

Leo Sowerby

SELECTED
WORKS



SOLO AND
DUO PIANO

GAIL QUILLMAN

JULIA TSIEN



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LEO SOWERBY (1895–1968)

Three Summer Beach Sketches, H109 (8:52)

- 1 I. Light — in big style (1:49)
- 2 II. Water — introspectively (5:26)
- 3 III. Sand — solemnly (1:32)

Suite for Piano — Four Hands H371 (performed on two pianos) (17:25)

- 4 I. Sadly and very quietly (4:11)
- 5 II. With verve (fugue) (2:38)
- 6 III. Slowly; with moderate movement (6:46)
- 7 IV. Fast and glittering (3:40)
- 8 Passacaglia, Interlude and Fugue H207a (16:37)
- 9 Prelude (for two pianos) H212 (6:26)
- 10 Fisherman's Tune H161b (2:46)
- 11 Synconata H176b (10:04)

TT: (62:48)

ALL WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

*Tracks 1–3 and 8 performed by Gail Quillman
Tracks 4–7 and 9–11 performed on two pianos
by Gail Quillman and Julia Tsien*

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Leo Sowerby Foundation

Notes

by Francis Crociata

Allow me to begin with one amazing, albeit stark fact. Not a single work in this collection was published in Sowerby's lifetime, and only two, *Fisherman's Tune* in its solo version and *Three Summer Beach Sketches* in a 1995 Sowerby Foundation Edition, are in print today.

MUSICALE!
By
Master Leo Sowerby
Of Grand Rapids,
The Wonderful Boy Pianist
Only Ten Years Old.
ASSISTED BY WELL-KNOWN LOCAL
TALENT.
Mon. Eve., Jan. 21
at Methodist Church
8:15 p. m.
CHILDREN 10c ADULTS 15c
Under the auspices of the Woman's
Literary Club.

The last wave of European composer-pianists — Paderewski, Hofmann, Rachmaninoff, Grainger, Prokofiev, and Bartók — was just beginning to touch American shores when a home-grown, red-headed prodigy of our own was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on the first of May, 1895. So it's not so surprising that Dr. Leo Sowerby, who achieved fame as a symphonist, composer-organist, and church musician, initially set out as "Master Leo Sowerby — the Wonderful Boy Pianist — Only 10 Years Old!" hoping to model himself after musicians who themselves aspired to be the successors of Liszt, Rubinstein, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven.

The aspiring wunderkind composer-pianist made a good start by seeming to toss off knuckle and thumbnail-busters like Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy* and Beethoven's *Waldstein Sonata*. A year later, at age 11, he ventured to include the first known work of his own, now lost, entitled *The Dawn of Day*. *The Dawn of Day* was the first piece of one of the most imposing bodies of music ever produced from the creative imagination of an American — 550 works in every form but opera — a catalogue that prompted even a lifelong Sowerby-devotee, the *Washington Post* critic Paul Hume, to exclaim in exasperation “Good Lord, there are five lifetimes of music here!” Along the way, Sowerby wrote an even larger body of organ works, nine symphonies (five orchestral, a massive Psalm Symphony, two solo organ symphonies, and a jazz symphony based on the Sinclair Lewis novel *Babbitt*), seven concerted (solo and orchestra) works for organ and three for piano, a dozen tone-poems and overtures, countless instrumental sonatas, secular and sacred songs, and over two-hundred anthems and cantatas. He was, from about 1915 (the time of *Three Summer Beach Sketches*, the first work on this program), Chicago Symphony Music Director Frederick Stock's “fair-haired

boy,” in effect the orchestra's composer-in-residence. He received the first American Prix de Rome, the fourth Pulitzer Prize for music, was profiled in *Time* magazine and, for the last six years of his life, was founding director of the College of Church Musicians at Washington National Cathedral.

Leo Sowerby's career as a pianist lasted until 1927, his 32nd year of life and the year he began his 35-year tenure as organist-choirmaster of Chicago's St. James Episcopal Church (later Cathedral). That year, he played his final concerto performances in Chicago — his own First Piano Concerto and, with Ernst von Dohnanyi and Felix Borovsky, J.S. Bach's Triple Concerto. That summer, he played his final piano recital at his beloved summer retreat at Palisades Park, Michigan. (The printed program concluded with the signature work of another Chicago composer-pianist, Zé Confrey's *Kitten on the Keys*.)

Elsewhere, I have written that Sowerby's public life was divided into two periods, his first act one of high celebrity with performers and ensembles ready to play whatever he wrote. His second act, which, ironically, began about the time he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1946, saw him remain among

the most frequently performed American composers of organ and choral works, while the concert world at large mostly ignored him. Even his “home team,” the Chicago Symphony, virtually abandoned him after Stock’s death. If it weren’t for Sowerby’s ever-faithful friend and champion, English concert organist E. Power Biggs, Sowerby wouldn’t have been played at all in the 1950s and 60s in the orchestral halls of Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Philadelphia.

That was how the world looked at Sowerby, but not how Sowerby looked at the world. He simply kept writing, irrespective of the fame it did or did not bring him. And if big names no longer sought him out (violinist William Primrose seems to have been the last to do so, although the manuscript of his Second Violin Sonata turned up in Jascha Heifetz’s estate), he still wrote for his colleagues at Chicago’s American Conservatory, players in the Chicago Symphony, and former students such as pianist Gail Quillman, who studied harmony and counterpoint with Sowerby in the mid-1950s and has remained devoted to her teacher’s music and his memory ever since.

Gail and her former student Julia Tsien have recorded a generous selection of his 64 piano works, including all of Sowerby’s four-hand pieces except for a four-hand arrangement of an early tone poem, *The Sorrow of Mydith*, and the Ballade for Two Pianos and Orchestra (“King Estmere”), once the most often-played Sowerby orchestral work. This was thanks to a now-forgotten duo-piano team, Guy Maier and Lee Pattison. *King Estmere* was their signature piece. They toured it with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra and played it with every major North American orchestra extant in the 1920s and 30s. Maier and Pattison split up in 1930 and again in 1933, so, other than a single 1936 performance at Howard Hanson’s American Music Festival, the *Ballade*, as audience-friendly and virtuosic a piece as Leo ever wrote, wound up on a closet shelf until Quillman and Tsien revived it during the Sowerby centennial year of 1995.

Because all of this music has been unperformed for anywhere from 50 to 100 years and spans virtually Sowerby’s entire maturity — 1915 to 1959 — hearing it all at once leaves several conflicting impressions.



Summer 1914 in rural Michigan

The first is that the earliest work, **Three Summer Beach Sketches** is the most adventurous harmonically. In 1915, the 20-year-old Sowerby began a short period as an occasional student of the Australian composer-pianist Percy Grainger. Although ostensibly piano lessons, according to Sowerby these were really just repertory bull sessions with Grainger and Sowerby playing for each other their own music, plus other composers' works they most admired.

Sowerby offered works by Bach, Franck, Mendelssohn, Debussy, and Ravel. From Grainger, Sowerby heard and came away with a lifelong passion for the music of Grainger's friend Frederick Delius.

The first bit of evidence of those Grainger "lessons" is discernible before you hear a note of the *Beach Sketches*. Dropping traditional Italian tempo and dynamic indications, Sowerby, for the remainder

of his life, adopted Grainger's practice of employing highly descriptive performance directions in English such as "Merrily-with snap," "Boldly," "With intensity of expression," "To be played with verve," etc. For *Sketches*, the pianist is presented with "in big style," "introspectively," and "solemnly" — with no metronome markings and, in the third movement, no bar lines. (After all, 1915 was just two years past the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*!) The outer movements are big, virtuosic etudes, with lots of rhythmic variety and surprising, unexpected, and sometimes quirky modulations plus, in the words of Sowerby student Ronald Stalford, "chords you'd never encounter in a score not having the name Sowerby at the top of the page." The inner movement is especially surprising as one of the earliest serious compositions to use jazz and blues harmonies.

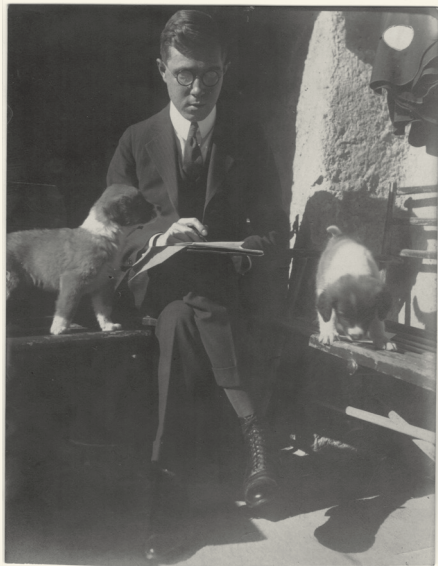
Sowerby composed his 1959 **Suite for Piano** — **Four Hands**, and *Beach Sketches* at his summer cottage retreat — a cabin, really — in Palisades Park, Michigan. As with the *Sketches* and most of Leo's music in general, he included no metronome markings; in this case, he even left the movement order up to the performers. Each of three performances at which Sowerby's attendance has been

documented used a different order. Quillman and Tsien have taken this principle of experimentation two steps further by playing the work in yet a different order — and on two pianos. To my ears, the *Suite* is more in keeping with Sowerby's style in the 1940s than the late 1950s — and in the two introspective movements, even earlier than that. I would like to offer three clues as to the influences that touched Sowerby in the composition of the *Suite*; about one of which I am certain, the other two are educated guesses. Two are kinships with composers Sowerby liked and had assisted along the way: Samuel Barber, for whose Prix de Rome Sowerby had advocated (the *Fugue* is unmistakably reminiscent of Barber's Piano Sonata, which Leo used regularly in teaching counterpoint) and his own former student Ned Rorem — echoes of his early *Toccata for Piano* can be discerned in the rollicking movement marked "Fast and glittering." Sowerby's former student William Ferris attests to another inspiration in that movement. In the late 1950s, with his friend "Jimmy" Biggs and the San Francisco Symphony, Sowerby conducted the west coast premiere of Poulenc's *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani* along with one of the three concertos he'd written for

Biggs. Leo loved San Francisco and, being a lifelong rail-enthusiast, was enthralled by the city's famous cable cars. Ferris confirms that the "Fast and glittering" movement was designed to evoke an impression of the rapidly accelerating and decelerating movement of the cars up and down the steep avenues.

Although Sowerby stopped playing piano in concert in 1927, he by no means stopped writing for the piano. The piano soloist who was his most passionate advocate in the late 1920s and early 30s was an Iowan, a student of Josef Lhevinne who Leo met at the American Conservatory: Frank Mannheimer. By the late 1920s, Mannheimer had moved to London, first to study with and then to assist the legendary pedagogue Tobias Matthay. Mannheimer scored a major success by introducing, first in Europe and then New York, Sowerby's *Florida Suite*, the first of several Sowerby works to appear in handsome — and prestigious — Oxford University Press editions. Sowerby and Mannheimer followed their success with the impressionistic *Florida Suite* — with its echoes of a cypress swamp, pines at dusk, etc. — with the second manifestation of Sowerby's turning in the direction of formal contrapuntal structures. He had just completed what would come to be regarded

(by friend and foe alike) as his masterpiece, the 1930 Symphony in G for solo Organ, which concludes with an immense, ingenious, and triumphant passacaglia. He followed in 1931 with **Passacaglia, Interlude and Fugue** for solo piano, intending it for Mannheimer, who, unaccountably, never played it. Sowerby, equally unaccountably, never showed it to another pianist. Sowerby wrote another Passacaglia for Mannheimer in 1939, this one in a more expansive, virtuosic spirit, with some astonishing and very funny pratfalls up and down the keyboard and a coda to wake the dead that Mannheimer did perform. The present Passacaglia, however, is of a different sort than the later one that organists have ever since ridden to cheers and standing ovations. Here Sowerby weaves, in three connected movements, a dreamily reflective French impressionist take on classic forms, ending with what may well be the quietest, most sensual fugue coda ever written by an American. The piece has also enjoyed a second life. Instead of trying to find a pianist willing to end a major modern composition quietly, two years later, Sowerby orchestrated Passacaglia, Interlude and Fugue to be the 12th of 17 of his works to be played by the Chicago Symphony during his



Summer 1923 in Turin at the home of the Pedrotti

lifetime. Stock revived the piece in two future seasons and, ending Sowerby's absence from CSO programs since 1946, Fritz Reiner, early in his Chicago tenure in December 1955, chose it to reintroduce Sowerby to Orchestra Hall audiences, writing to his old friend (whose *From the Northland Suite* he'd

premiered in Cincinnati and New York), "In your case, I don't have to wait to know who's who and what's what in Chicago." (Cedille Records CDR 90000 039 includes, on an album built around Sowerby's *Symphony No 2*, the world-premiere recording of the orchestral version of *Passacaglia*, *Interlude* and *Fugue*.)

Prelude (for two pianos), composed in October 1932, almost exactly a year following *Passacaglia*, *Interlude* and *Fugue*, continues in an introspective vein, although evincing more English austerity than French sensuality, more Delius than Debussy (calling to mind musicologist Paul Henry Lang's description of Sowerby: "Like Delius through stained-glass.") While there is no paper trail as to its provenance (i.e., whether it was requested or commissioned) Maier and Pattison, after abandoning their partnership in 1930, decided to try again in 1932 and may have included the *Prelude* in their comeback tour. They also included in their repertory the final two works on this album, **Fisherman's Tune**, an elaboration of a solo piano work Sowerby had played himself, as did Percy Grainger, for whom the work was an homage. The two-piano version was introduced by Silvio Scionti, a former pupil of Liszt's student Sgambati,

and his student Stell Anderson. Scionti and Anderson gave what is the first documented performance of the Prelude in Jordan Hall, Boston, in 1935.

In 1924, three years before Sowerby announced he was abandoning his waning career as a piano soloist for that of an organist and church musician, upon his return from his three-year Rome Prize fellowship, he received an intriguing invitation from an unexpected admirer, Paul Whiteman. Whiteman's experiment in symphonic jazz had resulted in several *succès d'estime* and one triumph, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. He invited Sowerby to tour the Midwest with his orchestra, along with Gershwin, Confrey, and Ferde Grofe. He wanted his composers to interact with the musicians of his renowned jazz orchestra, each of whom was proficient on a variety of instruments. It must have been quite a tour, with Gershwin, in defiance of the prevailing 18th Amendment, converting Sowerby from Scotch to Martinis. Confrey wasn't particular and drank whatever came to hand. Grofe couldn't party, as he was put to the endless task of copying band parts.

The Sowerby-Whiteman collaboration produced two works, the aforesaid

jazz symphony (unfortunately entitled "Monotony-Symphony for Jazz Orchestra and 6 ½ foot metronome) which, to Sowerby's chagrin, Whiteman proclaimed in the press contained more and greater genius than all the works of Stravinsky. The first work was the overture-length sonata movement Leo titled *Synconata*. The work functioned well as a curtain-raiser and it's second theme conveys a rather eerie presage of the tune of Cy Coleman's 1966 song, "If They Could See Me Now" from Broadway show *Sweet Charity*. Incidentally, both of Leo's jazz works contain two-piano parts of some difficulty. In Whiteman's first performance of *Synconata*, the two pianos were played by Sowerby and Confrey. Fresh on the success of the *Ballade for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, Maier and Pattison asked Sowerby for a recital work. We don't know who thought of arranging *Synconata*, but it was a natural.

Francis Crociata has been president of the Leo Sowerby Foundation since 1993.

Note: The numbers starting with the letter H after the title of each piece refer to the catalog of Sowerby's music assembled by the late Dr. Ronald Huntington (1931-1993).

Gail Quillman performed and taught in the Chicago area for her entire career. She has performed more of the solo piano and chamber music literature of her teacher, Leo Sowerby, than any musician in history. In 1989, she founded the Leo Sowerby Foundation in anticipation of the 95th Anniversary of Sowerby's birth. She retired from teaching and directing the Grace Welsh Piano Competition in 2015, retreating to a Buddhist monastic community in Thailand. Her former student, Julia Tsien, teaches and performs in the Chicago area. In recent years, Ms. Tsien has performed widely for Chicago-area Christian communities.

Producer Francis Crociata

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