
WRITING SAMPLE

Chris von Rosenvinge, publication designer for the University of Oklahoma College of Fine Arts, was present in London for the LSO recording sessions. This article was written for Sooner, alumni magazine of the University of Oklahoma.

Triumph in London

The London Symphony Orchestra records three works by OU composer Kenneth Fuchs

by Chris von Rosenvinge

St Luke's, on Old Street in central London, looks like a country church: an elegant stone edifice from the early 1700s surrounded by stately sycamores and ancient headstones. Not long ago, trees were growing through the roof. Now known as LSO St Luke's, it was acquired by the London Symphony Orchestra and transformed into a state-of-the-art performance and recording center with an ultramodern interior.

There, in September 2003, the LSO recorded three orchestral works by Kenneth Fuchs, director of the University of Oklahoma School of Music.

The recording represents the culmination of 18 years of friendship that began when Fuchs, conductor JoAnn Falletta and soloist Thomas Stacy were colleagues at The Juilliard School in New York City. Fuchs and Falletta were classmates, and Stacy, English hornist of the New York Philharmonic, was a member of the faculty. Stacy was also a friend of Vincent Persichetti, Fuchs's composition teacher, who composed an English horn concerto for Stacy in 1977.

In February 2003, Fuchs had just completed two orchestral works, including his own concerto for Stacy, and was eager to get them into the musical mainstream. "Composers today," Fuchs says, "must be resourceful about getting recognition for their music, and recording is one way to do it." He suggested to Falletta that they record the works, even without previous public performances.

Falletta was enthusiastic, and, as it turned out, already had some recording dates booked with the

LSO. Her sessions, moreover, would be the first in the new hall. She put Fuchs in touch with producer Michael Fine, who immediately put together the project details.

One challenge remained: Could Fuchs raise sufficient funds? The bill for a project of this magnitude—including orchestra fee, expenses of various participants, artist fees for the conductor and soloist, and production costs—could add up to \$60,000 or more. Time was of the essence: with Falletta and Fine already in London, expenses could be shared, but the recording dates were scheduled for September, only six months away. Fortunately, OU President David L. Boren recognized the project's potential for promoting institutional excellence. His support, generous contributions from members of the President's Associates, and a grant from the OU Research Council—along with contributions from Fuchs and a private foundation—made the project possible.

This project provided a rare opportunity to go behind the scenes of a professional recording session and to see a world-class orchestra in action. The LSO is perhaps the most widely recorded symphony orchestra in the world and is noted for recording an extraordinary number of soundtracks, including those for all the *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Superman* films. American composer Aaron Copland recorded most of his scores with the LSO.

Fuchs spent several months preparing the scores and instrumental parts. Since there would be little time for questions during the recording sessions, it was essential that the music be carefully prepared and proofread in advance.

The schedule called for two three-hour recording sessions on Saturday, September 6, and one three-hour session that Sunday. At the center of the operation was producer Fine, a Grammy Award-winning veteran of some 1,000 recordings and a former vice president of the record company Deutsche Grammophon. Recording engineer Jonathan Allen, whose recent recording credits include the scores for *The Hours* and *The Lord of the Rings*, would man the mixing desk. Fine's wife, Tammy, and another recording assistant would keep accurate logs of the myriad takes and supervise the digital tape recorders.

In a departure from standard orchestral procedure,

but usual for the LSO, there was no prior rehearsal. Fine and his team simply recorded from the moment the orchestra started to play. The LSO is legendary for its unsurpassed ability to read at sight the most complicated musical passages, not only without fault, but with extraordinary artistry.

While most recording studios feature a control room with a large window facing the recording hall, the LSO St Luke's control room lies below the main hall, and recording sessions are monitored by closed-circuit television. Listening through speakers and headphones in the control room makes it possible to hear delicate orchestral details that might be obscured in the hall and gives direct access to the sound being recorded.

On Saturday morning, the musicians started to convene about 10:15 to look through the parts that had been placed on their stands. Fragments of music began filling the resonant space. Then the concertmaster stood and motioned for the orchestra to tune. Suddenly the collective sound of some 90 musicians tuning their instruments flooded the hall. Falletta stepped to the podium at 10:30 on the dot. The room fell silent, and Falletta introduced Fuchs to the orchestra. He briefly expressed his thanks and longtime admiration for their artistry, then raced out the door and down the stairs to the control room below.

An American Place

The orchestra first recorded *An American Place*, a large-scale, 19-minute work for full orchestra in one movement composed in Norman and completed in August 2002. According to Fuchs, the score emerges from the rich palette of musical sounds developed in America during the last 100 years, including popular and classical elements, and reflects the influence of the American symphonists he admires: Copland, Persichetti, Peter Mennin and William Schuman, among others. The piece represents Fuchs's mature orchestral compositional style on a grand scale.

Communicating by intercom, Fine collaborated closely with Falletta, whose role was crucial and required prodigious stamina. Not only did she have to mold a convincing performance from an orchestra that never had seen or heard the music, but she also had to maintain consistent tempi over hundreds of takes to ensure that the final edited version would be seamless.

Falletta, who conducts orchestras around the world, currently holds the position of music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. *The New York Times* has called her "one of the finest conductors of her generation." A champion of contemporary music, she has performed nearly 300 works by American composers, including more than 60 world premieres.

Fine allowed the orchestra some time to become accustomed to an unfamiliar composer's style. He made several takes of the first 30 or so bars of *An American Place*.

"It was great," Fuchs says, "just to revel in the sonic richness coming at me through the speakers as the orchestra worked through the beginning of the score."

Fine announced to the orchestra over the intercom, "Ken can't believe his ears! We may have to restrain him!"

There were immediate and specific questions about certain pitches and dynamics in the music, and Fuchs admits it took a while to hear the music comfortably in such a high-pressure situation. The orchestra soon was recording large sections of music with only two or three takes.

"The LSO is a self-correcting orchestra," Fine said. "Nobody knows better than they if they have made a mistake. Instead of giving instructions, I often just chat with the conductor and can hear the players perfecting difficult passages in the background."

An American Place is a large, complicated score, and when the orchestra's required break came two-thirds of the way through the morning session, they were only halfway through the piece, with the difficult *finale scherzando* still ahead. Fuchs was not alone in wondering if they would finish in time.

There were some jovial moments. Coming to a tricky cadenza for the entire violin section, the concertmaster piped up, "The violins would like to know if this can be played as a solo!" (The orchestra laughed, and the answer was no!) Toward the end of the first session, Fuchs sang to the orchestra over the intercom, demonstrating how to play the final chord with a punched accent, "taaaaaaa—AH!" The LSO played it perfectly on the first try. After some 120 takes, the orchestra broke for lunch with everyone

feeling exhilarated by the first three hours. In fact, the session finished 10 minutes ahead of schedule.

London publicist Karen Pitchford brought several record-label executives to the sessions. James Jolly, editor of *Gramophone* magazine, attended the Saturday morning session. He praised the orchestra and the new recording space and graciously inscribed a copy of the magazine to Fuchs, writing "Great session, Great music!"

Falletta has scheduled the world premiere of *An American Place* with the Virginia Symphony for March 5 and 6, 2005.

Eventide

Following lunch, a reduced orchestra assembled to record *Eventide (Concerto for English Horn, Harp, Percussion and String Orchestra)*, the fourth work Fuchs has composed for Stacy. The world's most recorded English hornist, Stacy is responsible for commissioning a substantial portion of the repertoire for English horn. Leonard Bernstein once referred to him as "a poet among craftsmen."

Eventide is a 21-minute concerto in one movement composed in Norman between March 2002 and the following February. During the composition, Fuchs consulted with Stacy about technical matters, including the use of three multiphonic chords that give the piece a decidedly unusual character. The work takes its creative impulse from the spiritual tunes "Mary Had a Baby" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," among others. Although a purely abstract musical composition, Fuchs says, "Eventide is inspired by the mysterious quality of sunset glowing through stained-glass windows." Joel Levine, music director of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic, has called the work "stunningly beautiful."

With the LSO, Stacy delivered a seemingly definitive interpretation of a work never before performed in public. When he finished, the orchestra applauded.

Out of the Dark

On Sunday morning, a smaller group convened to record *Out of the Dark (Suite for Chamber Orchestra After Three Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler)*. Fuchs first wrote this 15-minute work for wind and string quartets with French horn in 1985, and Falletta conducted the premiere at Juilliard. Having just been appointed music

director of the Denver Chamber Orchestra, she suggested creating a setting for that group. She led the premiere performance of the orchestral version in Denver in November 1986.

Out of the Dark is the first mature work of Fuchs's compositional canon and represents the distillation of his thinking regarding modern compositional techniques. It is also the first example of his continuing interest in composing musical responses to the arts of painting, collage and poetry. When Fuchs lived in New York City, he fell in love with the works of the abstract expressionist artist Helen Frankenthaler. "Her large, freewheeling, brilliantly colored canvases," he says, "embodied for me the true spirit of the enterprise."

The session for *Out of the Dark* was completely relaxed. The piece is soloistic for all players, and it allowed the LSO musicians to show off their astonishing virtuosity. Timothy Jones, principal French hornist, played the especially difficult solo horn part with exceptional artistry.

For Fine the job was just beginning. Stacks of digital audiotapes were sent back to the United States for editing at his studio in Pennsylvania. In addition to featuring brilliant performances by the LSO, the final disc is a stunning achievement in digital editing. Fine worked through the fall seamlessly stitching together the best of nearly 300 takes to create the illusion of perfect performances. In October, Fuchs traveled to Pennsylvania to consult on the fine points of the best takes. Fine sent the edited tapes to Germany, where he prepared the final disc, and a lustrously rendered master was ready by Christmas.

Naxos Records will release the disc in its American Classics series in fall 2005.

Looking back, Fuchs says, "My encounter with the LSO fulfills my life-long dream of having my music performed and recorded by a world-class symphony orchestra. Nearly 15 years of my creative life were compressed into less than nine hours of recording time. The wonder, elation, admiration, awe and deep musical satisfaction that I experienced were thrilling."

His emotions were shared, as Fuchs learned the morning following the last recording session. Fuchs awoke to find that Falletta had slipped a note under his hotel door. She wrote, "I hope you will always keep the memory of your triumph here." ◆