
NEWS & INFORMATION

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**PRAIRIE RESTORATION:
SHOWCASING SYMPHONIC SOWERBY
FOR A NEW GENERATION**

**New CD Series Seeks to Revive Reputation
of a 'Remarkable American Composer'**

Midwestern composer Leo Sowerby's colorful and evocative symphonic poems, once a mainstay of America's leading orchestras, can be heard for the first time on CD via a new Cedille Records release, the first in a two-disc series showcasing Sowerby's symphonic music for a new generation of listeners.

Prairie: Tone Poems by Leo Sowerby (Cedille CDR 90000 033) includes the picturesque orchestral suite *From the Northland: Impressions of the Lake Superior Country*; the lively "program overture" *Comes Autumn Time*; and two Carl Sandburg-inspired tone poems: the wryly rollicking, Bolero-like *Theme in Yellow* with its images of Halloween jack-o'-lanterns, and the remarkably vivid and inventive *Prairie*, the title track, widely considered to be Sowerby's finest orchestral work.

Headlining the Sowerby series is conductor Paul Freeman of Chicago, a champion of American music and veteran of some 150 recordings for Columbia and other labels. On the new CD, Freeman conducts the Czech National Symphony Orchestra, of which he's the music director. For the next CD, Freeman will conduct his Chicago Sinfonietta in a world-premiere recording of Sowerby's Symphony No. 2. Freeman's previous Cedille recording was a program of piano concertos by Rudolph Ganz and John La Montaine, composers who, like Sowerby, have a strong connection to America's heartland.

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Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians calls Sowerby (1895-1968) a "remarkable American composer. . . . eclectic in the positive sense of the word." Sowerby drew inspiration from American folk music, blues, and jazz, as well as traditional Western concert and sacred music, notes *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. In fact, Sowerby was one of the first serious composers to introduce elements of jazz into the larger musical forms. In 1938, the *Musical Quarterly* observed, "This 20th century American composes for the present as a part of it, and for the future perhaps even more than he realizes."

From the Northland: Impressions of Lake Superior Country (1922) was inspired by a motor trip to the Canadian woods around Lakes Superior and Huron.

Autumn was Sowerby's favorite season, and he was repeatedly attracted to autumnal themes and texts. The overture *Comes Autumn Time* (1916), although originally written for organ, was the work that launched Sowerby's career as a major symphonic composer.

Based on a Sandburg poem of the same name, *Theme in Yellow* (1937) received its premiere performance — and until this world premiere recording, its only performance — on a CBS Radio broadcast from New York, July 31, 1938, with the CBS Symphony conducted by Howard Barlow. Sowerby likely never heard the piece performed: he was overseas during the broadcast and later lost the score and parts. The CD uses a new score prepared by James Winfield of Chicago, who relied on Sowerby's uncommonly complete pencil sketch and compared it with air-check recordings of the 1938 broadcast.

The disc's title track, *Prairie* (1929), was also based on a Sandburg poem. (The poet and composer were mutual admirers.) A 1934 *Time* magazine profile of Sowerby said the composer asks listeners to "imagine being alone in an Illinois cornfield . . . at peace and one with the beauty that is about."

Everybody had a taste for Sowerby. The names of Sowerby's champions reads like a who's who of 20th-century conductors: Frederick Stock, Serge Koussevitsky, Dmitri Mitropoulos, Pierre

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Monteux, Howard Hanson, and Eugene Ormandy, to name only a few. Ormandy chose *Prairie* for his Carnegie Hall debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Hanson chose *Comes Autumn Time* for the first disc of his American music series for RCA in 1939. Sowerby was the most frequently performed American composer on American orchestral concert programs through the 1920s and well into the 1930s, according to the CD's program notes.

In his heyday, Sowerby was considered positively avant-garde by Midwestern standards. In the following decades, Sowerby, like a whole host of his lyrically inclined contemporaries, saw much of his music disappear. "Regrettably, the musical establishment of a later era found Sowerby too sweet to swallow," observes Cedille producer James Ginsburg. "Music this attractive and accessible couldn't possibly be any good -- or so the thinking went."

Cedille (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing Chicago's most noteworthy composers and performers. The label is an arm of the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. Sowerby is of particular interest to Cedille because he based his career in Chicago from 1909 to 1962. "Sowerby is the most important composer associated with Chicago and a major American symphonist neglected in the CD era," Ginsburg says.

The Sowerby recordings are being undertaken with the support of the Leo Sowerby Foundation. Its founder, Francis Crociata, wrote the program notes.

Cedille CDs are distributed to retailers by Qualiton Imports and are available at finer record stores nationally. For a free catalog and the whereabouts of local retail outlets, consumers are invited to write to Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515, or send e-mail to cedillerec@aol.com. Cedille is on the World Wide Web at <http://members.aol.com/cedillerec>.

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PRAIRIE: TONE POEMS BY LEO SOWERBY

Cedille CDR 90000 033

Comes Autumn Time (Overture) (4:41); Prairie (16:41)

Theme in Yellow (20:03); From the Northland (20:42)

Czech National Symphony Orchestra, Paul Freeman, conductor