the composer’s birth. The imposition of COVID-19 public health restrictions early that year, however, precluded further recording sessions with large-scale ensembles.

Enter the Avalon String Quartet

To complete the album with works that complement the Whiteman commissions, Cedille’s Ginsburg and the Sowerby Foundation’s Crociata settled on a trio of Sowerby chamber works that likewise were written when the composer was in his 20s and had gone virtually unrecorded.

For musicians up to the task, Ginsburg turned to the critically acclaimed Avalon String Quartet, a Chicago ensemble already on the label’s roster and able to record during the pandemic, with precautions, at their home base of Northern Illinois University, where they had succeeded their mentors, the Vermeer Quartet, as quartet-in-residence.

Sowerby’s Serenade for String Quartet (1917), containing folk-music elements, was among a handful of early works that cemented his reputation “as the most promising of the new generation of American composers,” Crociata writes in the liner notes.

While working on his String Quartet in D minor (1923), Sowerby wrote to a friend, “The first movement of this thing will surely bring a howl of protest from some quarters, for it is a glorified fox-trot,

with plenty of blues thrown in for good measure.” Reviewing the work’s local premiere, the *Boston Transcript*’s critic hailed its “veritable and audible American spirit. . . . The workmanship is modern, yet falls into none of the formulas of ‘modernism.’”

Tramping Tune for Piano and Strings (1916–1917) was inspired by Australian composer-pianist Percy Grainger, who became a teacher, mentor, and colleague of the young Sowerby during Grainger’s Chicago sojourn. The work began as a song, “Tramping,” followed by *Tramping Tune* for solo piano and other versions. Sowerby arranged *Tramping Tune* for piano and strings in 1917. However, no actual piano-and-strings score exists, according to Crociata. When Sowerby, as pianist, performed the piece with strings from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1917, he apparently played his solo piano version alongside the separately scored string ensemble — the approach taken on this recording.

Recording Team

Leo Sowerby: The Paul Whiteman Commissions & Other Early Works was recorded by the Grammy Award-winning team of producer James Ginsburg and engineer Bill Maylone. The Whiteman commissions were recorded January 9 and 10, 2020, at Kennedy-King College, Chicago, Illinois. The chamber works were recorded January 23 and 24, 2021, in Boutell Memorial Concert Hall at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois.

Sowerby’s Music on Cedille Records

Leo Sowerby: The Paul Whiteman Commissions & Other Early Works is the capstone of Cedille’s 2021 “Summer of Sowerby,” a series of releases that also comprises *Organ Music by Frank Ferko & Leo Sowerby*, with organist David Schrader, and the Lincoln Trio’s *Trios from the City of Big Shoulders*, featuring piano trios by Sowerby and Ernst Bacon.

To date, Cedille Records has released eight albums devoted in whole or in part to Sowerby’s music, the others being *Prairie: Tone Poems by Leo Sowerby*, with Paul Freeman conducting the Czech National Symphony Orchestra; *Leo Sowerby: Symphony No. 2 & Other Works*, with Freeman conducting the Chicago Sinfonietta and Czech National Symphony; *American Works for Organ and Orchestra*, with organist Schrader and the Grant Park Orchestra, conducted by Carlos Kalmar; *The Pulitzer Project*, with the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus, conductor Kalmar, and chorus director Christopher Bell; and *Leo Sowerby: Selected Works for Solo & Duo Piano*, with pianists Gail Quillman, a former Sowerby student, and Julia Tsien.

With 550 works to his credit, about equally divided between traditional concert repertory and choral and organ works, Sowerby is the most prolific and highly honored composer associated with Chicago, where he received his conservatory training and spent all but the last few years of his career. Sowerby was de-facto composer-in-residence for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under conductor Frederick Stock. He was the first recipient of the Rome Prize (1921) and won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 1946 for his oratorio, *The Canticle of the Sun* (heard on Cedille’s *The Pulitzer Project*).

Cedille Records

Launched in November 1989 by James Ginsburg, Grammy Award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing and promoting the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area. The label's catalog of more than 200 front-line albums brims with attractive, off-the-beaten-path repertoire from the Baroque era to the present day. Works from the classical canon are heard in imaginative pairings.

Cedille has recorded more than 180 Chicago artists and ensembles, with more than 80 making their professional recording debuts on the label. Its catalog includes the world premieres of more than 300 classical compositions.

The audiophile-oriented label releases every new album in multiple formats — physical CD, 96 kHz, 24-bit, studio-quality FLAC download, and 320 Kbps MP3 download — and on major streaming services.

An independent nonprofit enterprise, Cedille Records is the label of Cedille Chicago, NFP. Sales of physical CDs and digital downloads and streams cover only a small percentage of the label's costs. Tax-deductible donations from individual music-lovers and grants from charitable organizations account for most of its revenue.

Cedille's headquarters are at 1205 W. Balmoral Ave., Chicago, IL 60640; call 773-989-2515; email: info@cedillerecords.org. Website: cedillerecords.org.

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*Leo Sowerby: The Paul Whiteman Commissions
& Other Early Works*

Andy Baker Orchestra, Andrew Baker, cond.
Avalon String Quartet
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 205)

Synconata, H176a (11:34)*
Serenade for String Quartet H137 (9:36)
String Quartet in D minor H172 (29:04)*
Tramping Tune for Piano and Strings H122c (3:18)*
with Winston Choi, piano,
and Alexander Hanna, double bass
Symphony for Jazz Orchestra ("Monotony") H178 (25:04)*

*World premiere recording