

Paul CRESTON

PIANO MUSIC

THREE NARRATIVES, OP. 79

RHYTHMICON: VOLUMES 7-10

Myron Silberstein

FIRST RECORDINGS

PIANO MUSIC OF PAUL CRESTON

by Walter Simmons

Paul Creston (1906–85) was one of the most frequently performed American composers of the 1940s and '50s. His orchestral works were championed by Pierre Monteux, Eugene Ormandy, Leopold Stokowski, George Szell, Arturo Toscanini and others of that calibre; and most of his works featuring unusual solo instruments, such as the saxophone, trombone, harp, accordion and marimba, have become classics for their respective media. Yet many of his most serious and ambitious works have fallen into obscurity. The reasons for his meteoric rise to fame and his equivalently precipitous disappearance from the repertoire are part of the appalling plight of more traditionally inclined American composers of the mid-twentieth century.

Giuseppe Guttoveggio was born in New York City into the family of a poor Sicilian house-painter. In spite of its poverty, the family did manage to afford a ten-dollar piano on which young Joe (as he was called) could practise, as well as a cheap violin for his brother. He took piano lessons from a mediocre local teacher, while teaching himself the violin by practising on his brother's instrument. Almost as soon as he started playing the piano, Joe began to compose, although he attached no particular significance to the activity. He was also interested in literature, and had begun writing poetry, short stories and essays and had even started a novel by the time he reached his teens.

Entering high school in 1919, he became acquainted with other musical teens and soon realised the inadequacy of his own training. He scraped up the money for piano lessons of a more professional standard with G. Aldo Randegger¹ and,

¹ The Italian-born Giuseppe Aldo Randegger (1874–1946), a concert pianist, composer, teacher and writer, has an unusual claim to fame: he hosted a three-part series, *Piano Lessons*, in 1931–32 on what was then an experimental medium – television. It was broadcast by W2XAB, a station owned by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Unfortunately the series was not preserved.

unable to afford concert tickets, spent hours studying scores and reading textbooks in the New York Public Library. Around this time, he played the role of a character named Crespino in a school play. His schoolmates began calling him 'Cress', and the nickname endured.

Forced to leave school at fifteen to contribute to the household income, he landed a clerical job, while taking on the task of educating himself further. Motivated and ambitious, he mustered the self-discipline to maintain a gruelling schedule: working during the day, he practised the piano in the evenings until 11 p.m., and then concentrated on other studies until the early morning hours. Learning that Thomas Edison had managed on four hours of sleep, he decided that he could do the same, smoking coffee grounds in a pipe to stay awake.

At the company where he worked, Cress became friendly with a secretary named Louise Gotto, who also came from a poor Italian-American family. Sharing his artistic aspirations, she was studying modern dance with members of the Martha Graham company. The two began dating, and their friendship developed into a serious romantic relationship.

This period was of considerable importance in shaping the personality of the determined young man. His independent study whetted his voracious curiosity, as he pursued a variety of subjects that captured his interest – not only music and literature, but foreign languages and linguistics in general. He also explored homeopathic medicine, cryptography and philosophy, including the occult. This ceaseless intellectual curiosity led to a lifelong passion for independent study, resulting in what was essentially the opposite of a standard basic education: that is, a highly idiosyncratic landscape of erudition that formed the framework of his own philosophy. Questioning conventional and inherited wisdom, he painstakingly and systematically developed his own theories of music, embracing aesthetics, acoustics, harmony, form, notation and – most of all – rhythm. Not limiting himself to music, however, he also developed his own theories of religion, language, health and nutrition and what might be called 'proper living'. The result was a personal style marked by an idiosyncratic individualism, remarkably coherent and consistent within the parameters of its own postulates but

resistant – even impervious – to perspectives derived from other premises. Also – probably as a defence against the sense of inferiority he felt because of his lack of educational pedigree – he developed an aggressive, pedantic and somewhat pontifical personal manner. Or, as he put it, ‘I did not [...] always accept without question or challenge every dictum of the authorities. The result of such intense scrutiny was to mold me into an iconoclast’.²

Seeking ways to earn a living as a musician, Cress considered working as a church organist and in 1925 undertook a year and a-half of organ lessons with Pietro Yon.³ Not only did he take advantage of every chance to accompany church services, but he also found opportunities to improvise organ accompaniments to silent movies – but sound entered the movies only a few years later, and live musical accompaniments became obsolete.

In July 1927 Cress and Louise were married. Embarrassed for a long time by his own unwieldy, foreign-sounding name, he then decided to change it formally to Creston, choosing Paul as his first name on a whim. By now Louise was dancing with the Martha Graham company, participating in their New York debut. Her work exposed young Creston to the world of modern dance, further sensitising him to the importance of rhythm.

Combining his literary and musical interests, Creston began writing articles on musical subjects, from practical advice for the budding pianist and essays on the performance of Bach to a theoretical examination of music therapy. Most of these articles were published promptly in the music periodicals of the time, initiating Creston’s lifelong practice of giving written verbal expression to his ideas on music theory and aesthetics.

But it was not until the early 1930s that Creston finally decided to commit himself to a career in musical composition. Many of his early pieces were experimental in

² Letter from Creston to me, dated 10 June 1981.

³ Another Italian-born American musician, Pietro Yon (1886–1943) received a fine training in Milan, Turin and Rome, where in 1905–7 he served as assistant organist in St Peter’s in the Vatican. The pastor of the St Francis Xavier Church in Manhattan, in Rome on church business, invited him to come to New York, and for the next few years he divided his time between Rome, where in 1922 he was appointed ‘Titular Organist’ of the Vatican, and New York, where he served in a series of positions of growing importance in St Patrick’s Cathedral. As with Respighi, his compositions include a *Concerto gregoriano* (1920), this one for organ and orchestra.

nature, exploring a variety of techniques and ideas in search of his own identity and compositional voice. By this time, he had also developed considerable proficiency as a pianist. He designated as his Opus 1 *Five Dances* for piano, which he had written in 1932. Shortly thereafter, his music came to the attention of Henry Cowell (1897–1965), then an enthusiastic activist on behalf of the *avant-garde*. Cowell was impressed by the authenticity, integrity and seriousness of purpose he found in Creston's early efforts. In October 1934, Cowell arranged an auspicious showcase for him at New School for Social Research in New York. There Creston performed his 1933 *Seven Theses* for piano.⁴ Cowell published the *Theses* in his *New Music Quarterly* the following year and also released a recording of Creston's Suite for saxophone and piano on his New Music record label. Cowell's continued support contributed significantly to promoting the younger composer's reputation. Cowell was later to write of Creston: "There is no one known to me who handles more expertly the traditional types of development of a musical germ."⁵

During the economically depressed 1930s, Creston wrote pieces for dancers, worked as an accompanist and took a position as organist at St Malachy's Church in Manhattan (it is known as the Actors' Church), which he held for more than 30 years. By 1937 he had abandoned his compositional experimentation, having arrived at the musical language that would serve him, essentially unchanged, for the rest of his life. In 1938 he was awarded the first of two Guggenheim Fellowships, and his works began to receive performances, ushering in a period when his reputation spread rapidly.

But what really catapulted Creston to national prominence was his Symphony No. 1. Although he had received no tutelage in composition, he completed the work in 1940 – only eight years after his decision to commit himself to life as a composer. The symphony won the New York Music Critics' Circle Award as the best new American work, selected over no lesser works than Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait*, William Schuman's *Prayer in Time of War* and Morton Gould's *Spirituals*. In their comments, the critics praised the unpretentious, straightforward directness of intent of the work, its skilful workmanship and its high-spirited mood.

⁴ Recorded by Peter Vinograd, with music by Aaron Copland and by Mark Zuckerman, on Phoenix PHCD-149.

⁵ Henry Cowell, 'Paul Creston', *Musical Quarterly*, October 1948, p. 533.

During the 1940s, with a family that now included two sons, Creston supplemented his income through private teaching of piano and composition and by writing background music for radio, providing music for children's programmes, mystery shows and a weekly religious programme. But the success of his First Symphony led to further awards, as well as major commissions and performances. The 1950s continued the trend, with performances overseas and more than 30 premieres as well. In 1956, the year he turned 50, a national survey found Creston tied with Aaron Copland as America's most frequently performed living composer. That same year he was elected president of the National Association of American Composers and Conductors, and shortly thereafter was elected to the Board of Directors of ASCAP, the main US agency for music copyright and performance. During a visit to the United States in 1959, Dmitri Shostakovich named Creston as one of the American composers whose music was most admired in the Soviet Union.

With the advent of television during the 1950s, Creston was one of the composers who supplied background music for the new medium, especially for news documentaries, such as the highly regarded CBS series *Twentieth Century*, for which he composed fourteen scores. His music for an episode entitled 'Revolt in Hungary' earned him the coveted Christopher Award in 1958.

Then, during the 1960s, almost as precipitously as it had appeared, Creston's star began to fade. Two distinct shifts were taking place: one was that performances of his music were occurring less in major metropolitan centres and more in the smaller cities of the American heartland. A second shift was that his major works – symphonies and tone poems – were being set aside in favour of the rousing overtures and other festive pieces he had written on commission. He continued to receive commissions during the following years, but the sources were far less auspicious and the projects less grand. It was during this period that Creston composed – without a commission – what proved to be his most compositionally ambitious and pianistically demanding solo-piano work: the *Three Narratives*, completed in 1962. So thoroughly do these pieces exploit the full range of the acoustical properties and possibilities of the instrument that only an experienced pianist could have composed them.

When asked about the composers whom he most valued, Creston would reply without hesitation: J. S. Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, Chopin, Debussy and Ravel. Although the influence of Scarlatti can be discerned in his early Piano Sonata,⁶ and that of the others elsewhere, it is probably the influence of Debussy and Ravel that is most apparent in, and clearly underlies, his *Three Narratives*, which might be viewed as his answer to *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Also during the early 1960s, Creston codified his theories on rhythm into a textbook, *Principles of Rhythm*.⁷

For Creston, rhythm was the most important element of music, and one on which he wrote voluminously. In *Principles of Rhythm* he defined his terms and developed his concepts in an orderly, logical progression, applying them to a broad spectrum of the repertoire. But it was in his own music that his rhythmic theory was most relevant. A central distinction drawn in his textbook is the difference between pulse and beat. Pulse refers to the recurrent oscillation indicated by the numerator of a time-signature; beat refers to the actual audible subdivision of the metre. In most traditional classical pieces pulse and beat are identical. In Creston's music, by contrast, extrametrical rhythm (i.e., when pulse and beat conflict, producing what is generally meant by the term syncopation) becomes a focal source of interest and delight, as pulses and beats interact and overlap in an array of patterns, all usually subsumed within one constant metre. The centrepiece of *Principles of Rhythm* is the series of paradigms that Creston called the Five Rhythmic Structures, a concept he had been refining for decades. He traced these patterns of rhythmic organisation back to the Renaissance, though in the twentieth century – especially with the advent of *Le Sacre du printemps* – such practices moved to the compositional foreground. But whereas composers like Stravinsky and Bartók used these techniques in passages where a specifically 'rhythmic' effect was desired, Creston integrated them into his music as an intrinsic part of the rhythmic flow – and not only in lively, dance-like passages, but in slow, lyrical moments as well. Furthermore, Creston's maintenance of a regular metre as a superstructure differs from the more frequently encountered practice of changing metres – and this difference is more than a matter

⁶ Recorded by Tatjana Rankovich, with music by Vittorio Giannini and Nicolas Flagello, on Phoenix PHCD-143.

⁷ Published by Columbo, New York, in 1964, and republished by Belwin-Mills, also New York, in 1976.

of notation: it is the integration of continually shifting accents and patterns within the framework of a constant underlying pulse that makes Creston's treatment of rhythm so distinctive.

His approach to harmony also warrants comment. His music is tonal, in the general sense of embracing an orientation around a particular key-centre, although it may change frequently and be absent during transitional passages. Even so, he objected vehemently to descriptions of his music as 'tonal', preferring the term 'pantonal'. He achieved this tonal flexibility through the use of dominant-quality seventh chords as harmonic foundation. Dominant-seventh chords demand resolution, but Creston rarely resolves them to a tonic; he resolves them instead to other dominant-quality chordal foundations, so that the music is constantly in chromatic tonal motion.

Creston dedicated each of the *Three Narratives* to a pianist who had shown interest in his music: No. 1 to Mildred Victor, No. 2 to Claudette Sorel and No. 3 to Earl Wild (who had premiered Creston's Piano Concerto). Each of the first two pianists played her respective piece, but Wild did not perform No. 3. There is no record of any pianist performing all three before Myron Silberstein. In attempting to identify and summarise all the principles of motivic development used in common practice, Creston dubbed one of them 'tangential variation', which he used to refer to the treatment of a motif by pursuing it in a different direction or with altered intervals each time it re-appears. The *Three Narratives* are in free sectional form, and use 'tangential variation' as the primary developmental technique. The predominant use of these formal and developmental principles results in a sense of spontaneity, almost like an improvisation, even though close examination reveals a remarkable degree of structural cohesion. The use of a single opus number for the *Three Narratives* suggests that Creston viewed them together as an integral work. Moreover, although he denied the use of tonality as an organising principle in his work, the fact that the tonal centre of No. 1 is F sharp, that of No. 2 is D flat (i.e., C sharp, the dominant of F sharp), and that of No. 3 returns to F sharp indicates the most basic tonal relationship among the three pieces. On the other hand, each of these enormously difficult pieces is a substantial, fully integral entity in its own right, and can be – and has been – performed on its own. In the *Three Narratives* Creston

stretched not only the limits of human pianism, but also of his own compositional boundaries, extending the complexity of his harmonic language beyond its usual limits, while illustrating the use of such concepts as the Five Rhythmic Structures, applied and integrated within a large, complex work.

Narrative No. 1 [1] falls into three large sections. The first section is marked 'Majestically' and establishes a tonality of F sharp. After an introduction characterised by the prominent use of dotted-note rhythms, the first main theme appears, accompanied by a low, rumbling *ostinato* in the bass. This theme is developed tangentially via free chromaticism, surrounded by sweeping figurations that span the full range of the keyboard. The second section is marked *allegretto*, with a time-signature of $\frac{6}{12}$. (Creston believed that the usual time-signatures of $\frac{6}{8}$, $\frac{9}{8}$ and $\frac{12}{8}$ are based on a misconception that the 'denominator' refers to 'eighth-notes' (in American nomenclature – a 'quaver' in British parlance), although those notes are not 'eighths' of anything. Since $\frac{12}{8}$ refers to a whole note subdivided into twelve units, those units are 'twelfth-notes', so that the correct time-signatures for the three in this second section would be $\frac{6}{12}$, $\frac{9}{12}$ and $\frac{12}{12}$.) A transition to the second section had slyly hinted at a new theme that is soon stated softly but clearly in E major, in a relatively simple figuration. As this section develops, the figurations become increasingly complex and chromatic, building to a triumphant climax in D flat major. After the climax has run its course, the texture gradually subsides, becoming stark and spare. The final section is marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, with a time-signature of $\frac{12}{12}$. It is the most typically Crestonian portion of the piece, based on the Second Rhythmic Structure, called 'Irregular Subdivision'. The bass notes introduce an *ostinato* that is based on four pulses, which are subdivided into three beats of irregular duration. Its hushed entrance notwithstanding, this dance-like section again builds energetically to a thundering conclusion in F sharp major.

Narrative No. 2 [2] offers a strong contrast with its predecessor. In a clear ABA form, it is marked *Lento*, with a time-signature of $\frac{9}{12}$ and a key-signature (a rarity in Creston) of D flat major. Soft and gentle in its presentation, the first section again uses 'Irregular Subdivision', with three pulses but four beats of irregular duration. In spite of its slow tempo and the simplicity of the initially diatonic main melody, introduced in the left

hand, rapid accompanying figurations create a backdrop of sweeping billows suggesting a harp. The tonality shifts to A major (with no key-signature) as the gently sweeping textures continue, eventually drawing to a temporary repose. The second section begins in B major but shifts tonal centre frequently as the music becomes more active and bold. After a climax is achieved, a gradual transition to the third section – incorporating a wink at the second theme of *Narrative* No. 1 – leads to a return to the thematic material of the first section in D-flat.

Narrative No. 3 [3] is the longest and most complex of the three. It comprises an introduction, three sections and a coda. The introduction is marked *Adagio* (*misterioso – senza rigore*) and is indeed mysterious and largely atonal. The first section proper is marked *Più mosso*, with a time-signature of $\frac{9}{12}$. Suggesting a tonal centre of B, this section begins *pianissimo*, continuing the mysterious mood, but soon increases in volume and complexity, as the first main theme is presented, with prominent use of dotted rhythms that recall the introduction to the first *Narrative*. Dotted-note rhythms continue to play a prominent role throughout the piece, which, though not technically atonal, shifts tonal centres so rapidly that it is atonal in effect. The first section promptly develops considerable textural complexity, with generous use of six-note chords in the right hand alone – partial tone-clusters that almost sound like wrong notes – while the left hand continues to develop the theme when it is not occupied with rapid figurations of hair-raising difficulty. An *Andante* introduces the second section. The entrance of the main theme is marked *tranquillo e molto espressivo*, and begins with an ascending step – a ‘tangential variation’ of the main theme of the first section. This section is gently lyrical, with rich, harp-like broken chords. The third section, *Con moto*, pursues another theme motivically related to the previous themes. This one is largely developed in the left hand, while the right hand plays an intriguingly irregular *ostinato*. An extended coda is marked *un poco largamente*, and begins gradually to assert a tonal centre of F sharp. By the final page, a tonality of F sharp major is clearly confirmed, bringing this extraordinary work to an end.

In 1968, the lifelong New Yorker – then 62 – moved with his wife to Ellensburg, Washington, accepting a position as professor of music and composer-in-residence at

Central Washington State College (now Central Washington University). He remained there until his retirement in 1975, when he and his wife moved to a suburb of San Diego. One of Creston's major projects during the early 1970s was another book, this one an attempt to correct a variety of illogical practices in the conventional notation of rhythm. *Rational Metric Notation* was completed in 1973, although six years elapsed before it was published.⁸ In 1984 Creston was diagnosed with kidney cancer. In spite of the removal of one kidney, the cancer returned, and he died in August 1985.

Perhaps Creston's most ambitious compositional project during his final years was a ten-volume series of 123 rhythmic studies he called *Rhythmicon*. Completed in 1974, these studies further illustrate Creston's approach to rhythm, while preparing the piano student for the types of usage found in his mature keyboard works. But, as with many historical precedents from Chopin through to Bartók, Creston the composer couldn't help but create pieces with their own legitimate musical appeal, alongside their didactic value. Although the first few volumes are very simple, the later ones exhibit consistent difficulty. Some are playful and witty, others are energetic and vigorous, and some suggest religious chants. On this recording Myron Silberstein plays the 25 studies that comprise Volumes 7–10. Book 7 contains eight pieces [4]–[11] that illustrate Creston's Third Rhythmic Structure, 'Overlapping', which he defines as 'the extension of a phrase rhythm beyond the barline'.⁹ Book 8 offers eight pieces [12]–[19] that highlight the Fourth Rhythmic Structure, 'Regular Subdivision Overlapping', which Creston defines as 'the organization of a group of measures [bars] into equal beats overlapping the barline'.¹⁰ Book 9 comprises five studies [20]–[24] that address the Fifth Rhythmic Structure, 'Irregular Subdivision Overlapping', which Creston describes as 'the organization of a group of measures into unequal beats overlapping the barline'. Book 10 consists of only four pieces [25]–[28] which illustrate multirhythms and polyrhythms. The former use two or more of the rhythmic structures successively; the latter use two or more of the rhythmic structures simultaneously.

⁸ By Exposition Press, Hicksville, New York.

⁹ Creston, *Rhythmicon*, Book 7, Belwin-Mills, Melville (NY), 1977, p. 160.

¹⁰ Creston, *Rhythmicon*, Book 8, Belwin-Mills, Melville (NY), 1977, p. 188.

Walter Simmons, musicologist, critic and record producer, has written extensively on American composers who maintained an allegiance to traditional musical values. He is the editor of a series of books, 'Twentieth-Century Traditionalists', published by Rowman and Littlefield. He wrote the first two volumes himself (under the Scarecrow Press imprint): *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo-Romantic Composers* (2004), which treated the lives and works of Barber, Bloch, Creston, Flagello, Giannini and Hanson, and *Voices of Stone and Steel: The Music of William Schuman, Vincent Persichetti, and Peter Mennin* (2011). As a record producer, he has made available first recordings of almost a hundred works, some of which had never even been performed.

Throughout his training as a pianist, **Myron Silberstein** gravitated toward repertoire that he felt needed a champion, either because it was rarely performed or because it had not garnered the critical appreciation he felt it warranted. His first recording, made when he was twenty, included pieces by César Franck and Ernest Bloch, along with first recordings of pieces by Vittorio Giannini. A review in *Fanfare* by Peter Rabinowitz designated it 'a revelatory release' and 'the most impressive debut' of the year.

In his mid-twenties, he took a break from performance to complete his academic studies. He concentrated in philosophy, published articles on William James and on Shakespeare, and attempted to write a doctoral dissertation on Kierkegaard and Sanskrit epic. Sanskrit translation remains a serious avocation.

When he returned to piano performance, he was too old for the competition circuit and therefore free to focus solely on the repertoire for which he had the strongest affinity: mid-twentieth-century music that prioritises expressiveness. His recordings include the complete piano works of Peter Mennin and Norman Lloyd, and an album of sonatinas and character pieces by Vincent Persichetti. Much of this repertoire had not been recorded previously. Mark Lehman wrote in the *American Record Guide* that his recording of Mennin and Lloyd was 'an



Photograph: Michelle Smith

indispensable addition to the discography of American piano music'; and Colin Clarke, writing in *Fanfare*, called his Persichetti recording 'a really vital disc'.

Aside from working on neglected solo repertoire, he coaches opera singers and teaches piano students. He is a Teaching Associate at Lake Forest College and an Adjunct Instructor of Music at Carthage College, as well as organist for Northminster Presbyterian Church of Evanston and pianist for the C21 Women's Ensemble.

Myron Silberstein is also a composer whose works include five piano sonatas, half a dozen song-cycles, several duo sonatas and a one-act opera based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Prophetic Pictures*.

He and his wife, Michelle, live in Chicago, at the crossroads of its Indian, Pakistani, Jewish and Rohingya communities.

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PAUL CRESTON Piano Music

Three Narratives, Op. 79 (1962)

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Rhythmicon

Volume 7 (1971) 16:07

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5	No. 100 A Jest	1:11
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Volume 9 (c. 1974) 9:09

20	No. 115 Hommage à César Franck	2:07
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Myron Silberstein, piano

TT 69:25

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