



NICOLAS FLAGELLO

Piano Concerto No. 1

Dante's Farewell • Concerto Sinfonico

Tatjana Rankovich, Piano

National Radio Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine

John McLaughlin Williams



Nicolas Flagello (1928–1994)

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Nicolas Flagello was one of the last American composers to pursue traditional romantic musical values, intensified by modernist innovations in harmony and rhythm, but without the irony or detachment of postmodernism. For Flagello music was a personal medium for spiritual and emotional expression, not a fashionable position during the post-World War II years when his creative personality was crystallizing, so his music gained little attention. Yet he held fast to his ideals throughout his life, producing a large and varied body of work that includes six operas, two symphonies, eight concertos, and numerous other works, of which much remained unperformed at the time of his death. With the greater tolerance of stylistic diversity that appeared during the latter decades of the twentieth century, however, Flagello's music began finding an increasingly sympathetic audience.

Flagello was born in New York City in 1928 to a family that had been musically active for generations. He studied both piano and violin as a child, and began composing on his own before the age of ten. He was soon brought to the attention of Vittorio Giannini, a highly esteemed composer and teacher known for his adherence to traditional musical values. He became Flagello's mentor. In 1945 Flagello entered the Manhattan School of Music, where Giannini served on the faculty. Earning both his Bachelor's and Master's degrees there, he joined the faculty himself upon graduating, and remained there for more than 25 years. Winning a Fulbright Fellowship in 1955, he took leave to study for a year at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, working under the elderly Ildebrando Pizzetti, and earning the *Diploma di Studi Superiori*. In addition to composing, Flagello was active as a pianist and

conductor, and made dozens of recordings of a wide range of repertoire, from the Baroque period to the twentieth century. In 1985 a degenerative illness brought his musical career to an end prematurely. He died in 1994, at the age of 66.

During the years since his death, Flagello's music has been performed and recorded at an increasing rate, attracting the attention of a new generation of listeners. Violinists Elmar Oliveira and Midori, and conductors Semyon Bychkov and James DePreist are just a few of today's leading performers who have found in Flagello's work deeply felt musical content, presented in a clear, comprehensible manner.

The three works presented on this recording span a period of 35 years, and encompass Flagello's entire compositional career. The *Piano Concerto No. 1* is his first large-scale work, *Dante's Farewell* was written at the height of his career, during a period of intensely productive creative activity, and the *Concerto Sinfonico* was his final composition. Each exemplifies what was perhaps Flagello's favourite compositional medium: the concerted work, featuring a soloist (or soloists) against the backdrop of a symphony orchestra. As treated by Flagello, such works suggest an individual bearing witness to spiritual and emotional torments, with the orchestra as empathic Greek chorus. Viewed autobiographically, the three works might be said to reflect his emotional state at the beginning, middle, and end of his creative life.

Flagello's *Piano Concerto No. 1* was composed in 1950 as part of the requirements for his Master's Degree at the Manhattan School of Music, where it received its first performance that year. The soloist was Joseph Seiger, and the composer conducted the Manhattan

Orchestra. The work has never been performed since then. Upon encountering the concerto, one is struck by two observations: one is the confidence with which Flagello addresses every convention of the romantic piano concerto, and in the process demonstrates a thorough mastery of traditional compositional technique. Several motifs are introduced at the outset, and these generate most of the work's thematic material. This material is developed with a consistent logic: most of the thematic ideas appear in counterpoint with one another; the elaborate first movement displays an extensive cadenza, which leads directly into a brilliant fugato. Although tonal centres are not always clear and unambiguous, a general sense of tonality is always maintained. The second and perhaps more remarkable observation is the boldness with which the 22-year-old composer asserts his own forceful personality. Listeners familiar with Flagello's other works will immediately recognize the vehement articulation, emotional turbulence, and surging passions that continued to characterize his work throughout his career.

The first movement, *Allegro maestoso*, introduces two main thematic ideas: the first, emphatic and defiant, containing an insistent ostinato motif; the second, characterized by a plaintive lyricism and irregular rhythmic phraseology. These ideas are developed with remarkable thoroughness throughout the course of this imposing movement—longer than the other two movements combined. The second movement, *Andante*, is a melancholy nocturne, which rises to an impassioned climax before receding to a poignant conclusion. The third movement, *Allegro con brio*, is scherzo-like in character, but, like the first movement, in sonata allegro form. The main theme, derived from the principal theme of the first movement, toys with hemiola patterns, while the secondary theme is characterized by an ascending series of fourths. Both ideas are developed energetically,

until the secondary theme from the first movement joins the finale theme in what is in effect a recapitulation of the entire concerto.

In 1959 Flagello's musical language reached a new level of maturity: more intense emotionally, more dissonant harmonically, more irregular rhythmically, formally tighter, and less obviously tonal. The works that followed proved to be among his most powerful and deeply expressive creations. In 1962 he composed *Dante's Farewell*, a "dramatic monologue" for soprano and orchestra setting portions of a text entitled *Gemma Donati*, by the prolific Italian-American poet and Latin scholar Joseph Tusiani (b. 1924). *Dante's Farewell* presents an episode in the life of the great Italian poet and statesman, told through the words of his devoted wife, Gemma. She recounts a nightmarish vision that came to Dante, warning him of danger to Florence, and of his painful decision to leave her and their children, and depart for Rome on behalf of his city-state, never to return. The piece is unified by a motif built around the interval of a third, introduced near the beginning by the solo violin.

During Flagello's most productive years, when his music was rarely performed, he developed the habit of leaving his works, including those intended for orchestra, in short score, planning to orchestrate them when a performance appeared imminent. Unfortunately many of these works, complete in every other respect, remained in short score at the time of his death. One of these was *Dante's Farewell*. In 2003, at the request of the Flagello estate, composer and music editor Anthony Sbordoni completed an orchestration for the work. Sbordoni's scoring displays an acute sensitivity to Flagello's approach to the orchestra, along with remarkable skill in bringing to life the sonorities implicit in the manuscript. The orchestral première of *Dante's Farewell* took place at Hunter College (CUNY), in

October, 2004. Nicholas Ross conducted the Hunter College Orchestra, and Susan Gonzalez, heard here, was the soprano soloist.

The *Concerto Sinfonico* for saxophone quartet and orchestra was Flagello's last completed work. It was commissioned by the Amherst Saxophone Quartet, who gave the première in November 1985, with the Buffalo Philharmonic under the direction of Semyon Bychkov. Although the character of much of Flagello's music is dark and tempestuous, it is difficult to listen to the *Concerto Sinfonico* without hearing in its consistent tone of anguish, agitation, and dread a sense of what Flagello experienced while confronting the physical and psychological disintegration that his terminal illness had already begun to wreak. On the other hand, the work is a fully autonomous, thematically unified musical structure that requires no extrinsic knowledge or awareness in order to understand and appreciate. Its title indicates the composer's conception of the work as not so much a virtuoso vehicle as an integrated symphonic structure in which the saxophone quartet serves as the composite voice of a hypothetical protagonist. The *Concerto Sinfonico* has had numerous performances in the United States and in Europe, and has been transcribed for symphonic band as well.

The *Concerto Sinfonico* is launched (*Allegro non troppo*) by a driving rhythm in the orchestra that quickly builds to an almost hysterical shriek, before the saxophones enter, introducing the main theme. At the head of this theme is a three-note motif that serves as the basis of the entire work. Soon the second theme, a lonely, plaintive melody derived from the first theme, is introduced by the alto saxophone. After this theme reaches a climax, a furious development of the first theme follows, beginning with a *fugato* played over an irregular rhythmic *ostinato*. This is followed by an

introspective reflection on both themes, which even admits a blossoming of faith and hope, before leading with grim resolution to the driving recapitulation and coda, which bring the movement to a defiant conclusion. The second movement, *Lento movendo*, is a darkly mournful barcarolle based on the material from the first movement, primarily as heard in the second theme. This section gradually reaches a climax, ushering in a turbulent central portion that culminates in a chilling explosion, which Flagello likened to "the voice of God." The passage ends in sad resignation. The opening barcarolle returns briefly, then concludes with a reminder of the three-note motif from the first movement. The third movement, *Allegro giusto*, opens with a variant of the three-note motif, played by the timpani, cellos and basses. The character of the movement suggests a grimly sardonic scherzo, with newly-fashioned themes derived from the first-movement material. The scherzo is followed by a grotesque "trio" section, before the scherzo idea returns, now subjected to a thorough development. This eventually builds to another stark proclamation from "the voice of God," followed by a shattering cataclysm. After the tumult subsides, slow harp arpeggios accompany a hopeful return of the work's main motif. But the mood darkens, as the second theme answers solemnly over ominous tremolos and timpani strokes. All hope seems dashed, as the driving rhythm that opened the work now hammers it into defeat.

Walter Simmons

Author, *Voices in the Wilderness:
Six American Neo-Romantic Composers*
(Scarecrow Press, 2004)

For further information, visit www.Flagello.com

Tatjana Rankovich

The pianist Tatjana Rankovich was born in Belgrade, Serbia, graduating with highest honours from the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. By the age of eighteen she had already won three first prizes in national competitions in the former Yugoslavia. Immigrating to the United States the following year, she entered the Juilliard School, earning both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. She has won numerous awards and prizes, among them the Gina Bachauer Scholarship, the Young Keyboard Artists International Piano Competition, and the Olga Koussevitzky Piano Competition. She is a sensitive performer of a wide range of standard piano repertoire, and is also a persuasive advocate of American music, performing and recording little-known works by Vittorio Giannini and Paul Creston, in addition to Nicolas Flagello, with successful recordings of Flagello's *Second* and *Third Piano Concertos*. She has featured both American and European repertoire on her many international concert tours. Sponsored by a Fulbright Grant and by the U. S. State Department, she presented recitals throughout Serbia and Montenegro, as well as master classes at the Belgrade Conservatory. She has been a frequent guest soloist with the Belgrade Radio Symphony, the Nis Symphony, and the Zagreb Philharmonic. During a 2003 tour with the Novi Sad Chamber Orchestra, a film documentary on her life and work was produced and televised. Tatjana Rankovich is currently on the faculty of the Mannes College of Music.

Susan Gonzalez

In addition to a rich and varied career in both opera and concert performance, the soprano Susan Gonzalez has also been active as a stage director. After graduating from the University of Cincinnati, she went on to earn Master's and Doctoral degrees at the Eastman School of Music. She has appeared with the Chicago Lyric Opera, New Orleans Opera, and with the Bolshoy Opera in Russia, and with the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Cincinnati Symphony, Annapolis Symphony, and the Mozart Players. She has been featured soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra and the American Composers Orchestra, and as a soloist in the major oratorios of Fauré, Brahms, Schubert, and Mozart. Among her honours and prizes have been awards from the Metropolitan Opera, the George London, Leonard Warren, and Baltimore Opera Competitions, from the Liederkranz Foundation, and from the American Opera Association. She received an Emmy nomination for her portrayal of Rosina in a televised production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and her recorded recital of songs by women composers has drawn considerable positive attention. She is currently Director of Performance at Hunter College (CUNY), where she teaches vocal technique and stages musical theatre productions.

Ukrainian National Radio Symphony Orchestra

The Ukrainian National Radio Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1929. Since then the orchestra has given a very large number of concert performances and made many recordings of music from a wide repertoire, ranging from standard classical and modern repertoire to the works of composers associated essentially with Ukraine. In addition to a busy schedule at home, the orchestra has toured abroad, in recent years to Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, and South Korea.

John McLaughlin Williams

The American conductor John McLaughlin Williams has been highly praised for his outstanding interpretive abilities and engaging podium presence. Beginning violin study in Washington, DC, at the age of ten, he was chosen just four years later by the Cabinet wives of the Nixon Administration to appear as soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra in its first Kennedy Center concert series for Washington, DC, school-children. He continued his violin studies at Boston University and the New England Conservatory, earning his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the Cleveland Institute of Music. There he pursued violin study with Martin Chalifour, composition with Donald Erb and Margaret Brouwer, and conducting with Carl Topilow. He was a member of the Houston Symphony, concertmaster of the Virginia Symphony, and has appeared as violin soloist with such orchestras as the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra, South Carolina Philharmonic, Portland Symphony, and the Boston Ballet Orchestra. As soloist, he gave the American premières of the violin concertos by Arnold Bax and Joseph Jongen, and, in 1998, performed the violin concerto of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, whose chamber music he has also recorded. His first four recordings as conductor for Naxos, featuring works by American composers John Alden Carpenter, George Frederick McKay, and Henry Hadley, have brought him international attention and critical praise. His conducting engagements have taken him throughout the United States, where he has focused on contemporary music and music by African-American and minority composers.

New Hudson Saxophone Quartet

Formed in 1987, the NHQ is dedicated to serious concert presentations of the saxophone quartet repertoire. Tonal purity and refinement and intimate musical rapport are hallmarks of NHQ performances. In addition to Flagello's *Concerto Sinfonico*, the quartet has recorded the *Saxophone Concerto* by Calvin Hampton, and has appeared with the Charleston Symphony, Long Island Philharmonic, and the Greenwich (CT) Symphony. The NHQ can be heard on recordings for the Sonari, Eclectic, and Arizona University labels.

Paul Cohen (soprano saxophone) has appeared as soloist with the Group for Contemporary Music, and with many of America's leading orchestras. He has recorded with such diverse groups as the Cleveland Symphonic Winds, Quintet of the Americas, the Philharmonia Virtuosi, Paul Winter Consort, and North-South Consonance, and is currently on the faculties of the Manhattan School of Music, Oberlin Conservatory, NYU, Montclair State, and Rutgers University. **Avi Goldrosen** (alto saxophone) has been featured soloist with a variety of orchestras in the New York metropolitan area. He has also performed with the New Juilliard Ensemble, the New Jersey Saxophone Ensemble, and tours with the New York Theater Ballet. **David Demsey** (tenor saxophone) has performed with leading classical ensembles, as well as appearing with some of the leading jazz artists of our time. His essay "*Improvisation and Concepts of Virtuosity*" appears in the *Oxford Companion to Jazz*, and he has written two books on composer Alec Wilder. He is Professor of Music and Coordinator of Jazz Studies at William Paterson University. **Tim Ruedeman** (baritone saxophone) has appeared with both symphony orchestras and new music ensembles. He is a founding member of the contemporary chamber ensemble Flexible Music, and is currently on the faculties of NYU, William Paterson University, and C.W. Post/Long Island University.

Rutgers Symphony Orchestra

One of the elite orchestras in New Jersey, the Rutgers Symphony Orchestra is an ensemble of 70-75 players enrolled in the undergraduate and graduate music programmes at the Mason Gross School of the Arts within Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The orchestra performs an ambitious concert series that includes three fall and two spring concerts, in addition to a major opera production, and regularly performs in New York City at Carnegie Hall and Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, as part of the *Rutgers in New York* series. Under the Australian Music Director Kynan Johns, highlights of recent seasons have included critically praised performances and recordings of major standard repertoire including symphonic works by Mahler, Prokofiev, Mussorgsky, Debussy, Sibelius, Shostakovich, Strauss, Bartók, Tchaikovsky, Ravel and Berlioz.

Kynan Johns

The Australian conductor Kynan Johns is currently Director of Orchestral Activities at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He is also Associate Conductor of both the Chinese National Symphony and the Israel Symphony, Haifa. A graduate of the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide, Kynan Johns has studied with Kurt Masur, Eri Klas, Peter Eotvos, Ton Koopman, and others. He made his professional début in 1997 with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, and has since conducted all of Australia's state symphony orchestras, and is a regular guest conductor throughout Australia and New Zealand. He made his début as an opera conductor in 1999, with Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* for Opera Australia. This was followed in 2000 by *The Tales of Hoffmann* and *Madama Butterfly* (Australia) and *Peter Grimes* for the New Israeli Opera. He made his European début in 2000, conducting the Netherlands Radio Symphony at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. He has conducted more than sixty orchestras and opera companies throughout the world, and was recently awarded second prize in the prestigious Dimitri Mitropoulos International Conducting Competition. He made his Carnegie Hall début as one of eight finalists in the Maazel/Vilar conducting competition, chosen by Lorin Maazel from more than 400 applicants worldwide.

Dante's Farewell

(Text taken from the monologue *Gemma Donati*, by Joseph Tusiani, reproduced by kind permission of the author)

Years, many years ago, I heard him moan in his sleep. When he woke, he said but this: "I have been through a forest dark with doom, and hell was in me, and no one, no one was saved". Then he walked to the palace, pale and worn. Now I know that his dream was more than a dream and his fear more than death.

The meaning of that vision - that far vision in which he saw soft-veiled tears and stars, that woman of his spirit, Beatrice. She was God's dream made visible to eyes in love with never setting light.

You may not understand, yet I must tell my grief, and utter no lament for it. I never knew of politics. I called myself a White, for Dante was a White.* To be the mother of his children, and the shadow of his light - it was my glory.

One night I heard him say: "Tomorrow dawn, I'll leave for Rome". I looked at him dismayed, for I knew he was feverish and weak; but Florence was in danger. I looked at him again as if to warn him against the perils of the road, the cold of nights, when, bursting in a rage of fire he cried to me: "Your holiness, how long shall

we keep Christ a-bleeding on the cross? How shall we save our souls if yours is dead? Let Christ descend again, and rid his temple of thieves and hypocrites! Is God dead too?"

I kissed his hand with tenderness, and said: "O my good lord, you are so tired and ill". He looked at me, his bride, and he was sad. "Gemma," he said, "Take care of our children, as you have always done; birds with no more nest. Poor Gemma, go, and promise not to see me when I leave." His kiss kept me awake and weeping.

Through the night I heard him pace - a wraith of war and death...!! Up and down, down and up, ... I heard him pace....And as he paused in anguish and despair, the river roared, raucous beneath the stones of Ponte Vecchio! The river roared!!

That dawn rose grey as if no day would follow. I saw him kiss his children's dreaming brows. He came then, furtively, to me and kissed me....

* refers to the political faction with which Dante aligned himself

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Playing
Time:
65:28

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NAXOS

Nicolas
FLAGELLO
(1928–1994)

- Piano Concerto No. 1 (1950)** ^{1,3} **28:48**
- ① **Allegro maestoso** 15:50
② **Andante** 6:55
③ **Allegro con brio** 6:02
- ④ **Dante's Farewell (1962)** ^{2,3} **13:43**
(orchestrated by Anthony Sbordoni)
- Concerto Sinfonico (1985)** ^{4,5} **22:53**
for Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra
- ⑤ **Allegro non troppo** 10:09
⑥ **Lento movendo (quasi alla barcarola)** 5:29
⑦ **Allegro giusto** 7:14

Tatjana Rankovich, Piano ¹
Susan Gonzalez, Soprano ²

**National Radio Symphony Orchestra
of Ukraine • John McLaughlin Williams** ³

New Hudson Saxophone Quartet ⁴
Rutgers Symphony Orchestra • Kynan Johns ⁵

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and To the Fore Publishers (⑤-⑦) • Booklet Notes: Walter Simmons • Cover Painting: *Amalfi Coast (detail)* by Nicolas Flagello (reproduced by kind permission of Dianne Flagello)
American flag, folk artist, 1880s.



AMERICAN CLASSICS

Nicolas Flagello was one of the last American composers to pursue traditional romantic musical values, intensified by modernist innovations in harmony and rhythm, but without recourse to the fashionable experimental practices of the post-World War II years. The three works heard in these world première recordings encompass Flagello's entire compositional career. Ranging from the *Piano Concerto No. 1*, which here receives only its second performance, to the *Concerto Sinfonico*, his final composition, they are powerful and deeply expressive creations filled with emotional turbulence and surging rhythms.

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