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GRIFFES Roman Sketches/**KORNGOLD** Symphonic Serenade. London Symphony Orchestra/**Simone Pittau**. (ASV)***

Charles Tomlinson **Griffes** (1884-1920) is one of the great might-have-beens of American music. Ironically, his death from pneumonia at the age of 35 may have been hastened by growing interest in his music. Unable to afford copyists, he exhausted himself in preparing parts for prestigious performances of his orchestral music on top of his day-job as a schoolteacher.

He is usually described as an impressionist, but while Debussy is the most obvious influence on his music it is impressionism with a highly-perfumed, exotic flavour - possibly best thought of as the equivalent in sound of Tiffany glass and other beautiful products of the American aesthetic movement.

The four-movement suite Roman Sketches (1915-16) was originally written for piano, and **Griffes'** orchestrations of the first and last pieces, The White Peacock and Clouds, are included on a valuable collection of his orchestral music on the Naxos label.

Now Craig Leon has orchestrated the two inner movements in a style indistinguishable from **Griffes'** own manner - quite an achievement as **Griffes** had an exceptional ear for orchestral colour (just listen to those dissonant wind chimes at the beginning of Clouds).

These ravishing miniature tone poems receive immaculate performances from the LSO under the young Italian conductor **Simone Pittau**, with warm atmospheric sound, and are superior to their Naxos counterparts.

Warmth is also a word that comes to mind with the recording of the Korngold piece, which the composer wrote in a Los Angeles hospital while recovering from his first heart attack in 1949.

This is Korngold the successful Hollywood composer trying to reclaim concert hall credibility. At the time he was doomed to failure in writing in such an out-of-date romantic style, but posterity has come to take a more tolerant view.

After all, this is almost contemporary with one of the last great romantic pieces, Richard Strauss's Four Last Songs.

The relaxed opening melody, deceptively suggesting a lightweight serenade, in fact introduces a substantial piece of symphonic proportions, including a grave and impressive slow movement haunted by the ghost of Mahler.

I'm not sure how many people are looking for a disc which combines **Griffes** and Korngold, but this one is extremely enjoyable and a persuasive introduction to both composers.

<http://www.highbeam.com/library/docfree.asp?DOCID=1Y1:92344499&ctrlInfo=Round19%3AMode19a%3ADocG%3AResult&ao=>