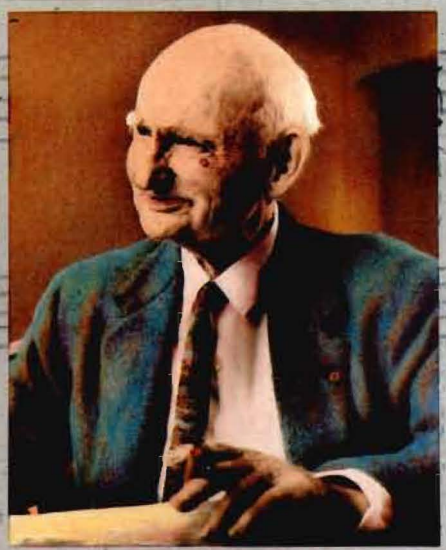
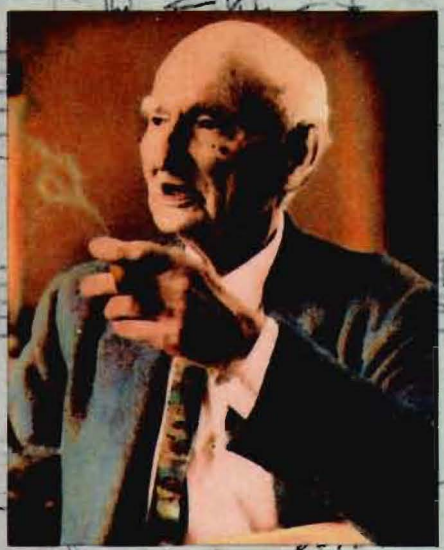
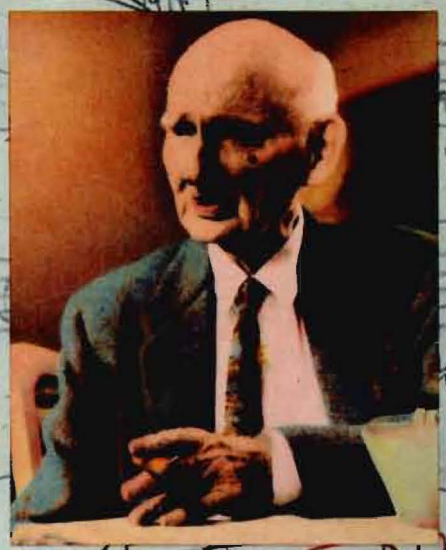
An Easter greeting to a friend, circa 1959

Rarely has so modest an output focused such a wealth of imagination and pungency. Rarely have so few works earned for their composer such enthusiasm and devotion, largely because Carl Ruggles (1876-1971), who could be highly critical of others, was even more exacting of himself. As he told me: "If a composer can't criticize himself, he doesn't get very far." And: "Every time I've let a passage go at what I thought was good enough, sooner or later it's come right back and slapped me in the face!" With such standards it was natural for him to destroy all his earlier music except what happened to survive by accident.







He was not always such a perfectionist. Born March 11, 1876, at Marion, Massachusetts, on Buzzard's Bay, he grew up as practical fisher-boy and instinctive fiddler. His mother, a gifted soprano, sang him tunes till his homemade bow found the notes on his cigar-box fiddle. Later, with a real fiddle, and after the family moved near Boston, he played in theater orchestras, learning to keep going no matter what: "They had the feeling to go for the right note, whether it was on the page or not—that's a gift! Compared to the Keith Theater orchestra, the Boston Symphony men weren't worth a damn."

Around the turn of the century he studied violin with Felix Winternitz and composition with Josef Claus and John Knowles Paine. He audited English courses at Harvard, engraved music and title pages for the Stanhope Press, was music critic for a short-lived Cambridge paper and attended an informal Saturday course in marine architecture given by an enterprising M.I.T. student. "I played some with Longy's amateur orchestra. They tried over things. When you played with Longy, you learned a lot."

Such a variety of background was not suggested in his earliest known music, the Bodenstedt song and the Burns song, which survive only in copyright deposit copies at the Library of Congress. Both show his early admiration for Robert Franz* (the quiet warmth and questioning subtlety) and show also how the beginnings of a technique gained from Claus and Paine were adequate to his own equivalent of Franz.

Later, in 1906, a shared enthusiasm for Franz was one of the first bonds between Carl and Miss Charlotte Snell, an immensely talented contralto with a queenly presence. When Carl went to Winona, Minnesota, in 1907 to teach violin and composition, Charlotte gave up the prospect of a brilliant oratorio career and followed him there to teach voice. They were married in 1908, two days before Carl conducted the first concert of the Winona Symphony. It is well that the Symphony paid him, because never having paid for lessons himself, he never dunned his pupils, who were all in the orchestra. (Charlotte was more realistic with her students.)

The demise of the Winona Sympony in 1912, despite good attendance and enthusiasm, remains a mystery, explained most plausibly by Carl's wanting to spend full time on his opera *The Sunken Bell* (Gerhardt Hauptmann's play *Die versunkene Glocke*, translated by Charles Henry Meltzer). Carl worked on it as late as 1923, never finished it and destroyed the clear copy around 1960 but forgot to destroy a mass of preliminary sketches.

The only apparently finished sketch in the style of the opera is *Mood* for violin and piano, undated. It is mostly atonal, but with a diatonic highlight ending the second paragraph that he hardly would have allowed after focusing his own kind of "dissonant counterpoint." When it came to light during my putting his papers in order in the 1960s, I hid it to prevent his destroying it, but asked him about it. He said the dialogues in it "might have been from hearing Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto—there's a duet in the slow movement." (After I found how the sketches and revisions fitted, my dream was to work it up with Dan Stepner and play Carl a tape of it, hoping that he would like its spontaneity and acknowledge it, but by then he had passed into the other life.) Its subtitle, "Prelude to an Imaginary Tragedy," hints that its intensity was all of a piece with the opera. Its superscription is a quatrain still unidentified (if written by Carl himself or by Charlotte, he would have remembered):

Our world is young,
Young, and of measure passing bound,
Infinite are the heights to climb,
The depths to sound.

His earliest acknowledged music is *Toys*, composed in May 1919 for the fourth birthday of his son Micah, a little song linking musical images of "painted ships," "choo-choo cars," and a floating balloon. It is consistently dissonant, but melodically free and airy. It was published in 1920, with a cover design by Carl's old friend, the painter Rockwell Kent.

On November 1, 1920, Carl wrote Henry Cowell from Grantwood, N.J.,: "I have just finished a rhapsody for 6 horns and orchestra…horns all in unison." This was the third movement of his visionary short symphony *Men and Angels* (*Men, Angels, Sun-Treader*)—all titles suggested by Charlotte. ("Sun-treader" was Browning's epithet for Shelley in "Pauline.")

This *Men* is a concise balancing of a few episodes related by melodic variation: a pair of fanfares, quiet lento, fantastic five-voice canon that ends *adagio*, final fanfare. In 1924 Carl discarded it.

Angels is a hymn for six trumpets. Carl told me that when he was working on it at Grantwood, Henry Cowell brought musicologist Charles Seeger, who exclaimed: "There! That's the way music should be!" Carl also mentioned that when he and Seeger were working at it together, they thought they had got just as far as possible from a then-accepted kind of music. But over a half-century later, its hymn phrases sound tonal. In Carl's own melodic style, "I never repeat till I come to the 9th note, but in *Angels* I disregarded it." In 1940 he revised and transposed it.

This *Sun-Treader* is a violently forthright song-without-words declaimed by the six horns. In 1924 Carl revised it as the first movement (*Men*) of another short symphony (*Men and Mountains*) and used the title in 1926 for another work. Both pieces with this title tempt one to see Carl as a New England transcendentalist, though he never mentioned this philosophy as part of his background.

During the summer of 1923 in Dorothy Canfield's house in Arlington, Vt., he composed (and partly recomposed) a set of three songs for voice and chamber orchestra called *Vox Clamans in Deserto* (A Voice Crying in the Wilderness): (Browning's *Parting at Morning*, Meltzer's *Son of Mine*, Whitman's *A Clear Midnight*). There were to be four more, but they remained unfinished: Carl's own *Premonitions*, Whitman's *As if a phantom caress'd me*, Shelley's *Lyric* and Keat's last sonnet. Browning's sudden horizons, Meltzer's pained longing, and Whitman's "fully forth emerging" soul are all well served by Carl's soaring melodic flights and dissonant textures (sevenths and ninths where octaves might be expected). They were sung by Greta Torpadie and conducted by Carlos Salzedo at the Guild concert of January 13, 1924. These were to be Carl's last collaborations with poets, his music growing steadily in self-reliant concentration.

Front cover painting by Thomas Hart Benton: Courtesy Rockhill Nelson Gallery / G.D. Hackett, N.Y.

Ornamental title page

Having scrapped *Men and Angels*, Carl revised its third movement as the first movement of a new short chamber symphony *Men and Mountains* (*Men, Lilacs, Marching Mountains*), the title taken from Blake's epigram:

"Great things are done when
Men and Mountains meet;
This is not done by
Jostling in the Street."

The middle movement, for strings only, has been aptly described by Dorothy Canfield: "*Lilacs*, music wistful, frail, tenuously complicated, tells of the ebbing away of humanity from the scenes of its old conquests, of sagging rooftrees and rotting farmhouses, of the soft-footed advance of the forest back over the land which man had wrested into his own hands, of dust on deserted hearthstones, of 'brush in the pastures'—that New England phrase which to any Yankee brings up the whole picture."

Marching Mountains, after a rhapsodic introduction, is a march of ponderous majesty, whose energy is briefly held in suspense at the mid-point, then unleashed into a rising acceleration, which ended the first version. It was conducted by Eugene Goossens at the Guild concert of December 7, 1924. "I remember I went down to the concert in a red hunting shirt—Lawrence Gilman spoke about 'a Vermonter coming down to New York.'" In 1942 Carl added a coda, which descends from the high point, by a retrograde of the introduction, down to a vigorous calm.

Carl's next work was planned as another chamber symphony with Whitman's title, *Portals* ("What are those of the known but to ascend and enter the Unknown? And what are those of life but for Death?"). Only the first movement was finished, recomposed for strings only and was conducted by Goossens at the Guild concert of January 24, 1926. "I remember Wally [Riegger] said, 'How beautiful that end is!'" Carl sketched a program note: "It is a prose poem in the form of rhapsodic variations based on a theme of seven measures announced at the beginning by the cellos and basses in octaves." But even after the performance he was still thinking of it as a larger work, though the other movements remain unfinished. In 1966 he told me: "In *Portals* I would make some parts simpler now, cut out some dissonances."

In August 1926, Carl conducted the Arlington Choral Society in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. Years later Charlotte told me: "I was so entranced by the introduction [to the famous Lament] that I forgot to come in. So we smiled sweetly at each other, and Carl started the introduction over again."

That November, his already announced new work was not ready for the International Composers' Guild concert, and co-founder Edgard Varèse could not shift it to a later program, so Carl resigned from the Guild. But in 1965 he told me: "I don't blame him. I messed up his concert; he had to substitute something. We never spoke for many months. Then Charlotte and I went to a concert at Carnegie Hall. As we were coming up the steps, he was coming down, and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and we rushed together with our arms around each other. I said: 'You know I'm no longer a member of the Guild'—and he said: 'Don't you know I never accepted your resignation?'"

The new work was already entitled *Sun-Treader*, and soon the medium enlarged into full orchestra, and the form gradually enlarged into a huge sonata shape (a symphony in one movement), the most definitive and comprehensive statement of his ideals that he was to achieve. The whole structure is motivated from free melody (not rows), and Carl always felt a certain mystery about melodic direction: "What makes you take the high note?—the low note?—the middle note? There's a million things…there's a whole generation back of that. It's not environment, it's not heritage—environment of course prepares things…certain factors come in there. That's what I believe in—what makes you do that?—the feeling that makes you take the right note."

What Carl termed "dissonant melody" generates dissonant texture either by style, consistency, or sometimes by the notes holding beyond, melodic intervals becoming chordal intervals. The form is built of large paragraphs or arcs of melody, which often approach their high point by going back and repeating a few notes (like a running start, as if to intensify the melodic connection) and which often end by relaxing either pitch or volume. These arcs are often separated by delicate echoes or anticipations. Whereas the earlier *Sun-Treader* (in *Men and Angels*) suggested a striding "tread," here the melody is so free, the dissonance so burning, that it seems to be on the sun itself, in a world of flame.

With Charlotte, summer holiday, circa 1911, and a daguerrotype portrait of Rug[illegible]es, circa 1892

The exposition is relatively brief, in three large arcs whose starts one may call A-B-C. A rises in jagged intervals ($A^{\flat}$-$a^{\natural}$-$e^{\flat}$-d^{1}-b-c-$f\#^{1}$…), accompanied by steadily accelerating drum beats. The transition anticipates B, which is a narrowing of A (a^{2}-$b^{\flat 2}$-g^{2}-$f\#^{2}$-$a^{\flat 2}$…), these four notes generating a climactic sequence which will be important later on. B's ebb ends with C (d^{2}-$c\#^{2}$-$g\#^{1}$-a^{1}, a near-inversion of A), whose climax varies B's sequence and leads directly to the first development.

This is also in three large arcs, starting with A, variant of C, variant of B. The first (A) breaks off abruptly, leading to a canon of $d^{\flat 3}$-c^{3}-b^{2}-$b^{\flat 2}$-g^{2}-$g\#^{2}$…answered by $e^{\flat 3}$-d^{3} and by f^{3}-e^{3}, each voice having its own dissonant accompanying voice, making a six-part canon for strings alone, with a rhythmically regular sequence of a^{2}-f^{2}-e^{2}-$f\#^{2}$ derived from B's sequence. An echo leads into the third arc, derived from B (f^{1}-$g^{\flat 1}$-$b^{\flat 1}$-a^{1}-$g^{\flat 1}$-$a^{\flat 1}$-$d^{\flat 2}$…), whose ebb leads into the second development.

This is in five arcs, starting with variants of A, A, C, C, B. The first starts gently (nine drum beats instead of sixteen), but cuts off violently. The second rounds its arc *mp-fff-pp*. The third starts with a variant of C but becomes a retrogression of the canon midway in the first development. The fourth repeats the canon forward again (same pitches as before but fuller scoring). The fifth repeats most of the third arc of the first development almost verbatim, leading directly into the recapitulation, mostly a literal repeat: A transposed, B verbatim, C prolonged to lead into the coda, which consists of five brief starts of A, the last with a mounting sequence toward the final dissonant chord.

Much of the texture is basically in three voices, the outer two often in octaves and in rhythmic unison but contrary motion, the inner one often a compact "handful" rhythmically different and with its own dissonances. Carl found it hard to focus many rhythmic details—when he showed it to the cellist Lorenz, "he'd say 'Sing that! You're playing it in a different way, but when you sing it, it's a damn sight better!'" And it was hard to make it seem natural for the retrogression of the canon to be followed by its going forward again: "It must have taken me a year to make that turn—I thought I'd never be able to do it."

In the meantime, Carl and Charlotte spent the mid-winters of 1929 in Jamaica and of 1930 near Alamogordo, N.M., with friends. In Jamaica at age 53 Carl began his painting, which reached impressive stature through a growth much more relaxed and abundant than his music. And around 1929 Carl met Charles Ives, and they found each other kindred spirits. Ives had his best copyist make a transparent score of *Sun-Treader*, but it was soon out of date and covered with revisions. In 1932 Nicolas Slonimsky conducted *Sun-Treader* in Paris and Berlin, two years before its publication.

Carl's first one-man show of paintings was at Bennington College, April 1935 (in May he umpired a baseball game). Other showings were at Bennington 1936, Chicago Arts Club 1937, Detroit Institute of Arts 1941 including *Aftermath* and *Sea Impression*. Each summer he exhibited at the Southern Vermont Art Center at Manchester.

In May 1937 the first *Evocation* found its shape, having been started in 1934. These piano pieces were quite a departure for Carl, a violinist and conductor, but they worthily continue the tradition of piano music being a kind of shorthand of the composer's own orchestra. As in *Sun-Treader*, some of the texture

is generated by holding melody notes beyond.

Another *Evocation* followed in 1940, dedicated to Ives, with a free-rhythm canon and retrogression in the middle. But it was similar enough to the first (almost like an inversion) that he separated them by a contrasting one for Kirkpatrick in 1941.

This intricate structure starts with a long phrase, at first unaccompanied, like a wide-interval Gregorian chant or a slowed butterfly (Carl allowed the first twelve notes to seem like a row), followed by a second long phrase (a variant of the first), accompanied. An interlude leads to a canon on the first phrase (starting strict, later free), which climaxes and ebbs. An echo starts another interlude which climaxes and ebbs, leading to anticipations of the return of the second phrase as coda. All this artful balancing is masked by a spontaneous melodic flow.

Still another *Evocation* was added in 1943, dedicated to Charlotte, violent or strongly tender in statement but simple in its binary form. Uncertainty about the best order of the four was decided by the one to Ives having the strongest, if not the loudest, finality, so the final sequence becomes 1937-41-43-40.

Carl had already scored *Evocation 2* in 1942 for the student orchestra of the University of Miami, and he scored the others in the next few years. In these orchestrations many phrases are in earlier states than the final versions for piano, which Carl kept revising as late as 1956.

Early in 1944 he started an "Invention for Orchestra" and wrote to Ives: "It's the rhythmic physiognomy of the 2nd part that intrigues me; perhaps I'm stumbling on something new." He already had—in the free canonic answers in *Evocation 2* and *Evocation 4*. The shape of the piece has analogies to *Evocation 2*, but is called *Organum*: "Varèse said 'The use of 5ths and 4ths is very remarkable, because that was done hundreds of years ago—let's call it *Organum*.'" It is in six sections: canon, chordal interlude, retrogression of the canon, interlude with a different triple canon, return of the canon, and choral coda. In 1946-47 Carl made a two-piano arrangement of it.

Quite tragically, this *Organum* remains his last finished work in his own style. Projected were more piano pieces in 1947, something for piano and brass in 1949, a commission from the Louisville Symphony in 1952, a set of flower pieces for piano in 1957 for Charlotte, but none shaped up. After Charlotte died suddenly, autumn of 1957, he exclaimed "I've lost my inspiration!"

In her memory, in April 1958, he wrote a hymn tune, *Exaltation* for congregation and organ (or brass) but with no particular text in mind (best with Watts's "O God, our help in ages past"). "Charlotte always wanted me to write a hymn for her," he recalled. It is wonderful to hear so much of Carl's melodic exuberance in these plain hymn phrases (with a few dissonances in the accompaniment), which in one way come back full circle to his plain songs of sixty years before.

But as his music began to lose focus around 1947-49, these were the great years of his painting, which later became more abstracted toward a calligraphic concision like *Sea at Buzzards Bay*, or sometimes more pictorially uninhibited like *Sanctuary*—suggesting that many of his tonal frustrations may have been otherwise fulfilled.

—John Kirkpatrick

*German song composer, 1815-1892

A Christmas greeting, decoration by Ruggles

CARL

Ruggles, enigmatic and granitic man—how his music and spirit have haunted me. I first heard his music at age thirteen—a performance at USC given by Ingolf Dahl. The piece was *Men and Mountains* and I remember how stunning it was. The music of the outer movements seemed brutally succinct—dissonance succeeding dissonance in a series of uncompromising and inevitable proclamations. *Lilacs*—the middle movement seemed to unfold arching and aching lines evoking ineffable shadings that caught longings and sorrows in my throat. I was fascinated.

Years later I began to perform Mr. Ruggles's music and to discover more of his remarkable testimony in each new performance. The fascination continued over the years and turned to awe and appreciation as through repeated performances I began to understand the depth of the music and power of its testimony. It was in this mood that following a performance of *Sun-Treader* with the Boston Symphony, I set out to meet Mr. Ruggles.

Syrl Silberman of WGBH-TV in Boston had worked on a film about him and had become friendly with the old man, who even then—in his nineties—was delighted to get a handsome young woman within grabbing distance. We drove up to the rest home where Mr. Ruggles, an old—and, some said, rather senile—man was living.

I had been told that Mr. Ruggles was inclined to be suspicious of new people and retreat behind the curtain of his infirmities. So Syrl and I just walked into his room, said "Hello," set up a tape recorder, put some light earphones on his old and shriveled head, cranked the volume up as high as possible and started to play an air check of the performance of *Sun-Treader*.

The first tympani stroke of the work hit the old man like a hammer. Suddenly he was sitting bolt upright, his eyes wild and open, like an eagle, his breath coming in fast, hoarse grunts and growls and gutteral noise: "Fine." "Great!" "Damn, DAMN FINE WORK!" He kept it up right through the whole piece, sometimes singing or moaning along with the music until the end. He turned toward me, sitting at his bedside and grabbed my hand in his, holding it in a viselike grip and just stared at me, saying nothing. We remained so awhile, then he settled back and began to talk, mostly about his friends: Ives ("Charlie"), about Varèse, Thomas Hart Benton, about music, music, music:

"I don't think much about that fellow Brahms. If you ask me he's just a big sissy—always hiding behind formal development resolutions, counterpoint—why doesn't he just come out like a man and say what he means? And those titles of his—*Capriccio Intermezzo*—what the hell does that mean?

A watercolor sketch on the back of an envelope, 1944

"Debussy—a genius—nothing wrong with him that a few weeks in the open air wouldn't cure."

The word "fine" was Mr. Ruggles's ultimate superlative.

"Oh, there are some fine works all right, the *St. Matthew Passion, Missa Solemnis, The Ring, Tristan,* and *Sun-Treader.* When I wrote *Sun-Treader,* I knew it was great. I knew it!

"Bach, now there was a great melody writer—nobody appreciates that. Even the famous one like that, oh, you know, 'Air'...can't be played properly on the G string at all. Why they just crap all over the thing, those goddamned violinists!"

Mr. Ruggles had strong opinions and great expectations.

He forged out an independent musical style, yet one based on his own idols—Bach, Beethoven, Wagner: From Bach, the contrapuntal mastery and complexity; from Beethoven, a commitment to tough and dramatic formal organization; and from Wagner, a rich orchestra and harmonic vocabulary using complex chromaticism to convey violent or subtle emotional states.

His music is a distillation of his thinking, feeling, and searching over the many years it took him to write each of his twelve works. These feelings in his music include *rage*—the rage of the mortal part of man screaming at the universe and cursing his finitude; *exultancy*—the mind and spirit of man reaching out, the universe comprehending it and merging with it; *longing and sorrow*—for all the great beauty that is lost in life and in the world—for all that is corruptible, for all that has passed away.

It is romantic music of great rhythmic and tonal complexity and the difficulty in performing it is to get past the difficulties and let it sing in Mr. Ruggles's favorite "tempo rubato." The inspiration for his pieces came in sudden flashes—a chord or a motive would appear and go down on whatever paper happened to be at hand and written in pen, chalk, crayon, whatever. Then, however, came an exhaustive process of years of scrawled solutions, cross-outs, revisions and commentaries, leaving stacks of paper bags, shirt cards, score pages, greeting cards and newsprint all containing stages of the works in progress.

The titles of his works, *Evocations, Angels, Portals, Sun-Treader, Exaltation,* say it all. He was a primitive, a transcendentalist, a salty Yankee. The movement of light on water, a whiff of a flower, a glimpse of his hand in the lantern light of the old school house in which he lived were all passages to the ecstatic.

Lilacs is such a good example of his special imagery. The forty-odd bars of the piece present a haunting and swirling sense of lilac scent overpowering in the night—just as it was around the Ruggles's house—a mournful sense of the evanescence of these first fragile spring moments. But also, the piece witnesses the feeling of New Englanders taking buggy rides in spring and seeing on the hills the broken chimneys and patches of lilacs that were all that remained of the farms of the boys who had gone to the Civil War and never came home. Lilacs.

These qualities make his music ever richer and more telling for me. More quotes from Mr. Ruggles, the first from his sketches filled with drawings and commentaries:

"I'm so disappointed in you musicians, you people. You don't understand the music, the forms, the forms of communication."

When I left him on our last visit, I asked him if he still thought about music:

"Think about it every day—always. I'm composing, you know, right now—all the time. But my body, do you see? It is totally diseased, there's not a part of it that works right. So I'm sorry that I can't write anymore, can't finish what I've started—or start new. But in my spirit I am unvanquished. I can't write, but I'm composing. Every day."

I asked him if he could sing some of what he was composing.

"First there are horns..." He began to sing, rasp, scream musical lines, all with his distinctive shapes, interjecting, "Here flutes! And strings—molto rubato, rubato!" And as we turned to go, he said:

"Now don't go feeling sorry. I don't hang around *this* place, you know. Hell, each day I go out and make the universe anew—all over!"

—Michael Tilson Thomas

Ruggles's birthplace; photo taken by Charlotte, 1914

PRODUCED BY STEVEN EPSTEIN

THE COMPLETE MUSIC OF CARL RUGGLES
MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS
BUFFALO PHILHARMONIC

SIDE 1

TOYS (For Voice and Piano)
Judith Blegen, Soprano
Michael Tilson Thomas, Piano

VÔX CLAMANS IN DESERTO (For Chamber Orchestra and Mezzo-Soprano)
Beverly Morgan, Mezzo-Soprano
Speculum Musicae
1. PARTING AT MORNING
2. SON OF MINE
3. A CLEAR MIDNIGHT

MEN
Buffalo Philharmonic

ANGELS (Original Trumpet Version)
Brass Ensemble, Gerard Schwarz, Leader

MEN AND MOUNTAINS
Buffalo Philharmonic
1. MEN
2. LILACS
3. MARCHING MOUNTAINS

SIDE 2

ANGELS (Trumpet/Trombone Version)
Brass Ensemble, Gerard Schwarz, Leader

SUN-TREADER
Buffalo Philharmonic

SIDE 3

PORTALS (For String Orchestra)
Buffalo Philharmonic

EVOCATIONS (Original Piano Version)
John Kirkpatrick, Piano
I —LARGO
II —ANDANTE CON FANTASIA
III—MODERATO APPASSIONATO
IV—ADAGIO SOSTENUTO

SIDE 4

EVOCATIONS (Orchestral Version)
Buffalo Philharmonic
I —LARGO
II —ANDANTE SEMPRE POCO RUBATO
III—MODERATO APPASSIONATO
IV—ADAGIO SOSTENUTO

ORGANUM
Buffalo Philharmonic

EXALTATION (For Brass, Chorus and Organ)
Brass Ensemble, Gerard Schwarz, Leader
Gregg Smith Singers, Gregg Smith, Director
Leonard Raver, Organ

All selections except *TOYS* and *EVOCATIONS* (Piano Version) conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. All selections are ASCAP.

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