

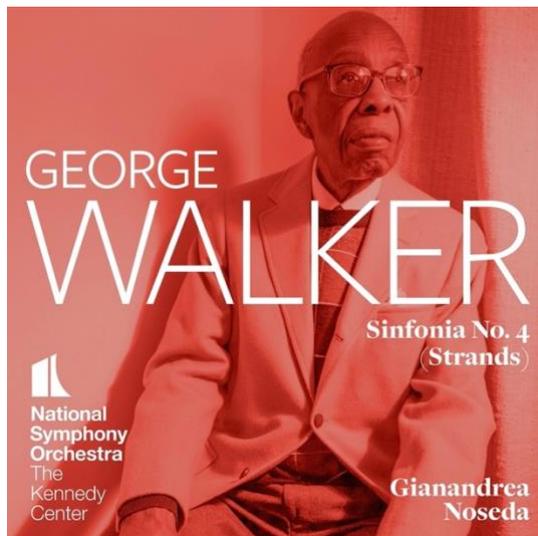
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WORLDWIDE

REVIEWS

Americana Recordings by Americans

July 22, 2022 | By Clive Paget, *Musical America*



In January 2022, the National Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Gianandrea Noseda launched a project to perform and record George Walker's five Sinfonias, a series of works written between 1984 and 2015. The first release features Sinfonia No. 4 (*Strands*), commissioned by the NSO in 2012 to celebrate the long-lived composer's 90th birthday. It's a colorful, complex work that incorporates a pair of spirituals as musical "strands" woven deep inside a tightly argued rhapsodic work.

Opening in dark and dramatic territory with resounding brass and metallic percussion prominent in the mix, the ten-minute tone poem

progresses through fragmentary episodes that coalesce around passing oases of calm, often featuring elements of one or other of the spiritual themes. There's a lyrical melody on cellos and an optimistic flourish on the opening of "Roll, Jordan, Roll" before stalking bass lines spattered with abrasive thematic splinters drive the music to its conclusion.

As the first African-American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for music, Walker holds a revered place in American musical history, but he's also a great composer with a distinctive voice that should be heard more often. The NSO's recordings are being released one at a time through to 2023 and include videos available on digital streaming platforms. With The Cleveland Orchestra bringing out a Walker album in November, let's hope it's the start of a major revival of his music on disc.



From the grand to the intimate, Samuel Adams's take on the Orpheus myth is a pearl of great price. Conceived as a dance project, *Lyra* was developed partially during lockdown in collaboration with The Living Earth Show—guitarist Travis Andrews and percussionist Andy Meyerson. The work was performed by contemporary dance company Post:ballet at San Francisco's Taube Atrium Theater in 2021 with music manipulated live using Meyer Sound's spatial sound technology Spacemap Go.

The score holds up perfectly shorn of its visual elements. Structurally inspired by Monteverdi's

L'Orfeo, it opens with an extended “Wedding” section where a three-note bell-like theme is fractured, multiplied, and recombined to hypnotic effect in a compelling sonic ceremony. Adams’s digital-acoustic soundscape wraps Andrews and Meyerson’s plucked strings and struck percussion in a mesmerizing bath of electronic sounds.

The composer’s environmental connection to the Eastern Sierra Nevada comes to the fore in the iridescent central section and the descent to Hades where field recordings, subtly blended with electronics, envelop the acoustic instruments in a kaleidoscope of buzzing and rippling overtones. The haunting “Canopy” finds Orpheus pacifying the boatman Charon on guitar against a haze of manipulated sound, while “Hades and Persephone” is shot through with piano and metallic percussion. The uplifting return to Earth embraces jazz and minimalism, ending in a dizzying swirl of electronics. Expertly engineered—and a treat on headphones—*Lyra* draws the listener in with ideas that reverberate long after the music has ended.

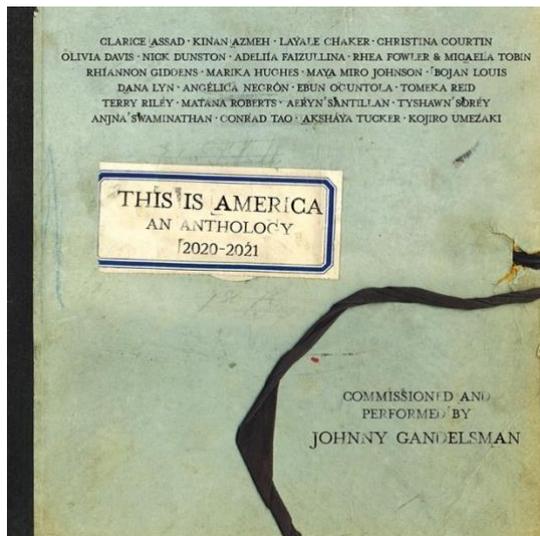


Believers in the pleasure principle should try a new recording of Robert Paterson’s string quartets. The New York-based composer tailors his writing to ensembles that inspire him, and in the Indianapolis Quartet—which premiered his Third Quartet at Carnegie Hall in 2020—he’s found ardent advocates for a personable brand of music-making that is fast, furious, and laced through with sardonic wit.

The carefree First Quartet from 2000 owes a debt to Janáček and jazz, not obvious bedfellows, but Paterson has something of the Czech maverick’s ability to surprise. Full of madcap humor, its woozy second movement, “Logy,” sends up

southern-style country waltzes, as if being played by three good ol’ boys fiddlin’ on a porch, with the first violin representing a mother’s voice (perhaps Paterson’s own) hollering at them to quit. The finale, “Energetic Polka,” quotes the theme song from TV show *The Love Boat*—I kid you not!

The various movements of Second Quartet (2019) are inspired by painters from Rothko to Seurat, a comic strip by David Lynch about a stressed-out dog, and a fiddle tune by Grieg, drawn together by Paterson’s quirky sonic palette that makes use of wrong-footed syncopations and extended playing techniques. The Third Quartet takes its cue from voice patterns—a Tourette’s sufferer, a poetry reading, an American auctioneer, sports anthems, etc.—in music that runs the gamut from comedy to patriotism. Gloriously entertaining.



Coming back down to Earth, Johnny Gandelman's *This Is America - An Anthology 2020-2021* has a great deal to say about the turbulent times we live in. Indeed, the Brooklyn Rider violinist's ambition requires three well-endowed discs to get all of his points across in 24 works written for him by a diverse cross section of composers from Clarice Assad, Angélica Negrón, and Rhiannon Giddens to Terry Riley, Tyshawn Sorey, and Conrad Tao.

Not every work is a masterpiece, but Gandelman's hit rate is impressively high with most compositions letting the message bubble beneath the surface rather than hit us over the head. Take the opening number, for example. Assad's "O" refers to the oxygen that kept patients alive during the pandemic but also the air so callously denied to George Floyd. Yet the music, for violin and overdubbed vocals, floats and tumbles as if buoyed aloft by the element itself. More overtly political, Rhea Fowler and Micaela Tobin's *A City Upon a Hill?* incorporates distorted electronic samples of politicians chanting "Make America Great Again" combined with the sounds of police helicopters and stampeding animals. Giddens's heart-warming *New to the Session* celebrates her initiation into Irish folk fiddling, while Negrón's aching, astrophotography-inspired *A través del manto luminoso* (Through the luminous mantle) is a miniature masterpiece with flickering violin cocooned in hazy electronics.

Gandelman's playing is flawless, with immaculate intonation, flights of virtuosity, and even the odd bit of singing and whistling. And while he's adept at conveying frustration and rage, he's also strong on comfort and healing.

George Walker

Sinfonia No 4

National Symphony Orchestra, Gianandrea Noseda

National Symphony Orchestra NSO0001D

Samuel Adams

Lyra

The Living Earth Show

Earthy Records

Robert Paterson

String Quartets Nos. 1 – 3

The Indianapolis Quartet

American Modern Recordings AMR1054

Johnny Gandelman

This Is America

Johnny Gandelsman
In a Circle Records ICR023