

FEATURE

Chatting with Cellist Emmanuel Feldman

BY JAMES REEL

Virgil Thomson's 1950 Cello Concerto is what might have resulted had Haydn written his own D-Major Concerto as the soundtrack for a Hollywood Western. That's the impression you get from cellist Emmanuel Feldman, who recently recorded the Thomson work for Albany, along with some of Thomson's little portraits and music by the contemporary American Charles Fussell. Feldman's performance is not a dutiful read-through of some justifiably neglected bit of effluvium. The cellist is honestly excited about Thomson's score, which is evident from his performance and his remarks about the work.

Why isn't the concerto better known? Thomson's cello-friend Luigi Silva played a big role in helping Thomson craft the solo part, and, perversely, that may be part of the problem. Says Feldman, "It gets quite high and technical, and there are a lot of arpeggios up and down the instrument in the outer movements, and I believe Silva told Thomson not to worry about the technical difficulties, but maybe Thomson should have." Oddly, the premiere, with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, went not to Silva but to Paul Olefsky. Silva did play it later, transposing some passages up an octave, violinistically. Few cellists have bothered with the concerto since; even Janos Starker, who has rarely met a score he couldn't master, got slammed in the *New York Times* for a 1981 performance betraying "a slipshod technique and a lack of idiomatic flair." If Starker can't put it across, who can? Well, Feldman for one, who quickly became a fan of the work.

"It has a quality that links it with Haydn's D-Major Concerto," he says. "The Thomson concerto is overall in D Major, and like the Haydn it needs great clarity, and you need to have a very secure and virtuosic technique to play it well and be comfortable with it. The first movement is light and airy and like galloping across the plains, but meanwhile you're going from one end of the cello to the other. So the technical difficulty, just getting to the point where you could play it easily, is part of the reason it's not played more. The other reason is that the music is out of print. That's the simpler reason." Out of print, but still available for rent, hence Feldman's recording with Paul Gambill and the Nashville Chamber Orchestra on Albany. As part of his research, Feldman sorted through many documents in the Thomson archives at Yale University. "There were different versions, with annotations from Luigi Silva and annotations from Thomson," he says. "The original scores themselves were pretty heavily marked up, but the rental scores had been corrected in the right way. That's a good place for anybody working on Virgil Thomson's music to get started, at the Yale library."

But back to the delights of the concerto, according to Feldman: "This recording should show that it's really a gem of the American repertoire. It's a beautiful piece. The second movement is so emotional, and deeply spiritual. The outer movements are a lot of fun; the first is upbeat and exciting, and the last is called 'Children's Games.' It's the sort of thing where you can really toss your hat up in the air."

As technically challenging as the concerto is, Feldman learned it quickly. He had no choice. He was already familiar with the work and had been lobbying various orchestras to program it, but he didn't get word that Gambill and the Nashville Chamber Orchestra were committed until about two months before the concert. "I'm a quick study and I've been involved in contemporary music here in Boston quite a bit," Feldman says. "The word on the street is if

it's really, really tough, give Emmanuel a call. I worked very hard on it; I was inspired by the stories of Rostropovich turning around the Shostakovich First Concerto so quickly. It turned out I was playing the Shostakovich in October and the Thomson in November, and I read that Rostropovich had learned the Shostakovich practically in a week. I was very inspired by that. I made an appointment with my wife, Pascale, who's a double bassist, and she agreed that within a week she would listen to what I had accomplished. So after a week, I had a couple of movements learned and memorized, not totally the way I wanted to, but I had to get it in gear at that point, and knowing that Pascale was waiting to hear it gave me some extra motivation. Rodney Lister, who also teaches at the New England Conservatory (one of Feldman's employers), had a portrait written of him by Virgil Thomson, so I played it for him as soon as I had it together, maybe a couple of weeks in, and I played it for as many people as I could. It turned out not to be so hard to get it together quickly, because I already had it in my blood, I'd wanted to play it for so long. All the way back in the late 1990s I had spoken with Anthony Tommasini, Virgil Thomson's biographer, about the piece. We were talking and I mentioned I was looking for new pieces to perform, and he said, 'You *have* to play this concerto; it's great!' He hooked me up with Scott Wheeler, another student of Virgil Thomson's and a wonderful composer, who got me the score. So I'd known about the piece for a while. And it took me from the late 1990s until last year to get it programmed and recorded."

Feldman says that despite the concerto's out-of-print status, it's easy to get orchestral parts. In fact, performers have two orchestrations to choose from. "We chose the reduced-orchestra version," he says, and for artistic reasons, not just to save money on players. "One of the nice features that I prefer in the reduced version is in one of the cadenzas in the first movement, Virgil Thomson has the double bass and cello sections accompany the soloist with a bass line. Then, at the end of the second movement, there's a beautiful solo that gets played by the trumpet in the full-orchestra version, but in the chamber-orchestra version, it's played by the clarinet, which has a more expressive quality for the type of solo it is. It's very effective." Feldman believes the concerto would be a smart programming choice even for orchestras whose audiences fear anything written since Ravel. "I think it would be an ideal pops piece," he says. "It's got this Western flair to it, and those two exciting outer movements."

Feldman's disc also contains five of Thomson's portraits; one is a cello-piano original, a portrait of painter Frederic James; the others are arrangements by Luigi Silva of such relatively familiar keyboard portraits as "Bugles and Birds" and "Tango Lullaby." Considering that Silva imposed many technical difficulties on the concerto, and that the Frederic James portrait is a rare example of Thomson's unaided solo cello-writing, Feldman says these little items work well for his instrument. "They're very idiomatic and fall well on the cello," he says. "Well, the one for Frederic James is a little uncelloistic at one point. It goes all the way from the bottom of the instrument to the top and back again. It's supposed to sound like a walk in the park, but it takes some work to get it that way. The other ones are very playable. I've performed them several times around New England, and everybody loves those four portraits, and they're fun to play, with good fingerings by Silva."

Aside from a taste for contemporary music, Feldman doesn't have much in common with Virgil Thomson except for one thing: he went off to complete his studies in Paris. Thomson, famously, studied with Nadia Boulanger, and recruited many other young American composers to follow in his footsteps. Boulanger was long gone by the time Feldman had graduated from the Curtis Institute and finished a Tanglewood fellowship; Feldman's destination was the Paris Conservatoire Supérieur, to which he'd gotten a scholarship. "Virgil Thomson was a young

composer studying with one of the greats and trying to find his own voice,” Feldman says when asked to compare his French connection to Thomson’s. “I was going to Paris to find my first job. My wife, whom I’d met at Curtis, was going back to Paris to complete her last year at the Paris Conservatoire. I got a job with l’Orchestre des Prix, which is an orchestra of young professionals comparable to the New World Symphony. The orchestra usually took members of the Paris Conservatoire who’d had their first prize, and put them in a professional setting, where they were conducted by unbelievable conductors. Pierre Boulez is one who came. I was the only American in the orchestra, and the *first* American in the orchestra, ever. And they didn’t let me forget it. Something would go wrong in the wind section, and the conductor would say, ‘Ah, yes, the downfall of our orchestra—we accepted an American.’ It was funny for a while, but I got to be the butt of some jokes. I was still learning French and I’m sure I didn’t understand some things they said about me.”

When Pascale completed her studies, both musicians decided they wanted to establish themselves in the United States. Feldman says he came back with a strong appreciation of French culture—the food and general conviviality above all—and with something of a French influence on his approach to music. “I liked how free the players were to express themselves with playing that was maybe a little less disciplined,” he says. “There was a good freedom to the singing aspects of the playing.”

Feldman’s musical tastes had already been evolving over the past few years. “When I started at Curtis, I was a dyed-in-the-wool Classical musician,” he says. “I didn’t play contemporary music. But at some point, maybe my second year, I started to be friends with many of the composers there, and I started playing their pieces. It hooked me. I was completely taken by the music written by these Curtis composers. I played in the Curtis Composers Orchestra, which was a voluntary thing, not a requirement. I ran into Jennifer Higdon, who has made quite a name for herself since then, and that was the start of it for me.”

Preparing for competitions, he learned, required contemporary pieces, including the Ligeti solo cello sonata, which Feldman describes as “a revelation.” He began playing the Ligeti everywhere, not just for competitions; same goes for the George Crumb solo sonata, which Feldman identifies as “another big turning point right after the Curtis years.” Upon his return from France, Feldman wound up in Boston playing principal with the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra, and word got around that he was interested in new music. “My phone was ringing off the hook,” he says. Feldman played with Scott Wheeler’s new-music ensemble, Dinosaur Annex; there and on his own he began playing a great deal of music by such living Boston-area composers as Andrew List, Howard Frazen, Jakov Jakoulov, John McDonald, Paul Phillips, and Gunther Schuller; in many cases, Feldman was giving the works their premiere performances. As a member of the Aurea Ensemble, he often finds himself collaborating in concerts with poets and actors, and in the ensemble Cello e Basso (formerly the Axiom Duo, which he founded with his wife), Feldman has worked intensely with choreographer Rebecca Rice and composer John Harbison. “It’s been important to me to go outside the usual cello experience, just playing a sonata or something,” he says. “I’m always looking for these different kinds of experiences. We just spoke with Mike McLaughlin, a friend of ours who’s a composer in Boston, who’s going to write a piece for Cello e Basso with accordion—he’s an accordionist. We don’t want to be just a duo; we want to collaborate with other musicians, and we’ve been reaching out to artists in other media to get involved, too. That’s been very important to us.”

Feldman stresses that his work with dancers has not required musical compromises. “What happens in the case of my working with Rebecca Rice is that if you both are committed to

your ideas, you can get to the point where you may have something that seems to be a conflicting point of view, but if you continue working at it articulately, there's a way to join the two ideas together. We had some conflicts in the Bach suites when we first got started; Rebecca had heard them on a recording one way and began to choreograph to that, so right away I had to give her *my* versions of that and the John Harbison solo suite. But then, some of the things I brought into my interpretation while I was working with Rebecca, like taking something slower or separating one section from another, are things I'm going to keep in my solo performances. You have to have real trust between the collaborators, and when you do you can discover something new, and later look at it objectively and say, 'Do I like what I came up with or go back to what I was holding onto so fiercely before?' In this case, I felt like I had grown. That also came from being in touch with the dancers, being in a place on the stage where I could see them and feel their energy. That concert was one of the greatest experiences I've had in a long time."

Unlike the many musicians who focus on their own instruments to the exclusion of all else, Feldman happily goes to concerts that have nothing to do with the cello. That's how he first encountered music by the composer who occupies the second half of Feldman's Virgil Thomson disc, Rutgers faculty member and former Virgil Thomson student Charles Fussell. "I had to call him after I heard his *Specimen Days*, which Sanford Sylvan sang in Jordan Hall with the Masterworks Chorale," says Feldman. "I was so bowled over by the beauty and the color in his orchestra-writing. So I called him up and got more and more involved with him." Fussell wrote a work for a piano trio Feldman played in, and eventually Feldman persuaded Fussell to write something he could play with the New England String Ensemble, of which he was a member. "He wrote *Right River* after he'd been reading Tobias Schneebaum's *Secret Places*, and he had an idea to write some music about a lone boatman going through a lush and dangerous wilderness. That's sort of what getting involved with these new pieces is like; it's a cool adventure. I got the score and looked at it in complete awe." Feldman admits that there are a few tough spots, technically speaking, but "it's extremely lyrical, using the full capacities of the string orchestra and the beauty of the cello sound, very lyrical with much color and variety in it. His forte is as a colorist; it's neo-Romantic in a sense, more than the two ballades of his that are also on the CD. I am so grateful that he wrote *Right River*, and I'm hoping to get it performed again."

So, given all his experience playing new music in a variety of styles, what makes a new score a good fit for Feldman? "I think the music has got to have some sort of underlying magnetism that brings both the audience and the players to it, something that is inside a composer's spirit that comes out in the notes, something that projects outward," he says. "I stay away from things that are academic or dry to the point that I don't think people can find something in it."

Feldman says that even though he has worked closely with composers of a wide range of experience, he tends not to ask them to rework something to make it a little more idiomatic. "I try to take Siegfried Palm's example," he says of the noted new-music cellist. "All the composers he worked with like him very much because he never asked them to change a single note. I was working on a piece with Andrew List, a sonata he had just rewritten after several years, and I listened to a recording of the first version and said, 'Wait a minute—there's some really cool stuff that's not here anymore.' He said it was too hard, and I said, 'Put it back in!' Composers shouldn't be afraid of writing music that's kind of hard to play. There are some techniques that seemed impossible some years ago that are now standard. A lot of it is just working on the music. When I played the Ligeti Cello Concerto at Harvard, a piece that's more

in his current style than the solo sonata, it was so difficult just to get the notes that I had to slow down so that just eight measures would last a minute or more, and when I did that I could find immediately that it wasn't just a 'technical' passage; there was a whole world inside even this most daunting passage with 16 or 18 notes that had to be played in two beats. There was great logic in it; it had shape and line, and harmonic impetus. It was a fantastic experience for me. That's part of being a true contemporary player; you have to spend the time to look at things from all angles. I compare some of the difficult passages in that concerto to looking at a 3-D picture of a molecule. If you look at it from one angle you see only one thing, but you can look at it from underneath and above and see many different views of it. It helps to visualize music in a three-dimensional sense, to conceptualize harmonic structure like crystalline structure. You have to be that kind of player, and you're always looking for composers who are writing things that speak to people and at the same time have found a way to integrate their voice into their compositions in an authentic way."

Even though he resists telling composers how to "improve" their music, Feldman loves to be the first performer to get his hands on a piece and start creating a performance tradition for it, in consultation with the composer. "If you have a problem, it means you're going to get off your chair and call the composer or get together and talk about the piece, maybe go late into the night with a few glasses of white wine to talk over the thing," he says. "A good way to work is to get the piece into a form where you can perform it for the composer, then get them there to hear it and talk about it, and make sure you don't come to that point just the night before the performance. I don't like to get together too early, because you don't want to not have things ready so when the composer says 'Could you do this or that,' you don't have it flowing enough to make the necessary adjustments. It's best to learn it to the point where you can perfect it, then be ready to change things. If composers come too early, they can get disappointed, especially if it's something difficult. You want to do your homework first."

**THOMSON Cello Concerto.¹ 4 Portraits (arr. Silva).² Portrait of Frederic James.²
FUSSELL Right River.¹ 2 Ballades² • Emmanuel Feldman (vc); Paul Gambill, cond;¹
Nashville CO;¹ Joy Cline Phinney (pn)² • ALBANY XXX (Hybrid multichannel SACD:
55:22)**

Virgil Thomson's Cello Concerto, composed more than half a century ago, hasn't been played much over the years; perhaps cellists suspect it's more trouble than it's worth, especially since it's been so difficult to get orchestras to program 20th-century music, even a score as immediately ingratiating as this. The first movement, "Rider on the Plains," definitely has a sweeping, outdoorsy feeling, but it lacks a real "riding" rhythm. If anything, some moments evoke a happy, comic-opera militarism. As is common in Thomson's work, the movement's ensuing themes are all derived from elements of the opening material. The slow movement is a set of variations on—actually, more a gradual metamorphosis of—a Southern hymn, but soloist Emmanuel Feldman plays it more like a keening folk ballad, to the music's advantage; the orchestra provides the more churchy, if wrong-note, harmonization in its presentation of the theme. The last movement is called "Children's Games," its main theme related to material from the concerto's beginning.

Feldman and the orchestra play this with sweep and spirit. Feldman offers a fine variety of tone color, from the dark richness of his C string to the penetrating clarity of the upper positions on the D and A strings, where Thomson keeps him much of the time. The strings of the

Nashville Chamber Orchestra sometimes sound slightly thin and a little strained, but they and the rest of the orchestra under Paul Gambill play with all the requisite gusto.

Charles Fussell's recently composed *Right River*, evoking an outwardly placid boat ride with inner complications, is a romantic, brooding, rhapsodic work with some recitative-like passages creating outbursts amid the lyricism; Feldman, Gambill, and the orchestra make a persuasive case for it.

Feldman teams up with pianist Joy Cline Phinney for the remainder of the disc. Luigi Silva arranged four of Thomson's keyboard portraits for cello and piano: "Bugles and Birds," "Tango Lullaby," "In a Bird Cage," and "Fanfare for France." Their spiky quirkiness borders on the inane, almost always a danger with Thomson, but they keep the musicians plenty busy, and ultimately come off as more than a collection of simplistic eccentricities. Thomson's one portrait written specifically for cello and piano, "Portrait of Frederic James," is more dour and chromatic, and less obsessed with the cello's upper positions than in the other portraits and the concerto, where Silva had a strong hand. The disc concludes with Fussell's *Two Ballades* for cello and piano, dating from earlier in that composer's career. They're even more rhapsodic than *Right River*, less thematically focused, with a more pointillistic piano accompaniment.

Feldman and his partners are persuasive advocates for both composers; let's hope he and this disc help bring the Thomson concerto the popularity it deserves. The recorded sound is close and lifelike, although I heard only a two-channel PCM advance copy, not the final SACD.