

GRAMOPHONE

THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

Office to say, it was not an especially good omen. It was 2006 and Gil Rose, founder and artistic director of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project – America's only orchestra dedicated exclusively to commissioning, performing and recording 20th- and 21st-century music – was meeting with a foundation that was considering his grant request for funding to start an in-house label for the orchestra; the focus would be largely on American symphonic music. BMOP had already made recordings for other labels, including Naxos, New World and Albany, and on more than one occasion they'd had to secure the funding, record and edit the music, and produce the cover image and booklet themselves – all to create a master recording that someone else would own.

'At a certain point, I thought, "What the hell am I doing?"' says Rose. 'All I needed was a UPC code and a manufacturer. That wouldn't be hard to find.'

The news that day was not auspicious, though. Tower Records, the record store mega-chain, had announced that it was filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. 'And I walked into the meeting, and the person held up the paper with the headline,' the conductor remembers. 'And he said, "Why would we fund this, in this dying industry?"'

But Rose is not a man easily deterred. Indeed, the idea of assembling and maintaining an orchestra dedicated almost exclusively to new music without standing governmental or institutional support seems almost naive in its idealism, yet Rose has sustained it for two decades.

So it has been with BMOP/sound, the label that the orchestra launched in 2008 amid widespread upheaval in the recording industry. And, as with the ensemble itself, the label has not only survived but blossomed into an integral part of the landscape of recorded music. It has garnered six Grammy nominations and a host of critical plaudits. In November it will release the 50th in its line of composer-centric CDs – a collection of orchestral works by the late Steven Stucky.

Surprisingly, Rose says that the label hasn't been an added burden on BMOP's fight to survive. Quite the opposite, in fact: 'I think if we had not established the label we would probably not be around today. The idea of advocating and documenting and preserving important music that would otherwise go unpreserved and undocumented has helped [BMOP] raise money. And, very importantly, it's increased our ability to raise money outside of Boston.'

That, in a nutshell, is the goal of BMOP/sound: documentation. The label's success was never going to be measured by retail sales, although Rose hopes that they will continue to improve over its lifespan. 'It's always been about having a core of people – whether they be philanthropists or composers or supporters of composers – who understood the importance of the archival, preservationist aspect.'

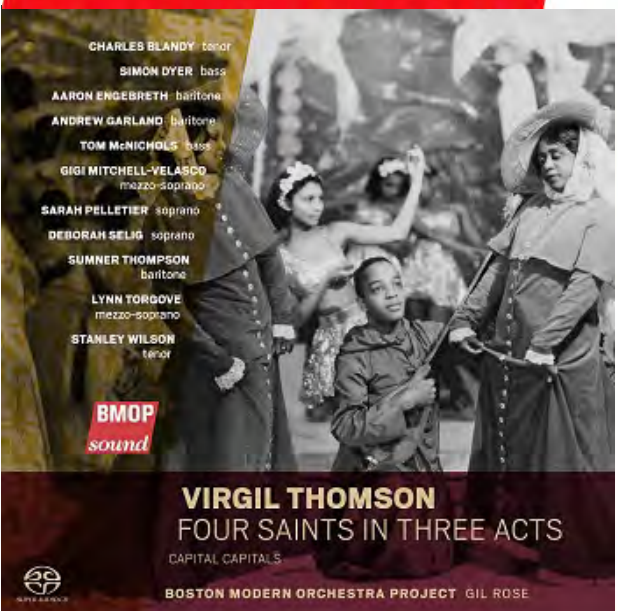
'My goal with the orchestra, and by extension with the label, has been to give a broad picture of American music in the past 100 years, of all stylistic tastes,' he continues. Indeed, few groups can match BMOP for catholicity of taste. 'It's where we tackle everything from Milton Babbitt to Mason Bates,' Rose says – and those composers are, respectively, the 34th and 45th entries in the BMOP/sound catalogue.

The label doesn't match BMOP's concert repertoire exactly, however. In deciding what to record, Rose thinks about three different categories of American music: lost masterpieces; works by senior, established composers that have yet to see the light of day; and music by young composers. While the last category gets the most attention, some of Rose's favourite releases are

BOSTON MODERN ORCHESTRA PROJECT



BMOP
sound



in the first two. Among his proudest achievements is a two-CD set, released last year, of the complete symphonies of Lukas Foss, whose stylistic bearings ranged across his career from neo-classicism to serialism. None of the four symphonies had ever been recorded.

He feels similarly about a collection devoted to Irving Fine and a forthcoming one of works by Leon Kirchner. 'Those mid-century guys have been put on the back burner,' he says. 'That stuff has no champion. And, conveniently, it's always been what's interested me.'

Two works by living composers slated for future release are David Del Tredici's expansively tonal *Child Alice* (1981) and Wayne Peterson's brashly energetic *The Face of the Night, the Heart of the Dark* (1991). Each won the Pulitzer Prize for Music. But *Child Alice* had not been played in its complete form since its premiere until BMOP performed it earlier this year. And Peterson's piece was never played again after its debut performances.

Correcting these kinds of historical and artistic injustices is a motivator for Rose, and he wants to do it while the composers are alive. The fact that Del Tredici is 79 and Peterson 89 does 'light a fire under' him, he says, to get their work released sooner rather than later. 'I really want to make sure that they see their magnum opus.'

The distinguished American composer John Harbison is one of many full of praise for Rose's work: 'One of the things that's always amazed me about Gil is the broad sympathy he has for a lot of different kinds of music, and the no-fuss ability to pull it all together.' Harbison's *Ulysses* was BMOP/sound's inaugural release and the first recording of the 80-minute ballet score. He is the only composer with three releases on the label.

Another reclamation was Harbison's first opera, *Winter's Tale*, from the early 1970s, which BMOP recorded after Harbison did some revisions. 'It's a very difficult piece,' the composer says, 'the kind of thing that, really, a project like this exists for, where you need an orchestra that good, and you need a conductor not daunted by a lot of difficulties. More than just a piece, it was like a whole early part of a decade that came back to me.'

One of the keys to the label's success, Harbison points out, is 'how good a "personnel" person Gil is. He's collected an orchestra at the highest level of quality. That's what he's selling, in a way. It's the pieces, but it's also the quality of the orchestra.' He also has high words of praise for Joel Gordon,



Rose with Steven Stucky; the late composer's music is the focus of BMOP's 50th release

'I can't overestimate what being on the BMOP label has done for me, and the value of that recording of "Play". Without BMOP, it would have died on the vine' – Andrew Norman, composer

young composers, there's no better example of the impact of BMOP/sound than Andrew Norman's *Play*, which the orchestra commissioned and premiered in May 2013. Shortly after the recording was released the following year, musicologist and critic William Robin wondered on Twitter whether it was the greatest orchestral work the 21st century had yet produced. There ensued a debate that brought attention not just to Norman's piece but to a host of other recent orchestral works.

The point, though, is that 'if we hadn't recorded it, no one would have known,' says Rose. 'Because I can tell you, there

weren't a lot of people in the audience that night.'

Norman agrees. 'I don't think I can overestimate the value of that recording and what it has done for me, and what being on the BMOP label has done,' he says

during an interview from Los Angeles. 'As with so many pieces of new orchestral music, it's entirely likely that [without BMOP's support] it would have just died on the vine, so to speak.'

It's common, Norman explains, for composers to put performances of solo and chamber works up on YouTube or elsewhere on the internet. Symphonic music is different, though, because of the regulations that govern how an orchestra's work can be disseminated. 'So it's difficult for orchestral composers to get their work out there. I think that just goes to show the extraordinary value of BMOP/sound and what it's doing for the community, because this work wouldn't exist, this repertoire wouldn't exist, without a record of it.'

As for the label's future, Rose doesn't foresee any drastic changes to a game plan that's already proved successful. He sees his ensemble continuing to introduce new material from younger

composers and resurrect obscure works undeserving of their neglect. Indeed, the list of projects for which recording is either underway or complete translates into releases that stretch well into the future.

'I don't see a giant growth curve,' Rose says. 'I just see the next releases in front of me.' **G**

► Read our review of BMOP's recording of George Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* on page 28



Recording Anthony Paul De Ritis's 'Devolution' with DJ Spooky (aka Paul D Miller) in 2012