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MUSIC

# Where Americans Can Become More So

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

**I**N 1935, Hunter Johnson, a North Carolina-born composer staying at the American Academy in Rome, got swept up in intense work on a dark, brooding piano sonata. He had won a year-long residency at the academy, then as now a leading center for independent study and research in the arts and humanities. There he was, in that ancient, cultured city, living and working in the academy's 11-acre complex of studios and villas atop the Janiculum, the highest hill within the walls of Rome, with its spectacular views. Yet all Johnson, 29 at the time, could think about was his native land.

Amid the "rotting splendor of Rome," he wrote in a letter, he was "teeming defiantly with America." The sonata was "an intense expression of the South," with its "frenzied gaiety, high rhetoric and brutal realism."

Johnson's reactions were not atypical. One tenet of the academy, which was established in 1894 by the noted architect Charles Follen McKim, was that if provided an ideal working environment in a splendid European city, American artists might grow individually, learn from one another and gain a clearer sense of their artistic and national identity.

That's what happened to the New York-based pianist Donald Berman, now 40,

**The American Academy in Rome has long given visitors a new sense of musical identity as well as a chance to study.**

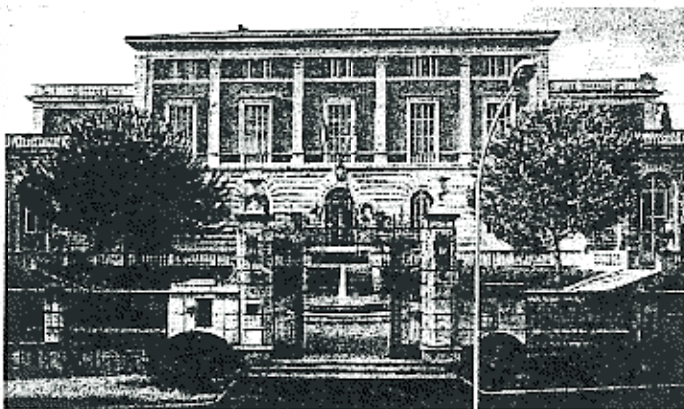
when he spent four months as a special guest of the academy in 1998. (Performers are infrequently invited.) He delighted in the company of the fellows and residents — artists, architects, writers and scholars as well as composers — and took full advantage of Rome. He also spent hours listening to recordings and studying scores by American composers that he found in the academy's extensive research library. Mr. Berman has championed American composers, with Ives as a special interest. ("The Unknown Ives," his invaluable 1999 CRI release, offered premiere recordings of unpublished works and important pieces in new critical editions.) And he has been extensively involved with music by composers of his acquaintance.

But he felt there was a gap in his knowledge of 20th-century American music. "My research at the academy helped to fill in the blanks," Mr. Berman said recently. "I wondered what had happened to all these people I had never heard of." People like



Courtesy American Academy in Rome

*Above, the composer Lukas Foss at the academy in Rome in 1952. Left, the main building, designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1914.*



Sadly, Spalding's attitude was part of the problem. But he was right that being in Rome, an artistic wellspring for two millennia, would help Americans develop. Being away from home yet together in a community helped even more.

One reason composers have been so productive at the academy is simply that the place, with its 18 buildings, is so wonderful. The restored 17th-century Villa Aurelia has lovely spaces for concerts and lectures. The 130-room McKim Building has studios, a library, galleries and residential units. Every year as many as 30 American artists and scholars, selected by a national jury, are awarded the academy's Rome Prize, a fellowship of from six months to

Walter Helfer, who taught at Hunter College in New York for more than 20 years, and Alexander Lang Steinert, who became the music director of the Army Air Forces' motion picture unit during World War II.

Eager to share what he had discovered, Mr. Berman persuaded the academy to help him set up a series of concerts in New York presenting works written either at the academy or by composers who had been there. He formed a committee, raised funds and put out a call for additional scores from past fellows. Within four weeks the committee received more than 200 scores from 41 composers.

With Mr. Berman serving as artistic director, it selected four programs of solo piano works, songs and chamber pieces for the series, "Americans in Rome: Music by Fellows of the American Academy in Rome," which begins on Wednesday at Merkin Concert Hall. (The other dates are

Oct. 16 and Nov. 6 and 13.) There are works by giants like Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter; by excellent composers who were recent fellows, like Stephen Hartke and Scott Lindroth; and by neglected composers, including Johnson.

Besides presenting nearly 40 works they believe in, Mr. Berman and the committee, including the composers John Harbison, Robert Beaser, Kathryn Alexander and Paul Moravec, hope that the series will shed light on what it means to be an American composer.

If living abroad proves helpful to American composers, it's partly because America has long had trouble shaking off its cultural inferiority complex with regard to Europe. Too many American artists and institutions see themselves in a losing game of catch-up with Europe. The com-

## Music by Fellows of the American Academy in Rome

Merkin Concert Hall.  
Wednesday.

plex was at its height in the 1920's, when the American Academy added composers to its roster of fellows.

One supporter was Walter R. Spalding, a professor of music at Harvard, who became a trustee of the academy. Spalding asserted that the new program would offer urgently needed help to American music. Although American schools had long been producing first-rank performers, he wrote in a 1920 essay celebrating the academy's 25th anniversary, "they never have and, in the nature of things, they cannot produce composers."

Robert Reck

plex, a scholarship of about six months or two years. There are also residents: senior artists and researchers. The academy typically supports a community of about 75. Since its founding, some 1,500 fellows and 320 residents have lived there.

The composer Harold Shapero first attended in 1951, at 31. "If I had lots of money, I'd give it all to them," Mr. Shapero said recently from his home in Natick, Mass. He thrived at the academy, even though at the time the facility, which had been closed during the war years, was in bad shape. "It was freezing in the buildings most the time," he added. "The food was not the greatest. The electricity failed every night."

He attended with his wife, Esther B. Geller, an artist. "They gave Esther a studio," he said. "There were servants to make the beds. I had a studio in the cellar that was big enough for five composers,

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with a good piano."

He recalls competitive games of pool and Ping-Pong. Almost every night he and a fellow composer, Leo Smit, played four-hand renditions of Schubert, Mozart and Beethoven symphonies in the common room, making a din and attracting crowds of fellow artists. One day, Ingrid Bergman, who was then involved with the director Roberto Rossellini, showed up. She was so excited by the four-hand music that she invited the duo to her place for a private concert. "Rossellini was quite mad that she'd asked us over," Mr. Shapero said. "But she was a charmer. Very flirty."

Best of all were the friendships formed with artists from other fields, like the painter Mitchell Siporin, who later became Mr. Shapero's faculty colleague at Brandeis University. The composer Lee Hyla, who spent a year, 1990-1991, at the academy,

was similarly inspired by its stimulating atmosphere.

"Almost every morning there was an event of some kind," Mr. Hyla said recently from Boston.

"An art scholar might take us on a lecture tour to some part of Rome. You could go or not.

Some talks were terrific. Some were pretty boring. But that's O.K. It was always interesting. Then after lunch, I'd work all day."

Mr. Hyla, whose chamber work "In Double Light" will be performed on Nov. 6, greatly valued being in touch with his native language and culture in the context of a foreign country. While there, he wrote a piece called "Ciao, Manhattan," and a piano concerto.

"Rome influenced my music and altered my language," he said. "It's a somewhat chaotic city. You are continually blasted with things from different time periods:

something from last year and something from 800. It affected the way I think about musical structure." Yet the concerto is still "very much an American piece," he added. "I used a bunch of punk riffs in it."

For the concert series, Mr. Berman tried to select works that reflect the influence of Rome yet affirm qualities that could be deemed "American." What might those be?

Among the common traits, Mr. Berman suggested, are "freshness, inventiveness, rhythmic vigor, an eclectic point of view." He finds it interesting that some of the new works being performed seem traditional. Mr. Beaser's songs on Emily Dickinson texts are "in the lyric vein of the 20th-century American pioneers," Mr. Berman said. Yet some older works seem startlingly fresh, like Billy Jim Layton's "Three Studies for Piano" (1957). "If they'd been sent by David Rakowski," Mr. Berman added, referring to a

technically adroit young American, "I'd believe he had written them." The program on Wednesday involves 11 players and a string quintet, and offers works by Barber, Sessions, Mr. Carter, Lukas Foss, Tamar Diesendruck and Mr. Hartke (the largest work, an exciting piano quartet, "King of the Sun"). On Oct. 16, Mr. Berman plays a solo recital with those fresh-sounding Layton studies, works by Kamran Ince, George Rochberg and Helfer, and a brilliant seven-minute Neo-classical sonata by Mr. Shapero that almost never turns up on recitals.

"It drives me crazy that nobody is hearing this stuff," Mr. Berman said.

He will also play, aptly, that dark brooding Johnson sonata composed at the academy.