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SUNDAY, MAY 10, 2009

## CD review: Disc of early Blitzstein music offers revelation



**Marc Blitzstein (1905-1964).**

**By Greg Stepanich**

Those who have seen Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* in performance can testify to its burning, slashing energy, a drive that moves the piece of 1937 agitprop ineluctably forward even as its angular melodies give the listener very little to hang onto.

But there was another side to this fascinating American composer (1905-1964), and a welcome new disc being released Tuesday by San Francisco-based Other Minds shows us what that was, as well as presents at least one work that deserves to be widely recognized in the American classical canon.

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*First Life: The Rare Early Works*, is a collection of three pieces for solo piano, Blitzstein's instrument, and two string quartets, written in the years from 1927 to 1932, when the composer was fresh out of studies at the new Curtis Institute and had continued on to teaching sessions with Nadia Boulanger in Paris and Arnold Schoenberg in Berlin. (The excellent notes by Howard Pollack, who is at work on a Blitzstein biography, say that he much preferred Boulanger.)



While Blitzstein's left-wing politics were an important consideration for the type of theater he wanted to write -- he was at work on an opera about the 1920s anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti when he was beaten to death in Martinique in an apparent gay-bashing -- as a purely instrumental composer he was a writer of his time, a musician enamored of the brittle, impudent style then championed by compatriots such as Aaron Copland and George Antheil.

In the three piano pieces -- a one-movement Sonata (1927), a scherzo titled *Bourgeois at Play* (1930), and a three-movement sonata called *Piano Percussion Music* (1929) -- that brash voice dominates, but is paired with a wistful vein of austere lyricism akin to that of Hindemith. The pieces are played here by Sarah Cahill, and she plays them marvelously, with brio and technical assurance, an important consideration given Blitzstein's own first-rate pianism.

The Sonata boasts a brash eight-note main opening that recurs in the middle and at the end, contrasting with a much slower contrasting theme of pensive beauty. Blitzstein indulges his dramatic bent with frequent rests amid the clangor of the opening section, an effective bit of aural theater that concentrates a listener's attention.

The piece has an aggressive athleticism that is further explored in *Piano Percussion Music*, which has a gimmicky third movement (Rondino) in which the pianist has to slap the keyboard lid, as well as open and shut it, violently and loudly. It's a strong effect, but the music played on the keyboard -- a ferocious galop with tricky rhythmic changes and sharply etched melodic fragments -- is compelling enough on its own.

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The slow movement, an Air with Baroque-style melodic figurations that are driven to a climactic cadence, follows a stumbling, agitated Toccata that builds to a tempestuous close and then makes its exit with a simple, hushed line. It's an inventive, muscular piece that has more expressive range than work by other contemporary composers exploring the same realms of dissonant tonality.

*Bourgeois at Play*, the final piano piece on the disc, is a bubbly 3-minute work of high-spirited drama in which Prokofiev-style syncopations and dynamic shocks are leavened by short glints of sheer diatonicism that seem to be there for purposes of mockery, a sort of tonal Bronx cheer. Cahill's exemplary pianism never flags throughout this recital, and she makes a most persuasive advocate for these fascinating pieces.

As good as she is, and as interesting as these piano pieces are, they are overshadowed by the two string quartets on the disc, played by the Del Sol Quartet. The second of those two, *Serenade for String Quartet*, has three movements, all marked Largo, but in practice, only the middle one really qualifies as a true slow movement.

Blitzstein clearly understood how to write for strings, and the *Serenade* is an intense, passionate piece that looks forward to Shostakovich in its single-mindedness and serious cast. Much of the music consists of darkly colored chordal and contrapuntal movement that speaks a simpler harmonic language than the earlier piano pieces. Crucial to Blitzstein's aesthetic is motif, and here in the *Serenade* these melodic utterances weave through the music and unify it: in the first movement, it's a six-note phrase, and in the last, an old-fashioned trill-and-suffix statement.

The second movement is perhaps the most involving, with very slow, almost primitive textures that wander aimlessly over a broken landscape before mounting to a powerful climax. Although there is a certain sameness of sound in some respects for the three movements, at less than 17 minutes total it can perhaps best be thought of as a solitary movement in three sections; certainly the last couple minutes of the final movement enter a major-key harmonic framework that speaks of release and relief.

But it is the earlier string quartet, subtitled *Italian*, that is the major find of this disc. This four-movement work has elements of Kitsch, but

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they are checked by an overall feeling of wit and mastery that makes it sound entertainingly varied rather than scattershot.

The first movement is a strong, often ruminative piece of writing in which clear motifs and wholly idiomatic string textures float above a gentle neoclassical pulse. The second is the pastiche movement, but Blitzstein sidesteps its pitfalls with the quality of his material. The ghost of the Verdi quartet is in the graceful opening melody, and operatic gestures are felt throughout, in a big waltzy outburst in the middle, mini-cadenzas from violin and cello, and a mournful, beautiful aria-like section in which the cello takes the lead.

A very brief (too brief, it seems to me) murmuring Presto follows in which the skill of Blitzstein's string writing can again be appreciated, and that sets up the music for a closing Largo of nine minutes' duration, almost twice as long as the next longest movement in the piece.

And it is a ravishing movement, beginning with a simple exchange of minor-key thirds, back and forth, setting up an atmosphere of grief. Voices are slowly added, and ultimately a four-note upbeat motif becomes the dominant phrase, appearing here and there as the music unfolds into a long-breathed, tragic utterance. Throughout both the quartets, the Del Sol plays wonderfully, with commitment and verve.

Blitzstein's *Italian Quartet* is a very fine piece of American string-quartet writing, and the notes tell us that Boulanger thought highly of it. She was, as she was in so many other things, absolutely right: it is indeed "wholly admirable," and should be seriously considered for inclusion in the repertory of every quartet interested in 20th-century American music.

The sound quality on this disc is quite good, even when heard through cheap computer speakers as a test. There's a concert-hall echo on the piano pieces that might not be to everyone's taste, but it worked fine for me. The quartets, in contrast, have a chamber ambience.

Other Minds deserves high praise and thanks for helping to fill in the picture of this much-neglected American composer. Although he concentrated his energies on the stage, Blitzstein did not have the melodic facility that would have made him a lasting success on the popular stage, unlike his friend Leonard Bernstein, who did.

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▶ January (30)

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'9 to 5 (1)

' film (1)

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That makes it doubly sad that he left off writing chamber music early, for the evidence here suggests that his particular gift was well-suited for this genre, and that he might very well have been able to write an important body of string quartet literature had he chosen to.

Nevertheless, devotees of American classical music will want to have these recordings, and doubtless want to hear at least one of the quartets in performance.

**Marc Blitzstein: First Life - Rare Early Works** (*Other Minds/CD 1017-2*) is being released Tuesday and is available at [www.otherminds.org](http://www.otherminds.org) and [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

POSTED BY GREG STEPANICH AT 11:22 PM

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' theater (1)  
 'Billy Elliot (1)  
 'Billy Elliot' (1)  
 'In Plain Sight' (1)  
 'Slumdog Millionaire (1)  
 'Wizard of Oz (1)  
 2008 (1)  
 Aaron Kula (1)  
 Academy Awards (3)  
 Adrienne Caterna-Thomas (1)  
 aging (1)  
 Akiva Goldsman (1)  
 Alan Ayckbourn (1)  
 Alcott (1)  
 Alicia Deyá (1)  
 Alondra de la Parra (1)  
 American art (1)  
 American Guild of Organists (1)  
 American International Fine Art Fair (1)  
 american teen (1)  
 amy adams (1)  
 Amy Poehler (1)  
 Andre Watts (1)  
 Andrea Robbins (1)  
 Andrew Lloyd Webber (1)  
 Andrew Rosendorf (1)  
 Andrew Stevovich (1)  
 angels and demons (1)  
 Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens (1)  
 Anna Faris (1)  
 Ansel Adams (1)  
 Antonin Dvorak. CD reviews (1)  
 Arlene Dahl (1)  
 Armin Mueller-Stahl (1)  
 Armory Art Center (2)  
 Art (1)  
 Art and Antique Show (2)  
 Art Basel (6)

Arthur Laurents (1)  
Arthur Weisberg (1)  
ArtiGras (1)  
arts (2)  
arts on this date (1)  
ArtServe (1)  
ArtsPaper Interview (3)  
Atlantic Classical Orchestra (1)  
Avi Hoffman (2)  
Ayelet Zurer (1)  
B.B. King (1)  
Bad Boys of Dance (2)  
Ballet (1)  
Ballet Florida (2)  
Ballet Gamonet (1)  
Baroque music (1)  
Barry Seidman (1)  
Beehive (1)  
Ben Affleck (1)  
ben kingsley (1)  
benjamin button (1)  
beth dimon (3)  
Bill Maher (1)  
Bill Williams (2)  
billy elliot (1)  
Blanchett (1)  
Boca Raton Museum of Art (1)  
Boca Symphonia (8)  
books (5)  
Brian Hecker (1)  
broadway (4)  
Broward Center (1)  
bruce adler (1)  
bruce helander (1)  
Bruce Sabath (1)  
Bruce Webber (1)  
Buck Howard (1)  
Buddy Guy (1)  
C.S. Lewis (1)

cabaret (1)  
Calder Quartet (2)  
caldwell (1)  
Caldwell Theatre (9)  
Carbonell Awards (4)  
Carter W. Lewis (1)  
Catherine Trieschmann (2)  
Charles Martin Smith (1)  
Chiara Massini (1)  
Chinese Art (1)  
Choderlos de Laclos (1)  
choral music (2)  
Christina Castelli (1)  
Christmas (1)  
Christopher Demos-Brown (1)  
Christopher Plummer (1)  
classical music (73)  
Cleve Gray (1)  
Cleveland Orchestra (1)  
Clive Cholerton (3)  
Coldplay (1)  
Colin Hanks (1)  
Colony Hotel Palm Beach (1)  
commentary (3)  
Conor McPherson (1)  
Coraline (1)  
criticism (1)  
Cruzan Amphitheatre (2)  
cuillo centre (2)  
Czech Symphony Orchestra (1)  
dan brown (1)  
dance (13)  
Dangerous (1)  
David Frost (2)  
David Hyde Pierce (1)  
David Koeppe (1)  
dead man's cell phone (1)  
Debra Fritts (1)  
Debra Monk (1)

Delray Beach Film Festival (2)  
Delray String Quartet (5)  
Demetrius Klein Dance Company (1)  
Dolly Parton (1)  
Don Henley (1)  
Donizetti (1)  
doubt (1)  
Dream a little dream (1)  
Drew Barrymore (1)  
Duncan Theatre (4)  
Duncan Theatre. J.D. Souther (1)  
Dustin Hoffman (1)  
Echoing Air (1)  
economy (1)  
Edward Albee (1)  
eissey (1)  
Eissey Campus (1)  
Eissey Campus Theatre (1)  
Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (1)  
Emerging Cinemas (2)  
Emily Blunt (1)  
Emma Thompson (1)  
end of year (1)  
entertainment (1)  
Eve Queler (1)  
Evita (1)  
Ewan McGregor (1)  
FAU (1)  
Felix Mendelssohn (1)  
Festival of the Arts Boca (7)  
Fiennes (1)  
film (35)  
Flagler Museum (4)  
florence foster jenkins (1)  
Florida Atlantic University (3)  
Florida Grand Opera (3)  
Florida Memorial University (1)  
Florida Stage (10)  
France (1)



Francois Begaudeau (1)  
Frank Converse (2)  
Frankie Valli (1)  
Fred Frith (1)  
Frederic Chiu (1)  
Frost (1)  
GableStage (2)  
Gabrielle Chou (1)  
Georgia O'Keeffe (1)  
Giacomo Puccini (1)  
giselle (1)  
Gold Coast Opera (1)  
Golden Globes (1)  
greg cannom (1)  
gypsy (1)  
Haagsche Hofmuzieck (1)  
Hapster awards (1)  
harpsichord (1)  
Harriet Himmel Theater (1)  
Henry Selick (1)  
Holden Luntz (1)  
holiday music (1)  
Hollywood Foreign Press Association  
(1)  
Holocaust (1)  
Home Aid Concerts (1)  
hugh sung (1)  
Impressionist painting (1)  
Israel Horowitz (1)  
Itzhak Perlman (4)  
Jaco Pastorius (1)  
Jacobs Theatre (1)  
James Gray (1)  
James Reston Jr. (1)  
James Sagui (1)  
James Taylor (1)  
Jane Fonda (1)  
Jane Powell (1)  
Jane Russell (1)

Jane's Addiction (1)  
jazz (5)  
Jazz Arts Music Society (1)  
Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (1)  
Jean Ritchie (1)  
Jean-Michele Gregory (1)  
Jeane von Oppenheim (1)  
Jennifer Aniston (1)  
Jennifer Connelly (1)  
Jennifer Frautschi (2)  
Jennifer Garner (1)  
Jerry Opdenaker (1)  
Jersey Boys (1)  
Jessye Norman (1)  
Joan Baez (1)  
Jodi Picoult (1)  
Jodie Langel (1)  
Jody Hill (1)  
Joel Zwick (1)  
John Goodman (1)  
John Malkovich (1)  
Jon Robertson (1)  
Jonathan Leshnoff (1)  
jonathan stein (1)  
Jose Carreras (1)  
Joseph Turrin (1)  
Joshua Bell (2)  
Joshua Habermann (1)  
Julian Bream (1)  
Juno Beach (1)  
Jupiter (1)  
Kate Winslet (1)  
Kathryn Fox-Winokur (1)  
Keith Paulson-Thorp (1)  
Ken Kwapis (1)  
Kenneth Branagh (1)  
Klezmer Company Orchestra (1)  
Kravis Center (7)  
Lake Worth Playhouse (4)

Langella (1)  
Larry Gallagher (1)  
Laura Jackson (1)  
Laurent Cantet (1)  
Lavard Skou-Larsen (1)  
Leonardo DiCaprio (1)  
Les Liaisons Dangereuses (1)  
Lesley Gore (1)  
letters (6)  
Lisa Leonard (1)  
literature (1)  
Ludwig van Beethoven (1)  
Lydia Artymiw (1)  
Lynn (1)  
Lynn Philharmonia (2)  
Lynn University Conservatory of  
Music (2)  
Lyric Theatre (1)  
Maltz (2)  
Maltz Jupiter (4)  
Mamas and the Papas (1)  
Marc Blitzstein (1)  
Marc Robin (1)  
Margery Lowe (1)  
Maria Karki (1)  
Master Chorale of South Florida (3)  
Matthew McConaughey. (1)  
Max Becher (1)  
Mendelssohn (1)  
meryl streep (1)  
messiah (1)  
Miami City Ballet (1)  
Michael Douglas (1)  
Michael Feinstein (1)  
Michael Hall (4)  
Michael McKeever (2)  
Michael Unger (1)  
Michelle Williams (1)  
Mike Daisey (1)

milk (1)  
Moises Kaufman (1)  
Momix (1)  
monty python (1)  
Mos'Art Theatre (1)  
Mosaic Theatre (2)  
Moses Pendelton (1)  
movie (4)  
movies (1)  
Mozart Piano Quartet (1)  
Munich Symphony (1)  
Nadine Sierra (2)  
Nanette Burstein (1)  
Naples Philharmonic (1)  
Nathan Lane (1)  
New Vista Theatre Company (3)  
New York postcard (5)  
Nicole Yarling (1)  
Nine Inch Nails (1)  
Nixon (1)  
Norma Conway (1)  
Norma Winstone (1)  
norton (1)  
Norton Museum of Art (4)  
Opera (5)  
operetta (1)  
organ music (1)  
Oscars (4)  
Other Minds (1)  
painting (6)  
Palm Beach Atlantic University (2)  
Palm Beach Chamber Music Festival  
(1)  
Palm Beach Community College (2)  
Palm Beach County (2)  
Palm Beach County Convention  
Center (1)  
Palm Beach County Parks and  
Recreation Department (1)


Palm Beach DramaWorks (8)  
Palm Beach Fine Craft Show (1)  
Palm Beach International Film  
Festival (5)  
Palm Beach Jewelry (2)  
Palm Beach Light Opera Company (1)  
Palm Beach Opera (13)  
Palm Beach Poetry Festival (1)  
Palm Beach Shakespeare Festival (2)  
Palm Beach Symphony (1)  
palmbeach3 (3)  
palmbeach3 Contemporary Art Fair  
(2)  
patrick shanley (1)  
patti lupone (1)  
pbcc (1)  
PBS (1)  
Pearl Primus (1)  
penelope cruz (1)  
Peter Meyerhoefer (1)  
Peter Morgan (1)  
philip seymour hoffman (1)  
photography (3)  
piano music (1)  
Pink Panther (1)  
Pitt (1)  
Pixar (1)  
poetry (1)  
popular music (15)  
poulenc trio (2)  
Prazak Quartet (1)  
Prima Trio (1)  
Puccini (1)  
Radu Lupu (1)  
rappaport (1)  
Rasta Thomas (2)  
Recordings (1)  
Renee Fleming (1)  
review (3)

Richard Goode (1)  
Richard Nixon (2)  
Rick Eggert (1)  
Riverside Theatre (2)  
Robert Goodnough (1)  
Robert Janz (1)  
Robert Kovach (1)  
Robert St. Croix (1)  
Rohan de Silva (1)  
ron howard (1)  
RosettaStone (1)  
Rosie O'Donnell (1)  
Rudy Autio (1)  
Salzburg Chamber Soloists (1)  
Sam Mendes (1)  
Samuel Beckett (1)  
Sarah Ruhl (1)  
Sarasota Opera (1)  
Scarlett Johansson (1)  
sculpture (1)  
Sean McGinley (1)  
Sean Penn (2)  
Seminole Hard Rock Casino (1)  
Seraphic Fire (4)  
Serge Strosberg (1)  
Seth Rogen (1)  
Shannon Trudell (1)  
Shu-Ying Li (1)  
Shulamis (1)  
Society of the Four Arts (8)  
Sophie Milman (1)  
South Florida Theater (2)  
souvenir (1)  
spamalot (1)  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church (1)  
Stephen Sondheim (2)  
Steve Lopez (1)  
Steven Dietz (1)  
Strayhorn (1)

SunFest (2)  
Sunset Cove Amphitheater (1)  
Susan Merritt (1)  
tallulah bankhead (2)  
television (5)  
Thais (1)  
The Class (1)  
The Norman Conquests (1)  
theater (56)  
theater review (4)  
Thomas Edison (1)  
Thomas Hampson (2)  
Thomas Sleeper (1)  
Tom Hanks (2)  
Tom Tykwer (1)  
Tom Wahl (1)  
Tony Awards (1)  
Toulouse-Lautrec (1)  
tour (1)  
Trey McIntyre Project (1)  
Trump International Golf Club (1)  
USA Network (1)  
valerie harper (2)  
Vistula Quartet (1)  
visual art (40)  
Vitra Nova (1)  
Walenstein Symphony Orchestra (1)  
Wall\*E (1)  
Watchmen (1)  
weekend arts picks (2)  
Wentworth Gallery (1)  
Wilma Bulkin Siegel (1)  
Winslet (1)  
Wynn Harmon (1)  
Yasmina Reza (1)  
Yi-Jia Susanne Hou. Bowfire (1)  
young frankenstein (1)  
Zack Snyder (1)

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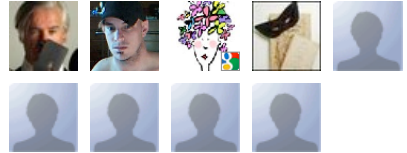
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