

Jerome Moross: *Frankie & Johnny, Those Everlasting Blues, Willie the Weeper*

Hot Springs Music Festival, Barrick, Edds, Kesling, DeHaan, Rosenberg

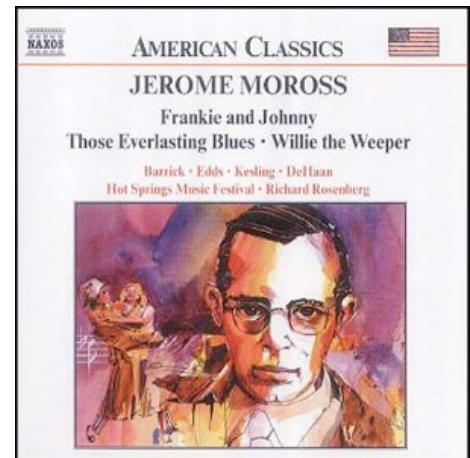
Naxos #8.559086

GRAMOPHONE

December 2002

Laurence Vittes

Naxos makes yet another major contribution to American music with two first recordings of nearly forgotten music by a Brooklyn-born composer who, ironically, became famous for a western movie score, *The Big Country*, and, like other successful film composers, never achieved the fame he sought for the serious music he most loved to compose. The disc's highlight is the 34-minute long *Willie the Weeper*, one of four planned 'dance cantatas' that, according to the composer, 'mix the singing and dancing so that you don't know where the singers begin or where the dancers end'. Draped on the kind of deceptively informal, almost casual structure that underlies much of the best of American music, this seductive portrait of an American grifter is a gripping piece of musical theatre with moments of striking beauty and power rooted somewhere between Tin Pan Alley and the Met. All performances of *Willie* during the composer's lifetime, including the Broadway ones in 1948, were accompanied by piano; the Hot Springs (Arkansas) Festival premièred the orchestration Moross intended in 2000, so these well-recorded performances have authoritative style, plus outstanding brass playing, and a riveting performance by tenor John DeHaan . . . This is music that cries out for more recordings. The full-length ballet *Frankie and Johnny*, though it is thoroughly competent and sports many of the gestures of the sophisticated music of the time (it was premièred in Chicago in 1938), is considerably less interesting. The dreamy *Those Everlasting Blues*, on the other hand, invested with raw passion by mezzo-soprano Diane Kesling, is another revelation. The liner notes by Laura and Richard Rosenberg dryly set out the facts of Moross's life, and the circumstances of the music on the disc. For a more inspiring assessment, however, better to seek *The Composer in Hollywood* (Marion Boyars: 1990), in which Christopher Palmer pays tribute to Moross as the composer who 'emancipated Hollywood western-American Music from Europe once and for all'. And while that may have been a considerable accomplishment, the best moments of *Willie the Weeper* are even more so.



#### PLAYBILL

ON THE RECORD: *But Is It Really a Broadway Musical?* By Steven Suskin, 23 Feb 2003

"Something fresh and exciting, as American as a hot dog spiked with mustard." "The best song-and-dance show to reach Broadway this season." "A new form in which three major arts united to create compelling theatre." So said the *Journal-American*, the *Daily News* and the *Herald Tribune*, respectively. And this, from Richard Watts in the *Post*: "Nothing I have seen all season had the imagination, creative freshness, and theatrical intelligence. There may be some question as to whether the proceedings belong technically under the head of ballet or musical comedy, but there is none at all that they are theatrically enchanting. . . . The most important feature is that it is not only a successful experiment in mixing words, music, and dance but also is such good fun." *Ballet Ballads* opened May 9, 1948, at the Maxine Elliott Theatre and transferred to the Music Box, for a combined run of 69 performances. The evening consisted of three one-acts, with music by Jerome Moross and lyrics by John Latouche. One of them, *Willie the Weeper*, is presented in full on this new CD. (Some of the song sections of *The Eccentricities of Davey Crockett* were included on "Windflowers" [PS Classics] and "Taking a Chance on Love" [Original Cast OC-4444]. The third piece of *Ballet Ballads*, *Susannah and the Elders*, remains unrecorded so far as I know.) *Willie the Weeper* is drawn from two folk poems, "Willie the Weeper" and "Cocaine Lil." It tells of a chimney sweeper, who wasn't much of a man - except in his reefer-fueled dreams. Fans of Moross' film scores and his musical *The Golden Apple* will know what to expect: bounteous melody, unexpected grace, harmonic riches and sly humor. And there's also the underappreciated Latouche, who died at the age of 41 in 1956 while working with Bernstein on *Candide*. Sample lyric: "Buy some cotton in Spain, and then spin it in Egypt; sell it later in Decatur, where citizens can be gypped.") *Willie* is joined on this new CD by an earlier Moross ballet, *Frankie and Johnny*. Written to a libretto by the composer (in collaboration with Michael Blankford), the "ballet suite for orchestra" was commissioned by choreographer Ruth Page for the Federal Theatre Project; it premiered in Chicago on June 20, 1938. According to the liner notes, this was "the first ballet to be truly 'American' in form, content and creative personnel." What this means, precisely, I can't say; but the calendar shows that *Frankie and Johnny* predated Copland's *Rodeo*, Bernstein's *Fancy Free* and even Rodgers's *Ghost Town*. (Copland recommended Moross - a member of his Young Composers' Group - for the *Frankie and Johnny* assignment.) *Frankie and Johnny* stems from the old song of the same title, about a pair of lovers; *Johnny* done her wrong, and *Frankie* shot him. The song is threaded through the 22 minute, modern music ballet. Although based on a folk song like Kurt Weill's *Down in the Valley*, the music is closer in style to *Fancy Free*. Which is to say, this is exciting, lively stuff. Moross' style falls somewhere between Copland and Bernstein; he might be described as a Bernard Herrmann who could write songs. Moross was also an expert orchestrator. His screen work included Copland's "Our Town" and "The North Star"; Frank Loesser's "Hans Christian Andersen"; and Hugo Friedhofer's "The Best Years of Our Lives." The orchestrations for *Willie the Weeper* are especially exciting; listen to the flutes embellishing "I've Got Me," and the trombones gone wild in the "Big Willie" section. This is our first hearing of these charts; *Ballet Ballads* was performed to a piano accompaniment in 1948 (and its 1962 Off-Broadway revival). Moross was difficult, ideologically; he made his Broadway debut at 21 with the 1935 "Social Revue" Parade, which was so social as to embarrass its sponsors. (The Theatre Guild thought that they were getting another Garrick Gaieties.) By the late forties Moross was blacklisted; he only reached Broadway twice, with *Ballet Ballads* and *The Golden Apple*. (His kid brother, Charlie Moross, pioneered the use of computerized payroll systems on Broadway in the mid-sixties.) Jerry Moross is best known for his 17 Hollywood scores, including the exuberant "Big Country" [Screen Classics SC-1-JM] and Otto Preminger's "The Cardinal" [Preamble PRCD 1778]. The latter features Bobby Morse, by the way. "Frankie and Johnny" and "Willie the Weeper" is on the low-priced Naxos label; the disc retails at only \$7.98. The program was recorded at the Hot Springs Music Festival under the direction of Richard Rosenberg. Rosenberg certainly understands Moross; the music,

especially in Willie, soars. John DeHaan is the Singing Willie, and does quite a job of it; Melisa Barrick, Denise Edds and Diane Kesling are the soloists for Frankie and Johnny. The two ballets are joined by "Those Everlasting Blues," a 16 minute cantata Moross wrote when he was 19, and it's mighty lugubrious. But that's no drawback, compared to the grand exuberance of Frankie and especially Willie.

#### FILM MUSIC ON THE WEB

November 2002 Film Music CD Reviews

Hubert Culot

The music again abounds with catchy tunes, lively rhythms and many orchestral niceties; and is also often redolent of popular music of its time. It is a substantial score that definitely deserves to be heard. (By the way, I now really wonder what the other panels of Ballet Ballads sound like.) Moross's often ostinato-based music is straightforward, full of catchy and memorable tunes, with many jazz-infllected phrases and rhythms. It is superbly crafted and his orchestral flair is evident throughout. All concerned here make the best of these attractive and little-known scores. . . I enjoyed every minute of this delightful release.

#### CLASSICAL CD REVIEW

High times with low life. American composer Jerome Moross comes out of the Thirties New York Left. He joined such lights as Elie Siegmeister, Arthur Berger, Bernard Herrmann, Vivian Fine, and Paul Bowles in a kind of composers' study group, under the guidance of Aaron Copland, to talk music and go over one another's work-in-progress. Almost all of them faced a conflict between their artistic and political lives. At one time, almost all of them wrote in a hierophantic, aggressively Modern idiom, the kind that used to empty concert halls and now graces such popular entertainment as movies and commercials. On the other hand, they felt a duty to connect with the proletariat -- the very folks who, if they listened to classical-music concerts at all, walked out or switched off the radio at the opening measures of Awful Modern Music. Well aware of the problem, they either ignored it (Arthur Berger), stopped composing (Ruth Crawford Seeger), or looked to vernacular music -- American folk music, pop, jazz -- for a way out. Critics usually credit Virgil Thomson for discovering the last. Aaron Copland writes an appreciative letter to Thomson and praises him for giving American composers "a lesson" in how to use folk music without betraying their artistic consciences.

Moross resorts to the last path. The Naxos CD includes Those Everlasting Blues, an extended aria on the Alfred Kreymborg poem. Moross wrote it in 1932 at the ripe old age of 19, a student of the radical Henry Cowell. There are jazz elements in it, but highly abstracted, like a bit of newsprint in a Cubist collage or ragtime in an Ives sonata. I suspect many even today would find it a rough ride. In many ways, it typifies young man's music, especially in its desire to be taken very seriously indeed. But Moross quickly changed. Naxos's inclusion of it in the program shows how very far, very quickly Moross went. By 1935, he hits on his trademark mix of blues, proto-jazz, vaudeville songs, folk music, and camp songs. The new music has the efficiency, elegance, and geniality of Mozart, never inflated to bathos. It entertains like a Broadway show.

Moross wrote the ballet Frankie and Johnny in 1938 for the Chicago choreographer Ruth Page. It wittily mixes dance with song. A trio of Salvation Army "savin' Susies" comments on the action with raunchy, low-down, Mae-Westian take-offs on the well-known bluesy, blowsy tune. Frankie works herself up to a jealous rage and shoots her lover to, if you listen carefully, very Modern music indeed. I was struck this time around to expressive devices borrowed from Stravinsky and Ives. But you don't think of either Stravinsky or Ives. You hardly think at all, because you're too busy getting the socks charmed off your feet. This is at least the third recording of Frankie I know of (the first, originally on a Desto LP and transferred to Bay Cities CD 1007, conducted by Hendl; the second by Falletta and the New Zealand Symphony on Koch 3-7367-2 H1; both currently available at <http://www.berkshirerecordoutlet.com>), and it's got a lot to recommend it. Falletta and the New Zealanders may play more symphonically and more precisely than Rosenberg and the Hot Springs Music Festival, but the Americans seem to have more fun.

For me, Willie the Weeper gives the most pleasure, not least because it's new to me. As far as I know, it gets its first-ever recording, definitely the first in its orchestrated version. It forms the second part of Ballet Ballads (1948), a triptych of ballet one-acters by Moross and librettist extraordinaire John Latouche. The trio of dances (Susanna and the Elders, Willie the Weeper, and The Eccentricities of Davy Crockett) appeared first off-, then on-Broadway to great acclaim. I don't believe any of the trio has ever appeared in commercial recording until now, which kind of lets you know the shelf life of great acclaim. Until now, I've only read about the Ballet Ballads in books. Keeping in mind the economics of off-Broadway, Moross provided a piano-vocal score but always intended to orchestrate the dances. What with one thing and another, however, the opportunity didn't arise until 1966, when CBS paid Moross to orchestrate Willie for a show which never aired. Obviously I can't speak to the other two parts, but Willie's a knockout. As in Frankie and Johnny, Moross mixes song and dance, but here even more elaborately, calling for a tenor and chorus, with either solo or chorus in every movement. Moross remarked that he wanted "to mix the singing and dancing that you didn't know where the singers began or where the dancers ended." Alert listeners will recognize the links to Weill and Brecht's Seven Deadly Sins. Indeed, as with Brecht's Singing Anna and Dancing Anna, we find a Singing Willie and a Dancing Willie, representative of two places in the character's psyche. The plot tells about Willie and his reefer, "the magical weed" which allows him to escape his dreary life into fantasies of wealth, power, sex, and (pathetically) even simple acceptance. Latouche bases his text on a couple of urban folk rhymes, "Willie the Weeper" and "Cocaine Lil":

Did you ever hear about Willie the Weeper?

Made his livin' as a chimneysweeper.

Cocaine Lil, Cocaine Lil.

She lives in Cocaine Town on Cocaine Hill.

She has a cocaine dog and a cocaine cat,

and they fight all night with a cocaine rat.

Moross comes up with a score that pays homage to the twelve-bar blues and to boogie-woogie. Almost all the music varies these forms, with the exception of two "pop" numbers, one foreshadowing the later Moross-Latouche musical, *The Golden Apple*, beloved of Broadway cultists, toward the end. The work opens and ends in a rolling marijuana haze. Along the way we get frenzied blues, seductive blues, sad blues, and so on. The blues, of course, has a definite harmonic structure, and Moross amazes me with the modulating changes he comes up with, still in the spirit of the blues. At one point, I suspect he's in two keys at once or dancing on the edge of a shimmering divide between two keys. Latouche comes up with so many wonderful lyrics, it's hard for me to decide what to quote. At random, I've picked the following from the episode "Famous Willie":

In Turkestan, in Kansas City, Kan.  
In Moxie or Biloxi who's the favorite man?  
Who's the chap who is the apple of the pub-a-lic eye?  
It's twelve-tone Willie when he hangs it high.

But there's also Cocaine Lil's enchantingly syncopated refrain:

'Cause it's oh baby, and gee baby,  
And m-m-m baby, and ah,  
And it's well, well baby, and swell baby,  
Then good-bye baby, good-bye, ta-ta.

Obviously, both Moross and Latouche intend something at least a bit satiric, but Moross's music humanizes it. It gets us to genuinely care about poor Willie, even as he sinks back into stupor.

The Hot Springs Music Festival Symphony Orchestra mixes, as a matter of mission, professionals with students, and, to some extent, it sounds like it. Intonation is professional, but attacks aren't particularly crisp. Nevertheless, Rosenberg does a fantastic job getting inside Moross's music. The student Festival Chamber Chorus has voices a bit young, but the diction and characterization of the words leave many a professional group in the dust. Everything has the happy energy of a Broadway show. Mezzo Diane Kesling scores a tour-de-force in *Those Everlasting Blues*. This ain't easy music, and she treads a fine line between an "operatic" and a vernacular approach. Unlike most classically-trained singers, including native speakers, she actually knows how to sing in English without sounding like Margaret Dumont or as if she's trying to swallow a mouthful of hot mush. It's a solid dramatic performance as much as a feat of singing. I can say the same for tenor John DeHaan in *Willie*. He comes closer to musical comedy than Kesling does, but his declamation isn't as crisp. Still, a fine job of singing and a fine performance as well.

The sound is fine for each piece, but I do want to complain about the different recording levels between *Those Everlasting Blues* (recorded much higher) and the two ballets. A comfortable level for *Frankie and Willie* becomes slightly painful with *Those Everlasting Blues*. A comfortable level for *Those Everlasting Blues* makes you strain to hear the ballets. Other than that, a great CD, especially for the price. - S.G.S. (March 2003)

Sequenza 21/The Contemporary Classical Music Weekly  
January 2003

"But, he was her man, nearly all the time..." Wonderfully atmospheric rendering of the complete ballet-- *Frankie and Johnny*--commissioned by Ruth Page of the Chicago Ballet. To the degree that he is remembered at all, Moross is best-known for the film score of *The Big Country* but even bigger things were expected of him.

Audiofile Audition  
December 2002  
John Sunier

Moross, who lived until 1983, worked primarily for the stage and films, writing in a very American tonal style. His works often used the folk tunes and pop songs of the day. Many musicals, ballets and 17 film scores, including that for the Western "*The Big Country*." I've enjoyed for years an LP of some of Moross ballet music for orchestra and two pianos, so was surprised to find that the two dance works heard here incorporate vocal and choral forces. *Frankie and Johnny* grows out of the popular song about the hooker who shoots her pimp for philandering with another woman. The modern-day Greek chorus/trio heard throughout are Salvation Army girls in the ballet production. The short mid-program cantata uses a more modest instrumental accompaniment and more experimental tonal language, but with the closing *Willie the Weeper* - premiered by the Hot Springs Festival performers - we return to the jazzy, seamy-side-of town mood of *Frankie and Johnny*. The singers are excellent in their roles and deliver the lyrics with great clarity.

Records International  
January 2002

Except for a couple of Bay Cities CD reissues, Moross' non-film music has been neglected, making this release recorded at last year's Hot Springs Music Festival very welcome. The earliest work is *Those Everlasting Blues*, a six-minute "cantata" composed in 1932 set in what Moross considered the style of the "Negro Popular Song". *Frankie and Johnnie* came the year following and is one of the first American ballets in true "popular" form. Three singers play a trio of Salvation Army girls who comment on the action of the ballet (prostitute loves but then kills her pimp/lover whom she catches cheating on her). *Willie the Weeper* (1948) was one of three "Ballet Ballads" which Moross

intended to blur the lines between opera and dance and which combine dance, song and story-telling in a through-composed form without dialogue.

Good Sounds

February 2003

Born in New York, in the same neighborhood that produced Aaron Copland and George Gershwin, Jerome Moross composed music for the movies that indelibly identified him with the Wild West. His theme for *The Big Country* immediately leaps to mind when one mentions music for Western film, but the composer's other music showed urban and jazz influences. All three works on this delightful disc were written, in one way or another, for the dance, though singers are included in the orchestral complement. They are genuine Americana discoveries, and are well played and recorded on this CD, part of Naxos' American Classics series. The young American singers make a fine impression. The recorded sound is detailed and stereo is deftly used to keep everything clear.