



CONSTANT LAMBERT

The Rio Grande

Sunday, May 23, 2010 | 7:00pm

The Kennedy Center

WRITTEN BY:

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Notes on the Program

Mediating on tonight's program between the world of the formal concert piece (Bruckner) and the more informal world of the musical-theatre retrospective (Rodgers and Hammerstein) is *The Rio Grande*. *The Rio Grande* is definitely a piece written for the concert hall, to be performed as written, but its composer, Constant Lambert (1905-1951), was profoundly influenced by the informal music of the twentieth-century New World—one of his formative influences was hearing black American composer-arranger Will Vodery's "Plantation Orchestra" during its tour of Europe in 1923. Some writers, indeed, see the opening choral gesture of *The Rio Grande* as particularly reflecting the signature fanfare of that ragtime/jazz orchestra. At any rate *The Rio Grande*, written in 1927, came into a world which already had the Gershwin *Concerto in F* (1925); it also had Debussy's *Ibéria* with its evocation of Iberian festival rhythms, a work which Lambert singled out as one of the great achievements of twentieth-century music.

The Rio Grande, a setting of the poem of the same name by Sacheverell Sitwell, also evokes a partly Iberian festival, this one in the New World—"through the soft Brazilian air." [Sitwell's somewhat puzzling geography is dealt with briefly at the end of this note.] It is part tone-poem, part choral serenade/nocturne, part piano concerto. It is written for chorus (with brief alto solo and minuscule soprano and tenor solos), piano, brass, strings, and a raft of percussion. The piano is a major presence throughout, co-equal with the chorus. Indeed the centerpiece of *The Rio Grande* is an extended cadenza for [quoting the score] "solo Pianoforte accompanied by 4 percussion players," the percussionists playing a wide variety of instruments—snare drum, Chinese wood block, cymbals struck and rolled in various ways, Chinese tom-tom (that one instrument is optional), cow-bell, castanets, tenor drum, bass drum, triangle. The percussion provides sprinkles of color rather than laying down a beat: they add a bit of extra sass and informality to an already sassy and rhapsodic cadenza.

The cadenza performs an important function in the piece: what comes before it is seen from the perspective of the revelers; after the cadenza the sounds of the festival are heard as from far away—"The noisy streets are empty and hushed is the town..." From this point on equal presences are "the soft Brazilian air" of the summer night—summoned beautifully by the muted strings—and the great river itself, rising to the piece's final fortissimo "as the great Rio Grande rolls down to the sea." From here the piece withdraws—moving, with the poem, out to the sea,



where the ships at anchor can hear the festival from the distance—and ends in the stillness of the summer night.

Geographical note: Sacheverell Sitwell (1897-1988; brother of Edith Stillwell and fellow poet) had never been to Brazil—or indeed to the Western Hemisphere—in 1924, when his poem "The Rio Grande" was published. In point of fact the two most important "Rio Grandes" of Brazil are both states, not rivers: Rio Grande del Norte and Rio Grande del Sur. The Brazil of the poem is a Brazil of the imagination, not a specific spot with latitude and longitude. (None of this kept Sitwell from being commissioned, later in life, to write a travel book on Brazil.)