



**HORVITZ Joe Hill: 16 Actions for Orchestra, Voices, and Soloist** • Christian Knapp, cond; Northwest Sinfonietta; Danny Barnes (*Joe Hill*); Robin Holcomb (*Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*); Rinde Eckert (narr); Bill Frisell (elec gtr) • NEW WORLD 80672 (77:41 📀)

Wayne Horvitz (b. 1955) is best known as a pianist who inhabits that fluid region some call jazz and others new music. He's primarily an improviser, but one with roots also in notated musics, a variety of traditions, and ideas of form and structure that go far beyond the basic song template. He's a classic example of the very American contemporary Downtown scene that prides itself on knowing no confining boundaries.

*Joe Hill: 16 Actions for Orchestra, Voices, and Soloist* (2004) is an ambitious work, and despite its neutral titular description, it's really an oratorio. Joe Hill was an organizer and songwriter for the early 20th-century labor movement, the International Workers of the World. The IWW (or Wobblies) was a visionary enterprise, the proverbial one big union that understood how organization would only succeed if it were universal (a principle, alas, forgotten, which now comes back to haunt the labor movement). Hill was executed in 1915 for a murder he may well have committed, but whose circumstances remain to this day uncertain. He quickly became a martyr to the labor movement, and in the 1960s was returned to a new generation's consciousness by Joan Baez's interpretation of the eponymous folk song.

This piece lasts about an hour, and while structured around a final prison visit by his fellow organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, roams dreamlike through different scenes, memories, and evocations of his life and ideals. Its spare but focused libretto is by Paul Magid. Its tone is eclectic—its opening (and recurrent) motto for trumpet and strings has the open-prairie sound of Copland and Thomson; there are moments of raucous dissonance and polytonality as in Ives; at other times relatively straight folk song from country and blues. There are only two actual songs for Hill, “Power in the Union” and “The Rebel Girl,” the latter arranged by Horvitz into a raucous music hall number, rather like Irving Berlin at the start of his career. But there are a few other traditional sources, and a blues number written by Mississippi John Hurt. The whole thing is a little as though *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*, and the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack all came together for a jam.

And the music is of a very high level. Don't worry that there's some backhanded critical put-down lurking down the road here; there isn't. This is a deeply felt, deeply musical piece. I loved it. Horvitz has a gift for writing plainspoken music with real guts and sophistication. The performers ideally project the intended tone. Danny Barnes and Robin Holcomb have just the right homespun quality in their voices and delivery, and Rinde Eckert is, as always, the voice of postmodern God—simultaneously thunderous, ironic, and compassionate. Bill Frisell's electric guitar part feels a little gratuitous to me, but not through any fault of his own. His taste is sure, and interventions subtle and apt.

This was something of a surprise to me, genuinely moving, pulling off a very difficult feat on several levels. It's hard enough to write effective *political* music, but Horvitz does it (probably because he doesn't try too hard to be political). He also writes eclectically without watering down any of his sources with radical juxtapositions. Great sound, committed performance. Accessible but deeply serious music. A beacon of light in troubled times. **Robert Carl**