

# American Record Guide

May-June 2017

## **WARD:** *The Crucible*

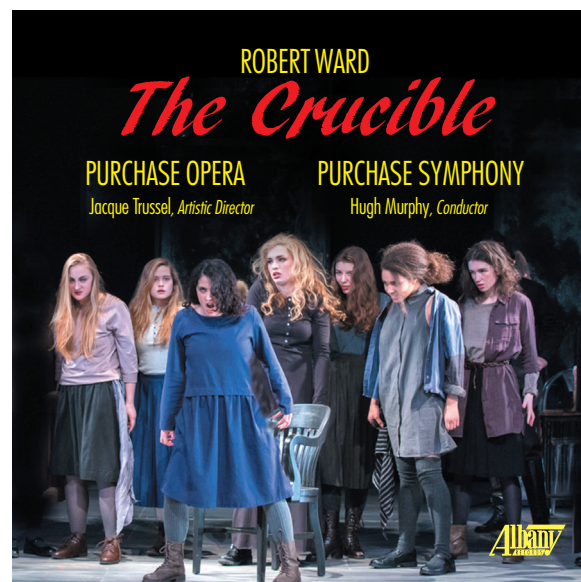
Bryan Murray (John Proctor), Rachel Weishoff (Elizabeth), Sylvia D'Eramo (Abigail), Soraya Karkari (Mary Warren), Joshua Benevento (Judge Danforth), Ryan Capozzo (Rev. Parris), Colin Whiteman (Rev. Hale); Purchase Symphony/Hugh Murphy

Albany 1656—114 minutes

Robert Ward's operatic setting of Arthur Miller's famous play won the Pulitzer Prize in 1962 and the New York Music Critic's Circle Citation. It has been revived a number of times over the last 50 years (just last summer, in fact, at Glimmerglass Opera) and is a frequent staple of university music programs (my alma mater, Western Michigan University, staged it while I was there).

Many critics find the music well written for the voice. Never does Ward write the vocal lines too high or against a heavy orchestration. The libretto by Bernard Stambler is a canny reduction of Miller's play, though several scenes are left out that I miss: Abigail's nearly hysterical scene with the other girls in the first act, the grilling of the Proctors on their biblical knowledge by Rev. Hale in the second. I'm glad that Ward didn't end the opera in an *Andrea Chenier*-like blaze of drums and high notes, but ends it quietly, with dignity and an uncertainty about how events may work out.

While unobjectionable, I don't think Ward's music is actually very memorable. One doesn't come away humming the tunes, but neither does one find that the music enhances the drama in any significant way. There are some motifs that are memorable, and Ward's use of metric alterations can keep the listener interested and off-guard. All the same, there are times when I almost wished I were listening to the play.



This is the first recording in 50 years. The performance is excellent. All of the voices are strong and sturdy, and some are truly outstanding. Bryan Murray and Rachel Weishoff have beautiful, colorful voices and use them most effectively. Sylvia D'Eramo and Soraya Karkari produce fiery characterizations without allowing their voices to become shrill or unsteady. Joshua Benevento creates an implacable Judge Danforth with ringing top notes, and Ryan Capozzo sings lyrically in a role that is not very sympathetic. I was also impressed by Colin Whiteman's Reverend Hale, sung with a mellifluous, powerful bass-baritone.

Production values are more than adequate as they always are for Albany. We get background notes on production and music and the entire text of the opera. The sound is also first rate. Albany has also given us Lee Hoiby's magical opera, *The Tempest*—also worth acquiring.

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