

“Winds in Hi-Fi”--Eastman Wind Ensemble with Frederick Fennell (1958)

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Essay by William Berz (guest post)*



Album cover

The title of the recording “Winds in Hi-Fi” is a perfect description of the album and justifies its historical interest: developments in wind music and in high fidelity recording. The first half of the title refers to the performers involved, a wind ensemble, which represented a new direction for concert bands that began in the middle of the 20th century. It was a landmark album in terms of its fidelity through its use of the most advanced technology of the time, which attempted to capture the artists’ essence--true high fidelity.

On February 5, 1951, Frederick Fennell (1914-2004) conducted a special concert at the Eastman School of Music. Sponsored by the Orchestral Department, the program included pieces for brass and woodwinds--no strings--with composers such as G. Gabrieli, Beethoven, Mozart, R. Strauss, and Stravinsky represented. All of the music was originally conceived for just wind instruments by their composers. The Eastman Wind Ensemble (EWE) was formally established the next year and became a new model for the concertizing band.

The establishment of the wind ensemble was an important development in the history of wind bands. Especially in the United States, concert bands were normally associated with the military band model as exemplified by the John Philip Sousa Band. During the late 19th and early 20th century there were countless professional ensembles that toured the country. As they lost their popularity, bands moved to schools and colleges. Many college groups, such as those at the University of Illinois and University of Michigan, became the new models. Those bands were generally quite large with multiple players on each part, much like the string section of an orchestra. Especially prior to World War II, transcriptions of orchestral music, marches, and novelty numbers formed the main repertoire.

With the formation of the wind ensemble, Fennell changed the model for concertizing bands. Rather than regularized choirs of instruments, he insisted on a flexible instrumentation that aligned with the composer's intention. As heard on this recording, when the group played the Strauss "Serenade in E-flat," op. 7, the EWE used 13 players; when playing the "Lincolnshire Posy" by Grainger, the group was a full concert band with about 50 instrumentalists. Trained to be orchestral players, the students at Eastman played more as soloists. This blend of sound was decidedly different from the larger symphonic band.

Fennell also encouraged conductors and scholars to revisit works for winds that were composed during earlier times and had become neglected. He also encouraged composers to write new pieces specifically intended for winds and percussion. Both directions greatly expanded the repertoire and broadened the definition of the band and are represented on this record.

After World War II, the recording industry faced many radical and swift changes in audio reproduction. The 78-rpm recording had been recently phased out. Popular music was being released on 45-rpm and classical music on 33-rpm long-playing (LP) records. Stereophonic releases began to appear in the mid-1950s. Mercury played an important role in implementing these new techniques and technologies. The label also pioneered remote hi-fidelity recording as was done on the Eastman recordings.

Mercury Records was founded in 1945 primarily as a pop label and was quite successful. In 1947, Mercury began producing classical records as well. David Hall (1916-2012) was hired in 1948 to be the head of the classical music division and was a dominant figure for the resulting recording projects, especially so with the EWE recordings. The recordings were marketed to the general public rather than music educators. Given the recording technology, they became quite popular with audiophiles.

Hall worked with Fennell on the repertoire that would be recorded. Hall pressed for listenable music, and most of the early records were devoted to marches or classics for band. The repertoire became a little more adventuresome after Hall left Mercury in 1956 on a Fulbright Fellowship to work in Denmark. Harold Lawrence (1923-2011) served as the director of the classical music division from 1956-1967 and produced some 350 Mercury Living Presence recordings. Many of these records are considered to be part of a "golden era" for the label.

A key figure in the EWE project, Wilma Cozart (1927-2009), was hired by Mercury in 1950 and played a leading role with the company both in administration and with audio production. She worked alongside with C. Robert (Bob) Fine (1922-1982), a highly sophisticated audio engineer; the two married in 1957. Cozart took on an even greater role with the EWE recordings after David Hall left the company.

The connection between Mercury and the Eastman School was established several years before the EWE recordings. Noted composer and conductor Howard Hanson (1896-1981), then director of Eastman, signed a contract with Mercury to record works by American composers with different groups at Eastman and in Rochester. The arrangement soon expanded to include recordings by the Eastman Wind Ensemble. Their first recording, "American Concert Band

Masterpieces” was recorded in May 1953. Twenty-one additional recordings followed in less than a decade.

The tenth album in the EWE-Mercury series, “Winds in Hi-Fi” was recorded in March of 1958 in the Eastman Theater in Rochester, New York. It was recorded on three-channel stereophonic tape machines using three highly advanced microphones. As had been done with their earlier mono recordings, the microphone placement featured a single mike centered above the conductor. This preserved the ability to produce mono releases as stereo was not yet firmly commercially established. Two mikes were employed on the sides of the group. The three channels were then mastered down to two to produce the stereo version. This album was one of Mercury’s early stereo releases.

In some ways, “Winds in Hi-Fi” is a great example of Fennell’s concept for what repertoire a wind ensemble might play. The repertoire includes two standards for concert band: “Lincolnshire Posy” by Percy Grainger and “Suite Française” by Darius Milhaud. “Serenade in E-flat major,” op. 7 (1881) by Richard Strauss was composed for 13 winds and performed by that number of players on this recording. “Three Japanese Dances” is somewhat unique. A member of the Eastman faculty, Bernard Rogers composed the work in 1933 for orchestra. After conversations with Fennell, he rescored it for winds in 1956. It represented a modern work for winds, not two years old at the time of the recording.

The Eastman Wind Ensemble served as an archetype for the concert band beginning in the 1950s. Its founder, Frederick Fennell, changed many elements of the traditions that were being followed by other wind conductors at the time, including instrumentation, repertoire, and style of playing. Its influence is still seen in contemporary bands and wind ensembles. On this recording, as well as the others in the Mercury series, the playing of this fine ensemble was heard by a very wide audience and is an excellent example of advances in the fidelity of recordings in the middle of the twentieth century. “Winds in Hi-Fi” is a landmark album both in the history of wind ensembles/bands and in audio technology.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.