

# MUSICAL Opinion

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Joseph Horowitz

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Dr Martin Pulbrook

## Anton Bruckner's **Astra**

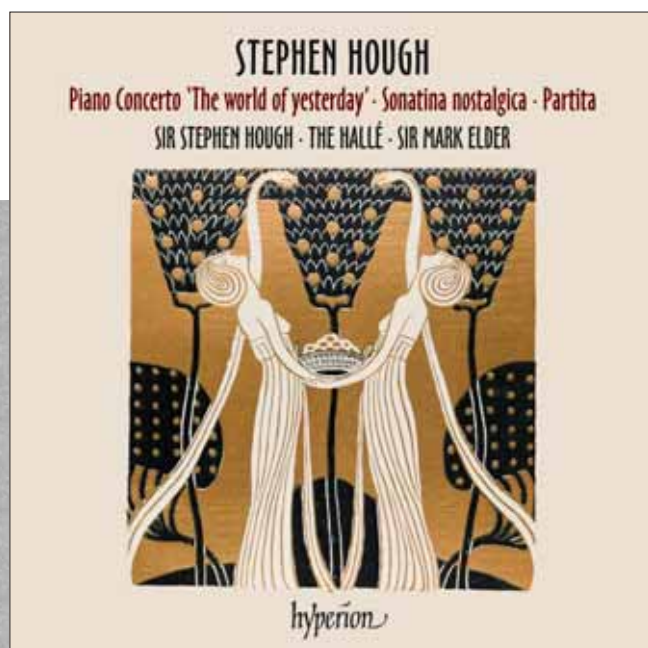
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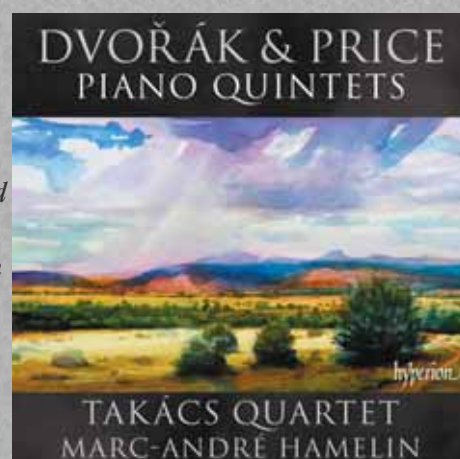


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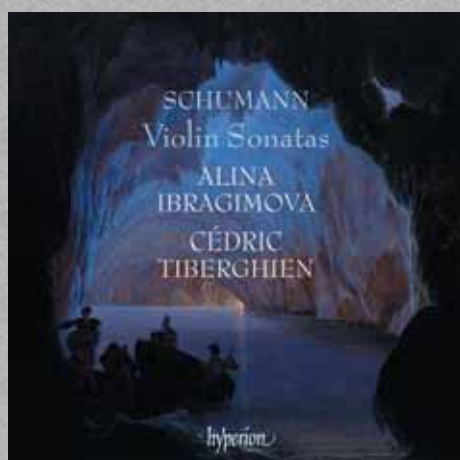
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**MUSICAL OPINION**  
1 Exford Road  
London SE12 9HD  
Tel: 0208 857 1582  
musicalopinion@hotmail.co.uk  
www.musicalopinion.com

#### Editor

Robert Matthew-Walker

#### Executive Director

Howard Blake OBE FRAM

#### Subscriptions

Shirley Hawke  
Tel: +44 (0)1424 457714  
Mobile: 07743 785787  
Fax: +44 (0)1424 863686  
shawke6145@btinternet.com

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#### Advertising

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Chris Monk  
Tel: 01424 422105  
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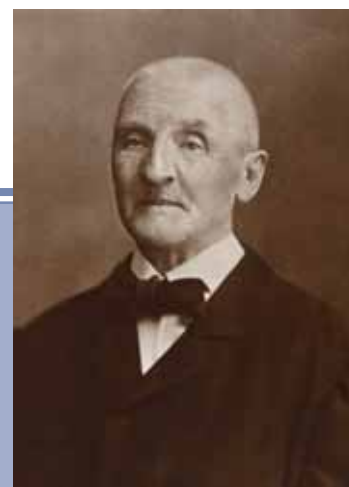
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Cover photo

Anton Bruckner

Photo: Wikimedia

# Editorial

## Unwritten business

The inclusion in this issue of an article on a work that never existed might well appear to some readers as the height of fantasy – and, of course, in many ways it is, more so as the type of work in question is one that has never been associated with the composer.

But – as readers will discover – Dr Martin Pulbrook's suggestions regarding an unwritten opera by Anton Bruckner are based upon a detailed knowledge of the Austrian master's life and work, and consider the very great likelihood that – had Bruckner been granted a further four or five years of life – such a concept might very likely have come to fruition.

The history of classical music is full of examples of 'unfinished' works, left incomplete at the composer's passing – from Bach's *Art of Fugue*, Beethoven's and Schubert's Tenth Symphonies, and further 'unfinished' symphonies by Borodin, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Debussy, Vaughan Williams, Walton, Shostakovich, Edmund Rubbra (the last cited being merely the opening phrases of what would have been his Twelfth Symphony – but they are of such interest that we have often hoped that a sympathetic composer would consider using Rubbra's published opening bars as a basis for an orchestral study or fantasy upon the idea).

The difference between 'unfinished' and 'unwritten' works is that in the former case we have examples of actual music put down by those composers (along, of course, with more from others not in our list) affording (what may be termed as) 'devoted completionists' the opportunity to imagine 'what might have been' in the composer's mind at various stages, in terms of actual sounds.

But of course in the case of an opera by Bruckner, we have no such germinal ideas – his method of composition was to concentrate fully and solely upon the work in question until it was

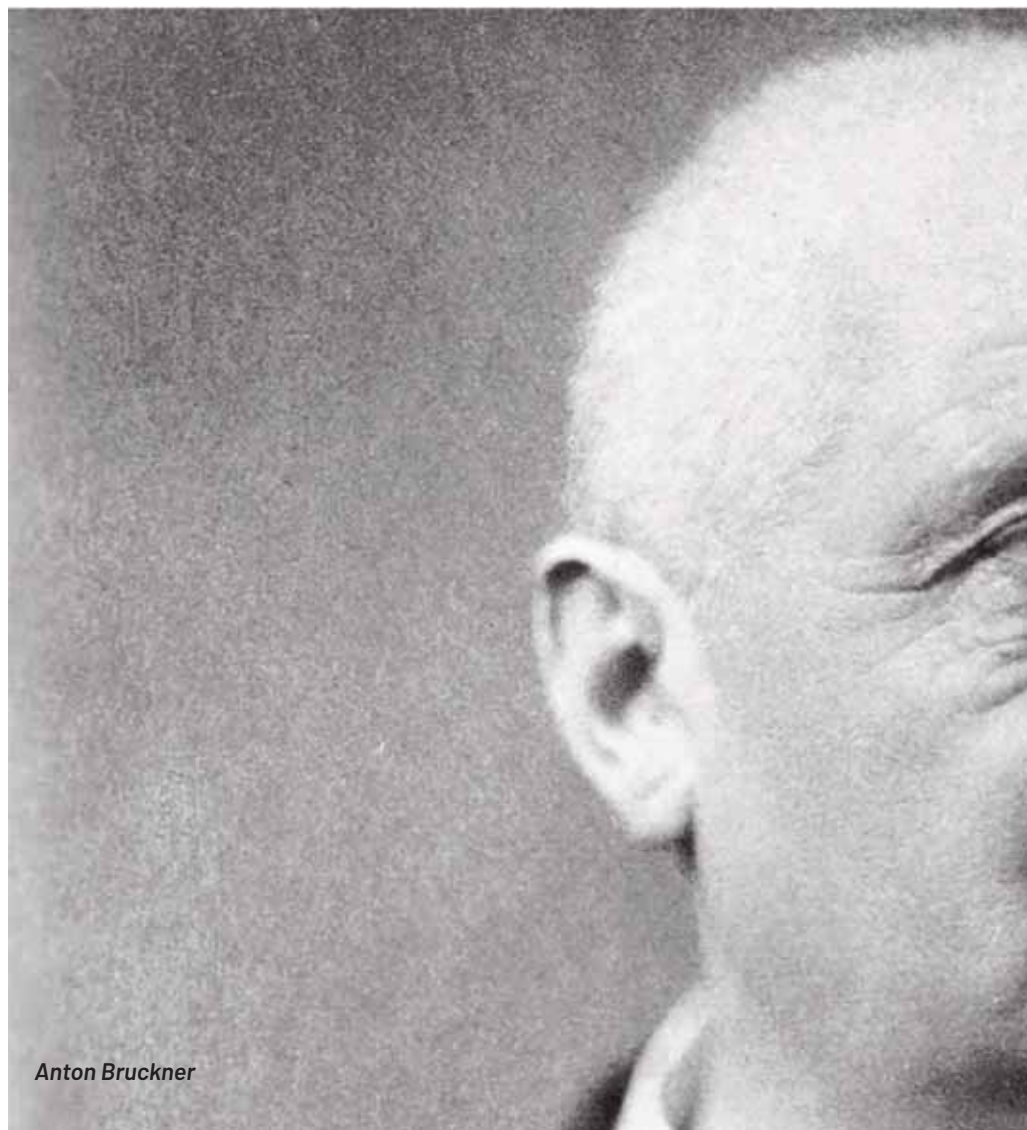
But of course we have no such opera by Bruckner, nor anything remotely approaching such a concept

finished (and then, of course, in his case subject to further revisions and new editions) – and such is the tantalising state of the incomplete finale of his Ninth Symphony that students of his music have, at various times, attempted what many regard as an impossible undertaking – the composition and completion of the finale's great symphonic coda, bringing this undoubted masterpiece to a conclusion as close to Bruckner's intention as it is possible to get.

The fact that Bruckner was working on that coda on the very morning of his passing indicated it was never his intention to leave the Symphony without a positive conclusion; we will, of course, never know how

it would have finally ended had death not claimed him that day, but such is the attraction and fascination of the legacies of great composers that such attempts at completions ought not to be wholly dismissed, but surely seen as the homage to transcendental artists of the last half-millennium – to capture, as it were, their final thoughts for posterity which would otherwise have remained unheard.

Yet: an unwritten work? – still less, a work so far outside the composer's customary scope as to border on the unthinkable: but, in Bruckner's case, is it so unthinkable? We must confess that on receiving Dr Fulbrook's text our first thoughts were negative, but equally – as admirers of Bruckner's matchless legacy – we found ourselves drawn more and more into the concept that the author posits: we know that the notion of composing an opera was – on more than one occasion – in Bruckner's mind during his final years, and that (in the event, of course) tentative steps had been made by



Anton Bruckner





him to take the project one stage further. Dr Fulbrook's knowledge of Bruckner's life and composing habits is considerable, and the very notion of the Austrian symphonic master having a long-time ambition to compose an opera is itself intriguing, to the point where one may legitimately contemplate whatever initial steps Bruckner has taken to obtain a

libretto – or, at very least, the outline of a drama suitable for his needs.

But of course we have no such opera by Bruckner, nor anything remotely approaching such a concept – but is, in fact, the concept so remote? There are several straws in the wind of Bruckner's life as to make the notion of discussing such a likelihood intriguing, a concept that

– had it been realised – would have turned almost every later opinion on the composer's creative character on its head.

All of us, from the specialist to the 'just interested', have surely wondered from time to time about the 'what-might-have-been' aspects of human life and creativity, and the very notion of an opera by Bruckner – backed up by such remaining evidence of subject-matter and the likelihood of a possible libretto – in the light of such an undertaking, makes, we feel, the concept worth considering.

It is surely the case that we all, from time to time, think of how events may have turned out differently from what history teaches us actually happened, and we found Dr Pulbrook's detailed and scholarly consideration of a great musical 'what-might-have-been' so intriguing that we have had no compunction in bringing his ideas to wider consideration – an adjunct, if you will, to the celebrations and reassessments of Anton Bruckner's immortal legacy to the standard-bearers of his life that the world of music celebrated in 2024 – two hundred years after his birth. ■

**Editorial Note:** we apologise for the relatively late appearance of this issue which has been occasioned by production factors outside of our control.

#### Other great 'unfinished' works



**Bach's Art of Fugue**



**Beethoven's Tenth Symphony**



**Schubert's Tenth Symphony**



**Borodin's Third Symphony**



**Tchaikovsky's Third Piano Concerto**



**Mahler's Tenth Symphony**



**Debussy's Symphony in B minor**



**RVW's Opera Thomas the Rhymer**

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# Meeting Shostakovitch

Robert Matthew-Walker

In 1972 I was head of the classical department of CBS Records UK. At that time there was a trade newspaper, *Music Week*, which had a regular one-page section devoted to classical music. The Editor and main contributor to that page was Evan Senior, a well-respected classical music journalist who had been the founding editor of *Music and Musicians* in 1950. I never knew quite how old Evan was, but he was certainly in his mid- to late-seventies – if not older – at that time.

I would speak with Evan often, and have lunch with him to keep him up to date with CBS's activities. One day in July he called me to ask 'Would you like to meet Shostakovitch?' Of course, my answer was 'Yes, very much so', and he explained that Shostakovitch was coming to England for a couple of days, *en route* to Dublin where he was to receive an honorary Doctorate from the city's University.

He was apparently to stay overnight in Cambridge, but I am unsure if at that time he was to meet the Fitzwilliam String Quartet who went on to record all of his fifteen String Quartets for Decca, and the University had arranged for a small press reception to meet him.

Evan however did not relish the idea of driving all the way from north London to Cambridge and back in one day at his age – he was a little uncertain behind the wheel – and asked me if I would drive him, meet Shostakovitch and return by the mid-evening.

I needed no second bidding, of course. So we went – I think it was to Fitzwilliam College, but I cannot now be certain. I know he and his younger wife went to King's College, seeing the great Chapel, where they were met by David Willcocks. Anyway, Evan and I were shown into a room with about twenty or so people, and there was the great man, smaller than I imagined, with a young lady of about the same height – who I later learned was his third wife – alongside a big butch KGB minder, and a lady (I assumed Russian) who appeared to be in charge of Shostakovitch's party.

At that time, Shostakovitch's Fifteenth Symphony had been broadcast by the

BBC for the first time in the UK – this was a recording of the world premiere, which had taken place in Moscow a little while earlier, conducted by Shostakovitch's son, Maxim.

The recording (the work had not been performed live in the UK at that time) was prefaced by a fascinating half-hour talk by Robert Layton about the Symphony, the music having caused quite a bit of comment owing to the quotations from well-known other pieces of music (Rossini and Wagner, especially).

I had eagerly tuned in to the BBC broadcast and recorded it, but the thing which struck me very forcibly was the reason for those quotations – and equally so, the extraordinary ending of the work.

I kept those reasons to myself: I would need to hear the work many times, and to discover what other musicians felt about the Symphony – but now, on being in the same room as the composer, I felt I'd say something to him.

So we lined up, and were ushered along – just a bit too quickly, I thought – to meet the great man and have a few words with him. The Russian lady who seemed to be in charge did the verbal translations – we were told that Shostakovitch did not speak English; following Evan, who had previously met Shostakovitch at the premiere of the Second Piano Concerto, played by his son Maxim (to whom the work is dedicated), it came to my turn: after the usual 'great honour to meet you, Maestro' – 'Uh, huh, uh, huh' reply – I said 'We were so interested to hear your new Fifteenth symphony' – 'Uh, huh, uh,' – 'In fact' said I, 'I have a theory about your new Symphony'.

This seemed to catch his interest more, and the answer came back through the interpreter: 'What is your theory?'

'It is the story of a man's life.'

This did it. He looked me straight in the eyes and said, with his lips hardly moving – in English! – 'You are correct'.

The interpreter asked him to repeat what he had said, which he did, this time in Russian.

And that was that – my one and only time with Shostakovitch – and we were ushered along to the tea and cakes bit of the reception: no more contact with him, as he was soon taken with his small party of minders to another room, and possibly to King's College.

Perhaps I ought to explain my theory about the work. Of course, now I know it more thoroughly, but it was that first hearing which struck me like a bolt of lightning.

The Rossini quotations in the first movement, I am convinced, are from the first opera Shostakovitch ever heard as a boy: perhaps the repertoire of the St Petersburg opera in the years prior to the outbreak of World War I can be consulted to see if *William Tell* was produced when Shostakovitch would have been seven or eight years old and taken to a matinée performance – that would certainly give credence to my theory: the first tune in classical music that stuck in his mind as a child – heard in the passages of light-hearted, youthful, expression.

The Wagner quotes are more general in terms of 'life's-fate', of course, but the closing pages are – to me (and as with the closing pages of the great Second Cello Concerto, which Rostropovich told me he regarded as the greatest of all the cello concertos which had been written for him) – a musical depiction of Shostakovitch's physical condition as he approached the end of his life: the Symphony's vast spread-out chord of A major, the constant 'being', across the entire string section – unchanging, eternal

This did it.  
He looked me  
straight in the  
eyes and said,  
with his lips  
hardly moving –  
in English! –  
'You are correct'.



Dmitri Shostakovich

– page after page, against which the irregular ‘tick-tock-click-clocking’ of the percussion exemplifying the composer’s irregular heart-beat – the arrhythmia which (at that time) could not be cured and which would inevitably lead to his death – as it did to Britten (also encapsulated in the arrhythmical opening bars of *Death in Venice* as Aschenbach enters with the words ‘My heart beats on’). I wrote about this perceived Britten connexion at the time of his centenary in 2013, and was very surprised to receive a letter from Britten’s heart surgeon in support of my perceptions.

Shostakovich and Britten – as is well known – knew one another; both suffered from arrhythmia, as I do myself, although in my case, the advances in treatment in the last fifty years have kept it fully under control and manageable on a day-to-day

basis than was possible in the 1960s and ‘70s.

But in the early 1970s I did not have arrhythmia (in my case, it began twenty years later), and was unaware of Shostakovich’s condition – it is only since his passing that I have realised just what those final pages of the Fifteenth Symphony must have meant regarding their personification, although I am equally in no doubt of two further examples from Shostakovich’s late music that were equally more personal.

These are that the *Suite on Pages from Michelangelo* is, in fact, Shostakovich’s Sixteenth Symphony – he died before he could hear his orchestrated version. He permitted the work to be performed (for the one and only time in his life) with piano accompaniment, when of course he could not have given the work the

symphonic title (I have written elsewhere about this, and the connections with Britten) – indeed his son, Maxim, indicated as much.

The second, and truly final personal matter, is found in the last page of Shostakovich’s last work, the Viola Sonata, completed three days before his death in hospital.

The Sonata’s concluding cadence in C major (!) is a stroke of absolute compositional genius; it is prefaced by the viola’s final descending line, which quotes the last woodwind phrase of Richard Strauss’s *Don Quixote* – before the solo cello finally, and quietly, descends to the low C.

*Don Quixote* is fantasy – the telling of stories, some true, some half-true, some made up – and I like to think that in his final creation Shostakovich is telling us: ‘Life is all fantasy, all made up – farewell!’

Although some may be surprised at my acceptance of Shostakovich replying in English, I knew he understood the language well enough from a passage in a book I had which was published around 1950. [The book was *The Incredible Mile* by Harold Elvin.] Elvin was what we would today call a media figure; he often appeared on radio and early post-war television as well as writing for newspapers.

The book is about a curious journey he undertook to travel the mile between the London rail termini St Pancras and Euston – about a mile apart, of course in the Euston Road – which were not joined by surface rail. Elvin decided to travel north by rail from St Pancras until he came to a station where he could cross the platforms and return to Euston station.

It meant that he had to travel part of the way in Russia, and at a station near St Petersburg, a gentleman got in Elvin’s compartment, whom he immediately recognised as Shostakovich – they then proceeded to converse, somewhat intermittently (there being no one else in the compartment), according to Elvin, partly in English! So I always knew that Shostakovich understood English, even though in post-war Soviet Russia it was not a safe ability to admit to.

There is one other story about Shostakovich’s visit at that time. Shostakovich and his wife stayed at the London home of the impresario Victor Hochhauser and his wife Lilian (her parents were Russian – she and her husband were both fluent Russian speakers). The Shostakovich’s visit





coincided with the world premiere of Peter Maxwell Davies's superb opera *Taverner* (based on the life of the 16th-century English composer) at Covent Garden.

The Hochhausers took Shostakovich and his wife to the first night of the opera, after which Max's publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, laid on a big party. The late Malcolm Smith was at that time head of promotion and the hire library of the publishing company, and soon after the party had begun, and was in full flight, he was called outside to speak to Victor Hochhauser. Malcolm was astonished to see Shostakovich and his wife with Lilian Hochhauser, when Victor explained that Shostakovich would like to meet Max but would not attend the party.

Malcolm returned and button-holed Max. Saying 'There is someone outside who would like to meet you.' Of course, Max was being fêted by many friends and well-wishers and said 'Tell them to come in, I cannot leave here just for one person.' Malcolm replied, 'Max, you must: if you don't meet this person you will regret it for the rest of your life.'

That did it (Malcolm could be very persuasive). Malcolm said the look on Max's face as he realised it was Shostakovich who wanted to meet him and offer his congratulations was 'an absolute picture – Max was like a child meeting his hero. He eventually returned to the party in a state of total elation.' ■

*Composers do not dwell in ivory towers...*

## SO WRITTEN TO AFTER-TIMES

### John McCabe – A Life in Letters

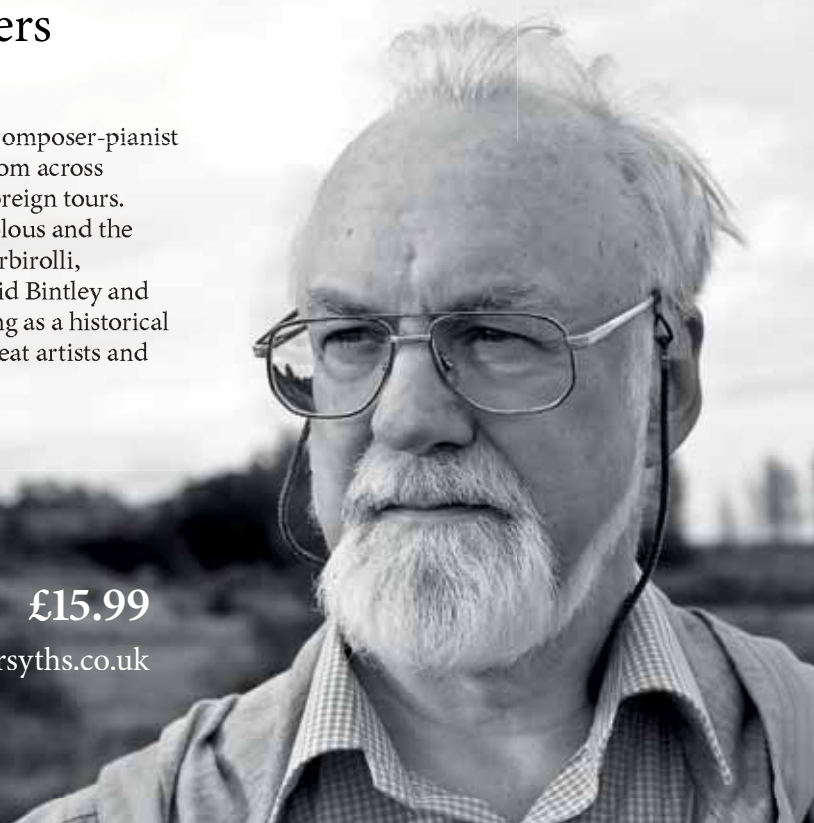
Compiled by Monica McCabe

A compilation of letters or extracts from letters between composer-pianist John McCabe and eminent composers and performers from across the world, including also letters home from his various foreign tours. They range from the scholastically interesting to the frivolous and the emotionally moving. Correspondents include Britten, Barbirolli, Ursula Vaughan Williams, Previn, Beryl Bainbridge, David Bintley and Richard Rodney Bennett. The book is therefore interesting as a historical document, as an intimate disclosure of the thoughts of great artists and even as light-hearted bed-time reading.

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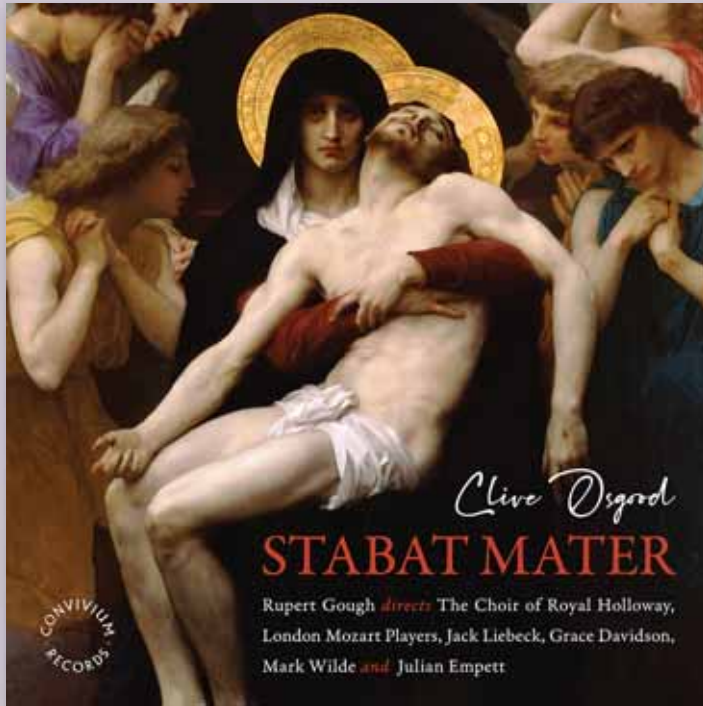
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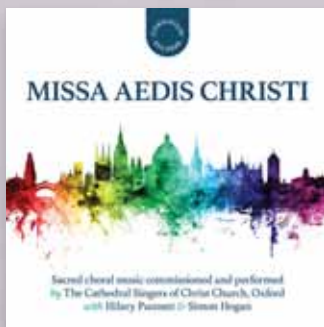
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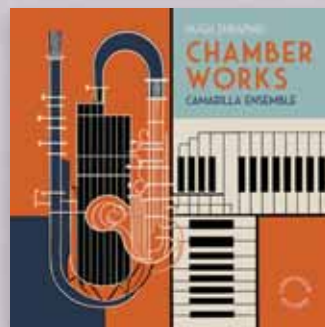


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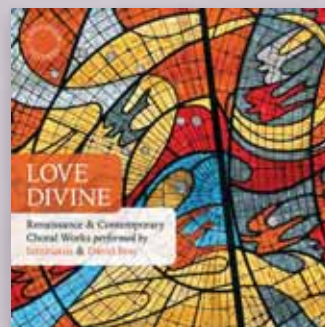
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**AS HEARD ON:**



# Three Who Quit: Ives, Elgar, Sibelius and the crisis of modernism

Joseph Horowitz

In November 1926, Charles Ives descended from the upstairs studio of his ample West Seventy-fourth Street apartment with tears streaming down his face. "I can't seem to compose any more," he told his wife Harmony. "I try and try and nothing comes out right." He was fifty-two years old and would live another twenty-eight years, creatively spent.

This well-known anecdote feeds the imagery of Ives the picturesque eccentric: a serendipitous modernist anomaly, a stranger to his own time and place who idiosyncratically and haphazardly forecast post-World War I notions of originality. And yet many composers, both in Europe and the United States, experienced a comparable crisis. The best-known cases were Edward Elgar and Jean Sibelius. Like Ives, they were Romantic symphonists in the Germanic tradition. Like Ives, they virtually stopped composing in the 1920s. Like Ives, they were strangers to modernism and – to a significant extent – to modernity. And there is a third similarity, a rooted relationship to Nature that was both elemental and national. What New England was for Ives, the Malvern hills and the Finnish forests were to Elgar and Sibelius.

Born in 1874, Ives remains too often framed as a ragged cultural footnote. He more deserves to be remembered as the supreme American concert composer, a musical genius, an iconic self-made American to set beside Emerson, Melville, and Whitman. His stage, his status, were and are international.

Within a decade of Charles Ives' death in 1954, contemporary composers of tonal music could not be taken seriously.

It was even a tenet of Cold War ideology, as framed in the United States, that composers were "free artists" entitled to experiment at will, to radically break with the past. The standard narrative for American classical music, popularised by Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, begins around 1915. It treats Ives as an early oddball who prophetically stumbled into modernist advances in harmony and rhythm.

The polar Old World apostles of musical modernism were Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky. In retrospect, they were resilient, ingenious survivors of twin upheavals: the 'Great War' and the Russian Revolution. Picking up the pieces of a shattered, delegitimised Europe, Schoenberg re-invented German music by systematising a break with tonality; he

predicted that his 12-tone rows would "ensure the dominance of German music" for at least a century to come. Stravinsky, traumatised by exile from his Russian homeland, also became a polemicist. He declared that music meant nothing beyond itself and that "inspiration" was a Romantic mirage. What he was saying, ultimately, was that he could shed his roots and compose literally anywhere, so long as he was left alone. He idealised a trans-national, cosmopolitan musical universe cancelling chaos with logic and order.

In retrospect, the post-World War I decades were relatively fallow for classical music. The mainstream symphonic canon

ends with Dmitri Shostakovich in the 1950s. That is: it ends not in the "free" West, but behind the Iron Curtain where lineage – for Shostakovich: Beethoven,

Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Mahler – was paradoxically preserved.

Modernism was born in a rupture vast in dimension. War and revolution were one part of it. Another was technological: radio, recordings, cinema, TV. New forms of vicarious engagement with the arts discouraged the domestic musicales of another era. Popularised, democratised, musical taste was at the same time thinned and commercialized. These tensions played out variously for composers of classical music. Spurning new audiences, Schoenberg and Stravinsky bravely re-invented themselves to a degree without precedent in the Western tradition. Others essentially gave up.

A juxtaposition of Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius discloses a surprising wealth of similarities. They strove to sustain the Romantic symphony. They rejected the new paths of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. They were discomfited by the pressures of industrialization and urbanisation. They were moody, neurotic men in declining health who relied on their wives for stability. They fed, indispensably, on imperiled pre-urban environments they identified as their own.

No eminent composer is as commonly mischaracterised as Edward Elgar. 'Pomp and Circumstance' do not describe him, and neither do his walking stick and trim moustache. A few photographs suggest the nervous activity of his eyes. But no picture could possibly reveal his restless hands and rapid, earnest speech. At concerts, musically aroused, he would elbow or clutch his bruised neighbours. By his own testimony, confirmed by others, he was vulnerable and erratic. His chronic physical afflictions targeted his eyes, his ears, his throat, his digestion. He suffered from gout and dizziness. He was often prostrate. And it is all crammed into his music: hyperactive unease; polarities of optimism and fatalism, exuberance and depression, gregarious élan and shy, solitary bitterness.

That the outcome seems "Edwardian"

Spurning new audiences, Schoenberg and Stravinsky bravely re-invented themselves to a degree without precedent in the Western tradition. Others essentially gave up.



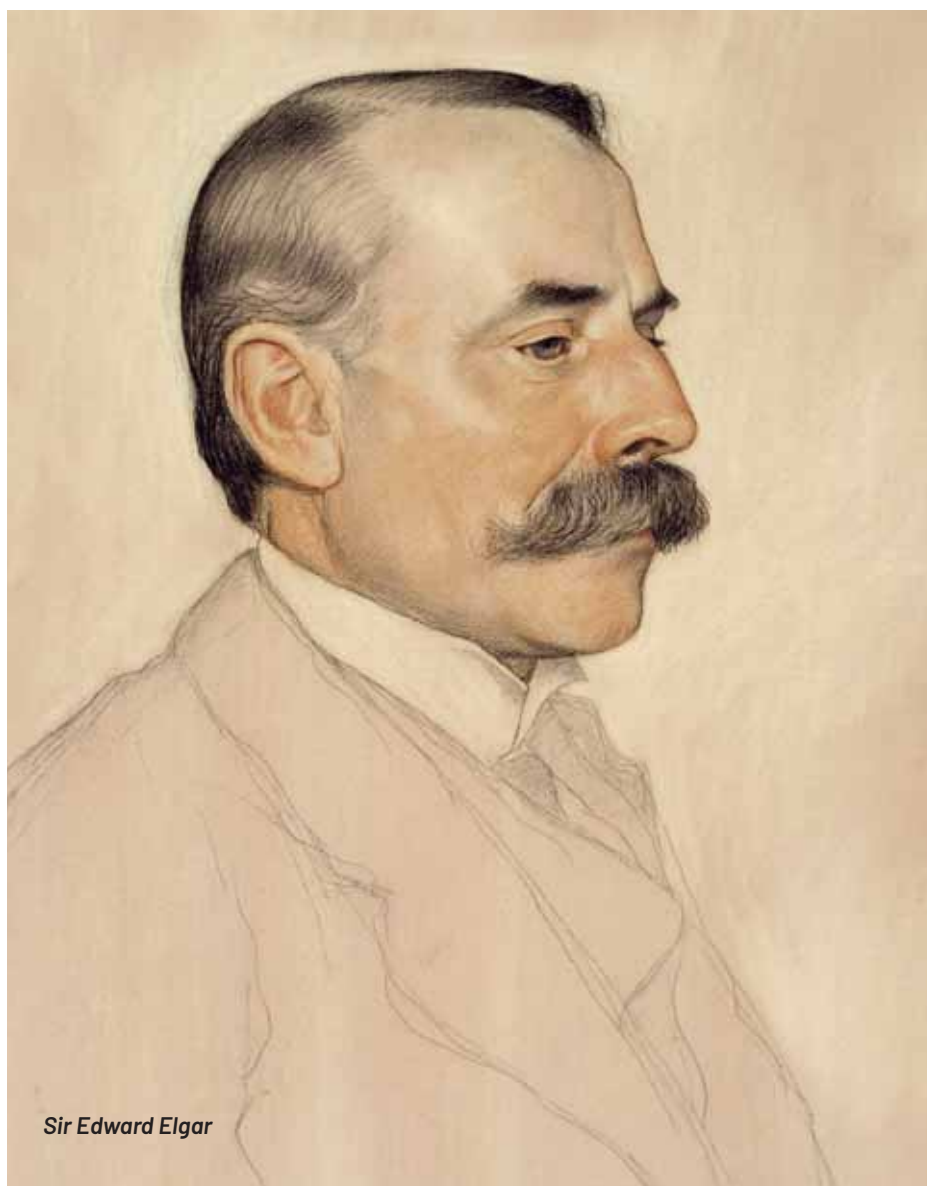
is both necessary and inadvertent. He is an essentially confessional composer, as ruthless in self-portraiture as Gustav Mahler (with whom he is often knowledgeably compared). The Post-Victorian times in which he lived were feverishly encumbered – like Mahler's Vienna (or Ives' New York) an aroused, destabilised fin-de-siècle.

Crucially, Elgar was not a product of London – its royal trappings, its ceremonies and parades. Rather, he was born in 1857 in the village of Broadheath. His father was a piano-tuner. William Henry Elgar was also Roman Catholic: an outsider. Edward left school at fifteen hoping to study music in Leipzig, but the family finances were insufficient. Instead, he taught himself to compose. He mastered orchestration to a rare degree. He knew French, Greek and Latin. As a young man he told his mother he would not be content until a postcard from abroad could be addressed "Edward Elgar, England."

The turning point in Elgar's life was his marriage to Alice Roberts in 1889. She was the daughter of a major general and, at forty, eight years his senior: a belated match to a shopkeeper's son so outwardly unfavourable that she was disinherited. The greatest influence on Elgar's life, she instantly gleaned his genius. She became his inspiration and his manager. She was also of London, which he was not. Through Alice, the Elgars befriended aristocracy. He accepted a knighthood to please her. The Hampstead mansion that became their London home included a library, billiard-room, picture gallery, servants' quarters, and acres of grounds – for Alice, a status symbol; for Edward, a required indulgence.

Like his *Pomp and Circumstance* tune that spawned a national hymn, Elgar needed "London" for his career – but could not compose there. "My labour will soon be over and then for the country lanes and the wind sighing in the reeds by Severn side again," he once wrote to a friend during a short London sojourn. He longed for his dogs and horses, his bicycle, his boots and rifle and fishing rod. He was a man who would bring hedgehogs from the woods and feed them in the house. And so he and Alice inhabited a series of cottages and country homes. Undisturbed by urban bustle, he was jotting music in his head all the while.

His reputation, national and inter-



Sir Edward Elgar

Photo: Wikimedia

national, came late, and suddenly, with the *Enigma Variations* (1899). Before that, he had to support himself with salon trifles: a humiliation he never forgot. The *Dream of Gerontius* (1900) and *Symphony No. 1* (1908) consolidated his name. His champions and admirers included important continental conductors and solo artists: Hans Richter, Felix Weingartner, Pablo Casals, Fritz Kreisler. Preparing the London premiere of Elgar's First, Richter said to his orchestra: "Gentlemen, let us now

Before that, he had to support himself with salon trifles: a humiliation he never forgot.

rehearse the greatest symphony of modern times, and not only in this country." It begins with a glorious tune that splinters throughout, then re-coalesces, laboriously but triumphantly, at the close. At the premiere, Elgar was called to the stage after the first and third movements. The final ovation was frantic.

But the hour-long Second Symphony, three years later, did not console. The Elgarian note of regret, of backward longing, was now fatalistic. The symphony's slow movement is a funeral

march. At first, Elgar had a deceased friend in mind. Then Edward VII died, and the “stately sorrow” (Elgar’s term) acquired a royal connotation. But in truth this music, at once sombre and eruptive, mourns all human transience. A signature passage, coming later, builds rapidly to a migraine; Elgar would instruct orchestras: “I want you to imagine that this hammering is like that horrible throbbing in the head during some fever. It seems gradually to blot out every atom of thought in your brain and nearly drives you mad.” He likened the Second Symphony as a whole to “the passionate pilgrimage of a soul” and prefaced the score with two lines from Shelley:

Rarely, rarely, comest thou,  
Spirit of Delight.

The first performance failed to fill Queen’s Hall. Elgar afterward complained of the audience’s lukewarm response: “They sit there like a lot of stuffed pigs.” His swift ascendancy had as swiftly diminished.

Then came World War I. Elgar’s single most memorable letter, dated August 28, 1914, read in part:

“Concerning the war I say nothing – the only thing that wrings my heart & soul is the thought of the horses – oh! My beloved animals – the men – and women can go to hell – but my horses; – I walk round & round this room cursing God for allowing dumb brutes to be tortured – let Him kill his human beings but – how CAN HE? Oh, my horses.”

The same letter records: “Everything is at a standstill.” Between 1918 and 1919 Elgar composed four works suffused by ruin and nostalgia: a violin sonata, a string quartet, an unjustly neglected piano quintet, a famous cello concerto. His reputation plummeted. In 1920 Alice took ill and died. A long denouement ensued. He continued to conduct his music and also recorded it. But his seventieth birthday anniversary concert in 1927 played to a half-empty house. His creative output dwindled to miniatures and transcriptions. In 1932, remarkably, he embarked upon a Third Symphony – but died in 1934 before finishing it.

Elgar’s fourteen lonely years of relative creative abstinence are commonly attributed to Alice’s absence. His declining health – a linked phenomenon – also played a role. But there can be no question that, on a larger stage, Elgar had unhappily stumbled into a world not his

own. To begin with, there was the new music: its cerebral calculation, order and logic, brittle restraint. Elgar’s copious letters say little about it, but there is evidence enough. Of his relationship to other English composers, his biographer Michael Kennedy surmises: “He did not, as Vaughan Williams did when he attained a similar pre-eminence in English music, attend almost every first performance of a new English work. The truth is that, like Delius, he was not very interested in the work of his contemporaries and juniors. He helped people he liked as men rather than as musicians.” In 1923 Elgar told Compton Mackenzie, who had just founded *The Gramophone*, that he supposed the magazine’s young critics would be sneering at him. “Not that I care,” he added, “I take no more interest in music.” He complained that “the horrible musical atmosphere... in this benighted country nearly suffocates me.” He passed on attending receptions for Sibelius, Schoenberg, and Ravel. He welcomed the post-war return to Britain of Richard Strauss, an Old Guard master he admired.

A vignette: in Spring 1921 Elgar began playing Bach fugues – and undertook an orchestration of the organ Fugue in C minor (BWV 537). He hoped Strauss would compose a companion orchestration of the preceding Fantasy. When Strauss demurred, Elgar did it himself – resulting in a provocatively unfashionable rendering for large Romantic orchestra. He told the conductor-composer Eugene Goossens that he depended on “people like Johann Sebastian” for inspiration now that Alice was dead and he could not be original. Of the fugue transcription he wrote: “I think it is *brilliant* – a word I wanted in connection with Bach who, in arrangements, is made ‘pretty’ etc. etc.” The recordings of his own music are notably impulsive and excitable. He earlier said he intended that his compositions be

played “elastically and mystically,” that people preferred “when they are conducted squarely and sound like a wooden box.” He was a man who considered Fyodor Chaliapin – a volcano of feeling – “the finest artist I have ever heard.”

And there was more – much more. In 1924, Elgar conducted at the Wembley Empire exhibition. “Music is dying fast in this country,” he reflected. “Everything seems so hopeless and irredeemably vulgar at court.” He complained of “hammering, loudspeakers, amplifiers, four aeroplanes circling over... all mechanical & horrible – no soul & no romance & no imagination... Something wet rolled down my cheek – & I am not ashamed of it.” He fled to the Malvern Hills and his dogs. It was not just modernism, but modernity that estranged him from creative work.

Elgar was no Charles Ives shunning phonographs, motor cars, and airplanes. But the urban industrial order was not for him. Broadcasting was “killing all the concert rooms.” Socialism was sully- ing government (he resigned from the Athenaeum when Ramsay MacDonald was elected a member). Abroad in the US in 1911, he reported: “I know I ought to be glad that perhaps I shall earn some money, but I would rather starve... Truly parts of the world are beastly!” His every nerve was “shattered by some angularity, vulgarity, and general horror.” Abroad in Rome two years later, he reported that “the rebuilding incessantly is fast ruining even what little

there was picturesque five years ago.” In March 1933 he was “in a maze regarding events in Germany – what are they doing? In this morning’s paper it is said that the greatest conductor Bruno Walter and stranger still, Einstein are ostracised: are we all mad? The Jews have always been my best and kindest friends – the pain of these news is unbearable and I do not know what it really means.” His death eleven months later spared him from

“I want you to imagine that this hammering is like that horrible throbbing in the head during some fever. It seems gradually to blot out every atom of thought in your brain and nearly drives you mad.”



finding out.

"Elgar's seventh decade brought him back to the country – where telephones were still few enough that his number at Napleton Grange in the 1920s was 'Kempsey 3,'" writes Jerrold Northrop Moore, the scrupulous editor of his letters. But annoyances persisted – the rumble of distant trains; denuded hills that once welcomed trees. In 1920, Elgar visited Stratford-upon-Avon and took relatives to lunch at a hotel he had known. "Under new management, USA I believe," he reported. "A three weeks carnival at Christmas, a Jazz Band specially engaged – dances every night – the whole place 'booked-up' with an abandoned set of filthy wretches! I have known S-on-A since 1869 and wish it cd. have been spared – we did not honour Shakespeare in this way in those sweet old years."

Increasingly bedridden, always a prodigious reader, Elgar immersed himself in history and folklore. Michael Kennedy surmises "his growing nostalgia for Worcestershire and an irrecoverable and perhaps imaginary past." Shades of Charles Ives and Danbury.

Like Elgar, with his moustache and cane, Jean Sibelius is iconically misrepresented: the granite p  te, the mountain repose, the chiseled glance. Sibelius the man was self-doubting depressive, incurably alcoholic. Like Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, Sibelius's *Finlandia* flogs his reputation with trumpeted uplift.

He was born in 1865, the son of a doctor. From childhood, he was attached to nature. He studied in his native Finland, then in Berlin and Vienna. He married Aino, his wife of 65 years, in 1892. A dozen years later, they built a large wooden forest house: Ainola, 24 miles north of Helsinki. His swiftly became the acknowledged symphonic voice of his homeland; it was also (until aesthetic fashion changed) pedigreed in Germany. A little later, his fame in Britain and the US grew to immense proportions among enemies of modernism, who misread him as a scourge: virile, clean, self-reliant. A continental counter-reaction caricatured him as a stuffed shirt.

His seven symphonies track an evolutionary quest that stands apart. The First (1899) is residually Romantic; Tchaikovsky is a potent influence. The tub-thumping Second (1902) stirs with what became his signature: self-generating

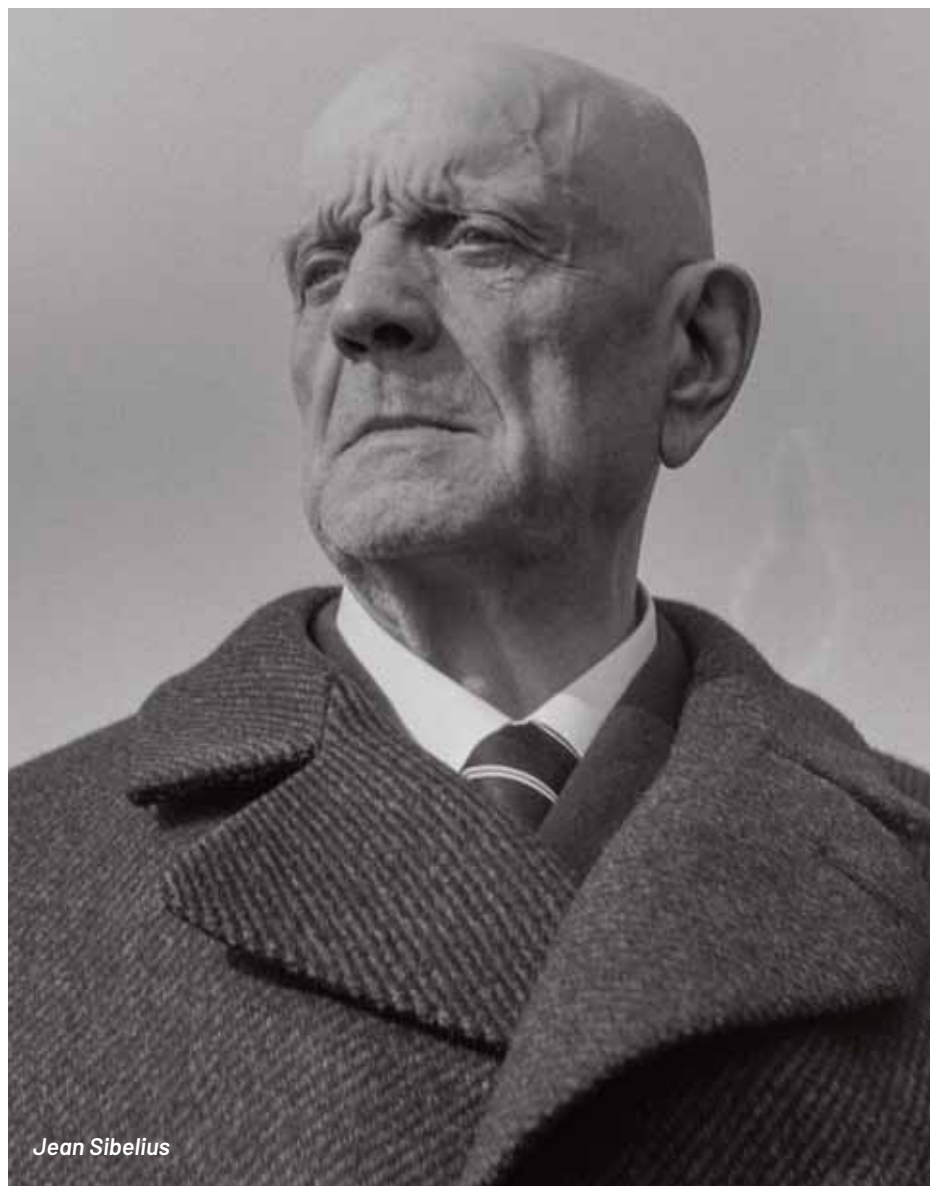


Photo: Wikimedia

forms. The Third (1907), even more, is stylistically in limbo. A compositional crisis ensued. Sibelius followed the new music of Debussy and Schoenberg – but it was ultimately not for him. He sensed a loss of "inner life." But he equally feared being marginalised as a "nationalistic curiosity." The result was an austere, idiosyncratic Fourth Symphony (1909-1911) that retained tonality and a moody Romantic sensibility, but was structurally experimental.

Though the Fourth Symphony's puzzled reception was, in retrospect, unsurprising, its composer – chronically prone to gusts of self-doubt – was thrown into further uncertainty about his proper path. A 1913 trip to the United States – a more conservative aesthetic environment

than the European continent – proved fortifying. He began anew, declaring: "Once again in a deep valley. But I'm already beginning to see dimly the mountain I shall surely climb... For an instant God opens his door and *His* orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony." Then, crucially, came a Spring epiphany of migrating birds. "Today at ten to eleven I saw 16 swans. One of my greatest experiences! Lord God, that beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming, silver ribbon. Their call the same woodwind type as that of cranes but without tremol... The Fifth Symphony's finale-theme: Legato in the trumpets!! That this should have happened to me, who have so long been the outsider." And

again: “The swans are always in my thoughts and give splendour to [my] life. [It’s] strange to learn that nothing in the whole world affects me – nothing in art, literature, or music – in the same way as do these swans and cranes and wild geese. Their voices and being.”

Its triumphant swan call defined the Fifth Symphony of 1915. But Sibelius was not done with it. He decided “to give my new symphony another, more human form.” The final revised version, dated 1919, shed moments of dissonance and cryptic compression; and the mounting swan song of the finale acquired a hymn-like counter-melody: an aureole. Ever after, Sibelius abandoned his aspiration to woo the modernist fraternity: he would go his own way. His elusive, understated Sixth Symphony (1923) is refreshed by modal harmonies that shun the victory note; “scent of fresh snow”. The Symphony No. 7 (1923) clinches, one last time, the Romantic strife-to-victory scenario that Sibelius, finally, could and would not abandon.

In 1941, Sibelius and Aino moved permanently to Ainola; their trips to Helsinki grew infrequent. He was ever rumored to be composing a Symphony No. 8 – but it never materialised and may have been discarded. Aino later recalled: “In the 1940s there was a great *auto da fé* at Ainola. My husband collected a number of... manuscripts in a laundry basket and burned them on the open fire in the dining room... I did not have the strength to be present and left the room. I therefore do not know what he threw on to the fire. But after this my husband became calmer and gradually lighter in mood.” During the same decade Sibelius was visited by Winthrop Sargeant, a former violinist who in 1949 became music critic of *The New Yorker*. Sargeant’s Sibelius portrait (little remembered today) vividly glimpses a retired genius on the sidelines:

[He] turned out to be a hale and hearty, and an extremely affable host... Sibelius’ home is approached by a rutted dirt road passing through a rickety country gate made of undressed timber ... The house is remarkably simple ... Sibelius designed it himself ... The library has a large low cocktail table where the Professor will sit by the hour, entertaining guests with the aid of interminable bottles of cognac ... It is interesting to note that both Sibelius and [Richard] Strauss, the

two great surviving Romantics, seem to prefer history, biography and well-worn classics to modern fiction, philosophy and politics... In the middle of the house, between the two main rooms, there is a huge square Finnish stove of green tile which burns birch logs and is evidently Sibelius’s sole source of winter heating... I dwell on these details because I think they reveal a great deal about the simplicity and self-respecting conservatism of the old man’s character. . . .

[Sibelius] and Mrs. Sibelius ... live alone with the help of a servant or two... Neither of them is particularly interested in discussing music. . . . Both of them are a great deal worried over the condition of the juniper trees, some of which have been killed by recent, abnormally cold winters. Sitting down to rest on a moss-covered rock, Sibelius rambles on about the pleasure of duck hunting in the early morning twilight, the character of the birch and evergreen Finnish forest, a wonderful horse name Matilda that he used to drive to Helsinki, the great age of the fern family, and so on... He is a man of long vistas and large horizons, who nourishes his native serenity by contemplating the stability of aged things... Present-day politics, even the fuss over the atom bomb, seem to him minor ripples on the surface of a large stream that somehow keeps on flowing... Though he is very proud of his status as Finland’s leading national monument, there is no trace of pose about him.

Sargeant’s *Sibelius* confutes other impressions: of a tortured castoff, a persistent hypochondriac riddled by self-doubt, conflicted by the forward march of time. He died in 1957 at the age of 91. He had last composed a major work – *Tapiola* – 31 years before. Often adduced is a dead end – his stylistic odyssey could travel no further. His biographer Erik Tawaststjerna blamed the anxiety inflicted by world musical opinion, including lofty expectations in Britain and the US. Sibelius himself said: “Let no one imagine that composing is easier for an

old composer if he takes his art seriously. The demands one makes on oneself have increased in the course of years. Greater sureness makes one scorn solutions that come too easily, that follow the line of least resistance.”

Queried about his Eighth Symphony, Sibelius told Winthrop Sargeant: “Things are moving.” But he also said that the world “ethos” – a word pronounced with “contemplative solemnity” – had turned inhospitable to musical genius. “I could write atonal music from here to Stockholm – by the yard – and it would mean absolutely nothing.” Sibelius also told Sargeant: “People think in statistics and that kills poetic thought.”

And so to Charles Ives and his tearful 1926 confession that he was creatively spent. Conventional wisdom attributes Elgar’s silence to Alice’s death – but he lived for another fourteen years, time enough to come back. Sibelius is believed to have had nothing more to say – which begs the question. For Ives, the most obvious explanation is illness. But terminal illness did not stifle Schubert, Bruckner, Debussy, Ravel, Bartok, Shostakovich.

Ives’ disabilities were more prolonged, arguably more comprehensive. He suffered gravely from diabetes and heart disease. He acquired palsy so severe he could not write a letter (and entrusted Harmony with his correspondence). A 1918 heart attack was a pivotal event in his physical decline – and a linked decline in his creative output. “By the end of 1926 Charles Ives was finished as a composer,” summarises his pre-eminent biographer, Jan Swafford. “He could no longer conceive and pull together a piece.” As

Swafford also notes, Ives physical disabilities locked in a vicious circle with bouts of depression and hyperbolic rants. “All his life, Charles Ives had reined in the warring paradoxes within and without, and the energy of their dissonance helped create

Ives never owned a radio (but permitted the maid one in her room), never admitted to attending a movie, disliked cars, rarely used the telephone.



and fuel his art. Now the centrifugal elements of his self had escaped his grasp, leaving him fragmented and exhausted."

Hence the pertinence of modernism and modernity: as with Elgar and Sibelius, a changed world, post-dating World War I, proved an abiding obstruction, a disabling irritant. It bears stressing that Ives was a master organist, steeped in the traditional literature for that instrument. His core affinities, among his compositional forebears, hugged Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. When Elliott Carter visited him around 1924, Ives sat at his piano and disapprovingly mimicked works by Ravel and Stravinsky he had recently encountered. Carter also learned that Ives began every day playing a fugue from Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*. He kept up with new music – at a distance – via newspapers, *Musical Quarterly*, and *The New Music* – articles he not only read but clipped. In conversation with John Kirkpatrick in the 1930s, he delivered a tirade damning musical "simplicity" – doubtless arraighing the Francophile neo-classical aesthetic then popularised by Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and other American tastemakers.

Ives' inflamed response to modernity is memorably inscribed in his commentary on the Alcotts' movement of his *Concord Sonata*. Describing the Alcott house, he writes:

It seems to stand as a kind of homely but beautiful witness of Concord's common virtue – it seems to bear a consciousness that its past is *living* ... all pervaded with the trials and happiness of the family and telling, in a simple way, the story of "the richness of not having." Within the house, on every side, lie remembrances of what imagination can do for the better amusement of fortunate children who have to do for themselves – much-needed lessons in these days of automatic, ready-made, easy entertainment which deaden rather than stimulate the creative faculty. And there sits the little old spinet-piano Sophia Thoreau gave to the Alcott children on which Beth played the old Scotch airs, and played at [Beethoven's] *Fifth Symphony*.

The same mindset fires his song-text for "The Ruined River" (1913):

Down the river comes a noise!  
It is not the voice of rolling waters.  
It's only the sounds of man,  
Dancing halls and tambourine,



Phonographs and gasoline.  
Human beings gone machine.

Ives never owned a radio (but permitted the maid one in her room), never admitted attending a movie, disliked cars, rarely used the telephone. He was persuaded to harbor a wind-up phonograph but complained that "so much of the music doesn't get recorded." His business success may seem an incongruity – except that, for Ives, life insurance fostered a wholesome community of policyholders, commensurate in its way with family and civic ties. Here he is in a 1929 newspaper advertisement (!): "There is a tendency, today, to minimise the individual and to exaggerate the machine-like customs of business, and of life. Some

men ... are becoming 'cogs' and they don't want to be 'cogs.' Work in the life insurance field, certainly doesn't cramp individuality, ingenuity or initiative."

If Ives' resistance to modernity was – to say the least – more truculent than any disaffection voiced by Elgar or Sibelius, he had more at stake. They were Old World Romantics for whom bitterness and morbidity, anguish and tragedy were aesthetically and temperamentally germane. Ives was a New World Romantic buoyed by Transcendentalism and Progressivism. Fundamental to Ives – to the man and musician both – was his conviction that the world was ever becoming a better place. His music does not grieve or seethe. The concert hall was for him a moral arena. His valedictory

Photo: Wikimedia / National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Fourth Symphony may not preach any explicit credo – and yet he truly called it “religious.”

The same striving moral dimension buoyed Ives’ New England inheritance. It was inherent to the organ loft and the camp meeting. Danbury as he first knew it exuded prosperity and optimism. Ives recalled its July Fourth celebrations as “Cannon on the Green, Village Band on Main Street, fire crackers ... Church bells, ... fifes, ... a prize-fight, drum-corps, ... Baseball game ... runaway horse, – and the day ends with a sky-rocket over the Church-steeple”; when in 1880 a new Civil War memorial was dedicated, George Ives’ band led the parade; the town was decked in flags and bunting. Charlie’s alma mater was not Harvard, where money and family defined an elite, but Yale, which more greatly stressed character and enterprise. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s over-soul, spiritually uniting humankind, Harmony Ives’s equation of happiness and divinity, of a binding mutuality “just God and religion” – it all exuded the same sanguine fervour.

For that matter, the ferment of the *fin-de-siècle* American arts feasted on the moral criterion. Even Wagnerism, a defining cultural and intellectual movement of the 1880s and 1890s, was in the United States cast as a meliorist crusade resonant with the social gospel movement. A little later came the Progressives, crusading for social and political reform. The nation was consumed by self-confidence and idealism. Ives’ response was precariously mercurial. The end of the Great War (which he blamed on international moneyed interests), and promulgation of Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, signalled for Ives a grand opportunity to vindicate the democratic majority. He envisaged a People’s World Union embracing universal disarmament, free trade, and an international police force. Eyeing American politicians with disgust, he printed 5,000 screaming pamphlets framing a Twentieth Amendment intended to enact direct democracy: the general public would submit proposals to Con-

gress, which in grateful response would draft referenda enacted (or not) by majority vote of the electorate.

But Ives’ fragile conviction that everything is fixable was already overwhelmed by the carnage of World War I. Wilson’s Fourteen Points languished. The United States refused to join the League of Nations. And, as Ives had occasion to discover, Danbury had changed beyond recognition; discovering its grime and empty factories, he moaned aloud, burying his head in his hands. Rather than sinking, his optimism took ever more belligerent forms. In 1938, still pitching his Twentieth Amendment, he wrote to President Roosevelt:

The composer feasting on the rustic sublime was nothing new. Think of Vivaldi, Beethoven, Liszt, Berlioz.

“[People] give more of their spare thought than is necessary to the easy un-essentials which include ... the radio sap, the movie mush the tabloid lolly pop. ... But give these millions a fair chance to get their teeth into stronger food, and then ... it will not be many generations before all these various political groups throughout the world – with their medieval stuff well organised, fancy labels, and strutting

leaders – will be recognised as being as useless to humanity as a policeman in Heaven.”

Charles Ives was a chronic humanist ever more convinced that modernity corrupts the very preconditions for human betterment: the capacity for individualism and independent thought. The contradiction left him unhinged. Ever more, he railed against “lily pads” and “soft ears,” “ladies,” “pussies,” and “pansies.” If his homophobia was real enough, he – of all people – was no misanthropist. It all contributed to his creative crisis. He was a man throttled and spent.

Challenged by modernity, Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius were fortunate in marriage. Their wives were – among much else – a necessary anchor: a repository of personal and cultural memory. A further, final point of resemblance: they were composers anchored in nature: pre-urban, pre-industrial, immutably wholesome.

The composer feasting on the rustic

sublime was nothing new. Think of Vivaldi, Beethoven, Liszt, Berlioz. But in Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius this affinity became newly exigent. In juxtaposition with the city and the factory, nature changed meaning. It seductively signified something past, even illusory. And the past remembered, or imagined, was for Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius a fundamental motif.

For Elgar, Nature was the Malvern Hills, a rural agricultural expanse across the River Severn bordering Worcester – his home until the age of 54. “I am at heart the child on Severn side,” he said. Tramping the city’s outskirts, he heard music and composed in his head what he would write down upon returning home. This pastoral idyll, ever juxtaposed with the noise and bustle of London, was both soothing and inspirational. An early touchstone was the *Introduction and Allegro* for strings (1905), whose surging vigor alternates with a melody first suggested by a visit to Wales: on a cliff “between the blue sea and blue sky,” Elgar heard a “Welsh tune from afar.” Later, in the Wye Valley near home, he encountered a “similar song.” As deployed in the *Introduction and Allegro*, a song introduced by a solo viola intimates nostalgia and innocence: a signature Elgar motif. Fourteen years later, he would begin his Cello Concerto with another, sadder tune redolent of folksong. “If ever you’re walking on the Malvern Hills and hear that, don’t be frightened,” he said on his deathbed. “It’s only me.” The Hills had become a mournful companion in solitude.

In fact, Elgar’s Worcester was hardly rural. Notwithstanding its picturesque cathedral, and the proximate countryside, this city of 30,000 was crowded and noisy. The urban/rural duality of London/Worcester was already established in microcosm in Worcester itself. Considering “Elgar’s Aesthetic of Landscape,” the art historian Tim Barringer writes that Elgar’s “ruralism” is “deeply ambivalent”; Barringer commensurately calls the Edwardian era “a moment of crisis in which long-established binaries – town-city; center-periphery; high-low; even male-female – were placed under strain, even erasure.” Certainly Elgar’s music is nothing if not “binary” and “placed under strain.” Its remembered innocence is fleeting and contested.

The music critic Ernest Newman, who knew Elgar well, testified: “In his heart of hearts he was afraid of the future.” As if in



compensation, Elgar idealised, even mythologized his “rural” past. But if the “Malvern Hills” in Elgar is as much a need as a memory, it is no less potent. It is Elgar bracing himself to confront the *fin-de-siècle* contradictions he observed, felt, and processed. In this view, the pounding “migraine” interrupting his Second Symphony is, additional to a psychological affliction, a mechanical dystopia. Christopher Grogan, in his 2020 book on Elgar and “landscape,” here discerns “the strains and outright damage which applied science, through industrialization and urbanization, had inflicted on the fabric of social and interpersonal relationships” – a perspective Elgar shared with his friend Thomas Hardy.

Grogan’s consideration of Elgar and Nature references Jean Sibelius. He ponders “how crucial to landscape is the involvement of the person, who belongs to the landscape and perceives it as belonging, in some unique way that only they can perceive and express, to them. This dynamism is a constant in the music of Elgar, who ‘possessed’ his local landscape to an extent rivalled perhaps only by Sibelius.” The landscape Sibelius possessed at home in Ainola, 24 miles north of Helsinki, was initially “to a large extent untouched countryside,” writes Erik Tawaststjerna. “Foals and sheep almost nosed their way into the house, and from time to time an elk majestically bestrode the grounds.” But, like Elgar’s Worcester, like Ives’s West Redding, Ainola – spare, rustic, solitary – was hardly remote: the Sibelius family enjoyed a neighborhood social circle. And the city remained within reach.

Migrating swans overhead might engender the trumpet call of a symphonic finale. But Sibelius’s most famous swan – *The Swan of Tuonela* – was mythic. A gliding, dolorous presence, it inhabits the land of the dead. Nature in Sibelius is elsewhere active, aquiver – but for the most part there are no swans or birdcalls, no piping shepherds, no dancing peasants or wandering poets. In his diary, he recorded

the changing seasons, the effects of light, the speaking silences of land, sky and water indifferent to man. It translated, for him, into musical timbre, texture, and sonority. Observing the reddish rocks protruding from the “pale blue” Baltic Sea, “solitary islands of a hard, archaic beauty,” he exclaimed: “When we see those granite rocks we know why we are able to treat the orchestra as we do!” More: Nature engendered musical structure. “I should like to compare the symphony to a river,” he wrote. “It is born from various rivulets that seek each other in the way the river proceeds wide and powerful to the sea.” He wanted “motives and ideas” to “decide their own form.” He aspired to quasi-intuitively discern an inner logic, to eschew imposing formulas of construction from without. His affinity for instinct – his mistrust of a manipulative creativity – was grounded in affinity for the natural environment. “When I consider how musical forms are established I frequently think about the ice-ferns which, according to eternal laws, the frost makes into the most beautiful patterns.” He “sought to uncover a deeply intuitive and nature-musical relationship to sound itself through a process of meditative inward-

ness,” writes the music historian James Hepokoski. Daniel Grimley, in a 2021 Sibelius study, adduces a “radically immersive and destabilising process, a commingling of self and environment that sought to permeate and break down the boundaries between human agency and the shifting mood of the weather and the night sky.” *Tapiola* (1926), Sibelius’s last major work, combines an obsessive exercise in motivic concision with a howling Finnish soundscape, a vortex of mystery and terror.

In his musings on a new musical aesthetic,

Ferruccio Busoni – with whom Sibelius enjoyed a close musical and personal relationship – theorised an elemental “Ur-Musik” eschewing prefabrication. There is something like that in Sibelius. But unlike the questing protagonist in Busoni’s *Doktor Faust* – unlike Liszt’s *Obermann*,

in his brooding piano narrative *Vallée d’Obermann*; unlike Berlioz’s Faust, invoking Nature in the *La damnation de Faust* – Sibelius is never Faustian. For him, Nature dissolves the ego. He remains a mute witness to the meteorological cataclysms that enthrall Liszt and Berlioz, *Obermann* and Faust.

And so it is with the great Nature poet of American music. Distancing himself from Walt Whitman, whom he in other respects much resembles, Charles Ives revealingly complained: “Whenever he wants us to know how human he is ... he becomes somewhat of a ‘loud talker,’ – I’d take his word for it with less effort on his part.” Ives can be loud, he can be brash. But the ego in Ives, as in Sibelius, is “radically immersive.” He pursues a “commingling of self and environment.” As typically as Sibelius’s environment is forbidding or aloof, however, Ives commingles with the divine. In his supreme Nature studies – “The Housatonic at Stockbridge,” from *Three Places in New England*, “Thoreau” from the *Concord Sonata* – the sublime is protean, eventually benign.

Late Elgar, like Sibelius, Ives often composed in proximity to Nature. For many years, he escaped Manhattan to Pine Mountain, near Danbury. With his brother, he built a plank cabin at the summit. Like Sibelius’s Ainola, his eventual home in West Redding – where he worked in seclusion on the *Concord Sonata*, *Three Places in New England*, and the Symphony No. 4 – was not winterised. The finale of the Fourth Symphony – his valedictory – briefly incorporates birdcalls. But – like Elgar, like Sibelius – Ives typically does not mimic Nature. This culminating journey to the summit – which in the Second String Quartet, with the same ending, is titled *The Call of the Mountains* – is essentially interior. First conceived in the Adirondacks, saturated with *Nearer My God to Thee*, it maps a summit of the spirit. Its commingled hymn fragments are cosmic: unbordered; its surging epiphany is a fragment of something greater still. Its ecstasies would prove increasingly implausible over the course of the harried decades Ives was fated to endure in silence.

A glance at the leading musical modernists contemporaneous with Ives is instructive. Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg – not the residual Romantics

His affinity for instinct – his mistrust of a manipulative creativity – was grounded in affinity for the natural environment.



Gustav Mahler

Elgar, Sibelius, and Ives — are the latter-day Fausts, craving experience new and original. Courageously, perilously, they undertook a radical transformation of their own stylistic signatures.

And they do not invoke Nature. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov did — most profoundly in his late opera *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, composed in 1907 when Stravinsky was his prize pupil, virtually a surrogate son. The twittering, shimmering forest music of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1910) is a sequel to Rimsky's. Gustav Mahler, a seminal inspiration for Schoenberg and his followers, was a supreme Nature poet. And so, initially, was Schoenberg, in the comparably twittering, shimmering Prelude to *Gurre-Lieder* (1910) — but never thereafter. As post-World War I modernists, Stravinsky and Schoenberg were dissident, deracinated. No less than the modernist painters and novelists, their predilection was to deconstruct and reformulate. Elgar, Sibelius, and Ives eavesdrop on Nature — a posture of humility, comity, and subordination.

Concomitantly: for them, the past remained a daily background presence. Stravinsky and Schoenberg were emigres dislodged by world events; Stravinsky's St Petersburg, Schoenberg's Vienna, were no more.

But can the past ever be evaded? In 1928 Stravinsky composed a ballet, *The Fairy's Kiss*, adapting more than a dozen Tchaikovsky songs and piano pieces. The plot reads as an allegory of Tchaikovsky's fate: kissed by the muses at birth, doomed to an early death. The two Tchaikovsky works most tellingly cited say it all: "Lullaby in a Storm" and "None but the Lonely Heart," both plaintive songs. *The Fairy's Kiss* is Stravinsky revisiting his own childhood, confiding his emotional roots.

In 1948 Schoenberg wrote a short essay titled "On Revient Toujours." It begins by remembering "with great pleasure" a leisurely journey in a Viennese fiacre through the Black Forest — that is, a Nature experience both seductive and frightening. Schoenberg applies this adventure to his recent reversion to an older, tonal style — an occasional desire "to dwell in the old." "A longing to return to the older style was always vigorous in me," he admits. "And from time to time I had to yield to the urge."

If even for Stravinsky and Schoenberg musical retrospection proved inescapable, for Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius — and also for Gustav Mahler — it acquired a new tone: not just an embrace of the past, but a yearning compelled by dislocation from the present: a chronic impulse, exigent and unwilling.

Some two centuries after Johann Sebastian Bach, Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius felt spent. Stravinsky, too, eventually discovered himself in crisis, unable to compose — and opted for Schoenberg's 12-tone method. But — we can now admit — 12-tone music proved a wrong turn, a dead end.

Straddling a transitional moment they could not command, Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius foretold the terminus of the symphonic canon; they are casualties of uprooted tradition. Significantly, the final contributor to the mainstream orchestral repertoire, Dmitri Shostakovich, composed behind an Iron Curtain that kept modernism and cosmopolitan modernity at bay: he could feast on Bach and Beethoven, Mussorgsky and Mahler. Today, too many new orchestral works sound like make-shift music, erected in sand.

The dialectical tension between present and past, long the mainspring

for musical creativity, has gone slack. In Ives, Elgar, and Sibelius, in Stravinsky and Schoenberg, this conundrum, differently manifest, ran its fatal course. ■

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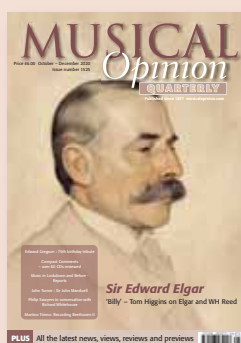
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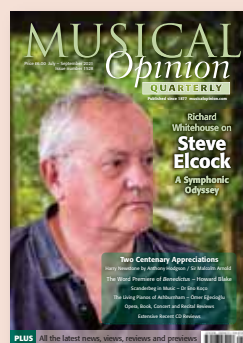
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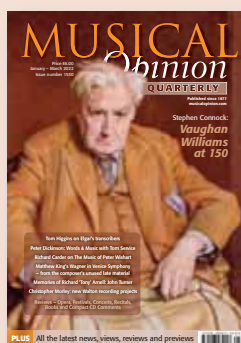
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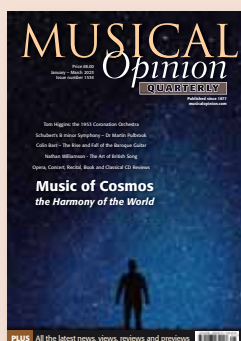
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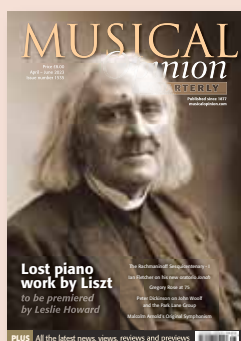
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# Sir Charles Mackerras 1925-2010

## A centenary tribute and a personal recollection

Tom Higgins

'Ah, good to see young Mackerras here,' said Sir Adrian Boult at the Royal Albert Hall. Boult, then in his mid-eighties, and the 'young Mackerras' were sharing a BBC Promenade concert. They were also sharing the conductor's dressing room, allowing Mackerras to overhear Boult's courtly aside. Captivated, Mackerras never forgot it and thereafter seldom missed a chance to tell the story, evoking its irony by adding with his famous grin, 'At the time I was over 50!'

They had first met almost 30 years before, when Mackerras, newly arrived from Australia, sought Boult's advice on how to make a career in Britain. He found Boult helpful and generous with his time. Soon he gained a job with Sadler's Wells Opera, joining the company in 1947. An opera house needs a wide range of talents and Mackerras possessed several. He was appointed to fill two jobs: second oboe in the orchestra and répétiteur. A hint of the future came with some backstage conducting.

It was a good start, but Mackerras's instinct was to acquire more training. The chance came less than a year after arriving in London. He won a British Council Scholarship to study conducting with Vaclav Talich in Czechoslovakia. Soon he exchanged London for Prague, but not before his marriage to Judith Wilkins, principal clarinet in the orchestra. She went with him.

Czechoslovakia charmed him. He learned the language, but more significantly, he discovered the operas of

Leoš Janáček. After a year, he was back in London and returned to Sadler's Wells, but this time with the promise of more conducting. As so often happens with young conductors in an opera house, he directed standard repertoire, mostly prepared by more senior members of the company. It was time to gain recognition and be discovered.

Something of his own was required and it arrived with his long-nurtured idea of turning Sullivan's music from the Savoy Operas into a ballet. His ambition got the recognition it deserved – Sadler's Wells Ballet welcomed the project, believing it would make an excellent item in its 1951 Festival of Britain programme. A partnership was formed between Mackerras and the choreographer, John Cranko and together they found their story line in one of W.S. Gilbert's Bab Ballads – *The Bumboat Woman's Story*. *Poll Pineapple* became *Pineapple Poll* and a happy end was contrived.

Gilbert and Sullivan either separately or together were rich pickings and the Mackerras/Cranko collaboration made inspired use of what it found. Mackerras's choice of music, and brilliant orchestrations, were well matched by Cranko's exuberant choreography. Premiered in March 1951, *Pineapple Poll*, conducted by Mackerras, was an overnight success.

The era favoured the ballet – refulgent and refreshing, it was just what was needed as the country slowly emerged from postwar austerity.

Less spectacular – but equally important – was the part Mackerras played in persuading his Sadler's Wells boss, Norman Tucker, to mount the first stage performance in Britain of Janáček's *Katya Kabanova*. Tucker was impressed by Mackerras's enthusiasm and took little persuading to plan a production. It was a bold move. Outside his native Czechoslovakia, Janáček's fame rested on his activities as a conductor and teacher. A nationalist, he chose his own Czech language (flavoured with Moravian dialect) for his operatic libretti. The result was sometimes edgy-sounding music. Contemporary opinion thought him 'difficult'. The polite view categorised his stage works as 'highly personal'.

As the opera went into rehearsal there was visually and musically much reliance on Mackerras: he was the only one who had seen a performance. At this distance of time, we should still be impressed that he helped prepare the forthcoming production while also working on *Pineapple Poll*. Despite his involvement he was not scheduled to conduct the performances. In his own words, later in life, he said it was because 'I was too junior in the company.'

Nevertheless, he was about to experience a twist of fate. Conducting *Katya Kabanova* had been allotted to Michael Mudie, one of the two senior conductors. Mudie, however, was ill and as the first night approached, it was clear he would not be able to direct the performance. Almost certainly, Mackerras was the only one who could take over. He conducted the premiere at Sadler's Wells Theatre in April 1951. The reviews were mixed and, no doubt, were read with mixed feelings also.

The resistance to Janáček lasted for decades. When he finally found a place in the repertoire Mackerras was largely responsible. His persistent promotion of Janáček ensured their names remained

The resistance to Janáček lasted for decades. When he finally found a place in the repertoire Mackerras was largely responsible.





linked – at least in Britain. In the 1960s he appeared as a guest at Sadler's Wells for two more English premieres: *The Makropoulos Case* and *From the House of the Dead*. By now he was labeled a 'Janáček specialist', a description he resisted. Being restricted by any sort of identification was what he objected to, maintaining he was a repertoire conductor. My own view was that he certainly *was* a repertoire conductor, but still a specialist in several areas.

**A**lan Charles Maclaurin Mackerras was born to Australian parents in New York State, America in 1925. When he was two the family moved back to Sydney. Music inspired him from an early age and by his late teens he was a professional oboist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Arriving in London at the age of 21, he showed no sign of his future life-long affair with opera. That developed from his association with Sadler's Wells.

Post-Sadler's Wells in the early 1950s his career began to broaden with concert engagements and recording sessions. There were BBC broadcasts where his catholic taste flourished. One programme with the Goldsborough Orchestra (forerunner of the English Chamber Orchestra), included the suite, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Richard Strauss. A month later, as conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra (a post he held for two years), he directed Richard Rodgers's ballet music to *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*.

For BBC Television, he conducted a quantity of studio-produced operas. Over a shorter period he was also associated with Benjamin Britten's English Opera Group with which he directed the premiere of Noye's *Fludde*. Soon the satisfaction of being busy at home was matched by an expanding career abroad. The world opened up to him and in time

he appeared in most major opera houses. After his Covent Garden debut, he joined the Hamburg State Opera as First Conductor. Here he became more accustomed to directing performances without an orchestral rehearsal – a common practice on the continent.

Beyond that he was already assembling a substantial discography. But it wasn't just the number of recordings – his

versatility encompassed opera, ballet, concert repertoire, Johann Strauss II, Offenbach and Eric Coates. The '60s had not yet turned when his scholarship began to assert itself. Pye Records took up his idea to record Handel's *Music For The Royal Fireworks* as it was first heard in 1749.

One night, at 11pm, in a north London church more than five dozen wind players

**T**here were many memorable first nights, not all of them under Mackerras. One of his – Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* – was especially noteworthy. When the production was announced, excitement in the company ran high, most vocally in the orchestra. It remained that way, even though there were rumoured opinions from outside that the orchestra wouldn't cope with the difficult score. Spiritedly, members laughed this off, remembering the praise they had already received for technical expertise in Janáček and sympathetic playing in Wagner.



Photo: Keith Bruce / The Herald



and nine percussionists assembled to record Mackerras's specially-prepared edition. With a few tweaks in Handel's instrumentation, he aimed to reproduce the sounds of the mid-18th century. Foremost in the band were 26 oboes, led by two distinguished players, Terence MacDonagh and Sydney Sutcliffe. With bassoons, horns and trumpets came two serpents.

Nowadays London professionals still hand down the story of the session's late hour. It was simply the only time that so many wind players could be brought together. The recording took just three and a half hours, but its impact lasted much longer. Its success was accompanied by musicians and critics alike awarding Mackerras high marks for his scholarship; but it was the sound that stayed in the memory. The abundance of wind instruments generated its own special tone, sounding grand and expansive.

Authenticity was what he was after, and Mackerras carried this over when he conducted *The Marriage of Figaro* at Sadler's Wells in 1965. This time it was vocal ornamentation from Mozart's day. Characteristically, he had already spent much time on research, although, it is said, he initially met opposition from some artists. After the first night there was also opposition from some reviewers. But not all. Forward-thinking critics judged it successful, as indeed they did the following year with his HMV recording of *Messiah*. For this Mackerras was in partnership with music scholar and harpsichordist Basil Lam. Handel's own performances were the basis of their work together. The venture was well received and gratifyingly was nominated for the 1967 Grammy Award.



*Der Rosenkavalier*

Photo: Crutis Brown

As the '60s closed, Mackerras had already established the disciplines by which he would best be remembered: the introduction of Janáček operas and authentic performances of Handel and Mozart. Yet he was not even close to the half-way point in his career.

By now Sadler's Wells Opera, his

starting point, had moved to the London Coliseum. Managing Director Stephen Arlen, successor to Norman Tucker, decided to reform the company; he overturned the old system of two conductors and created the job of a single music director. Perhaps to no-one's surprise, Mackerras was appointed to this new role.

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The move to the Coliseum was ambitious, but Arlen did not live long enough to see it fully develop. He died early in 1972. Shocked at first, the company recovered itself when Lord Harewood subsequently took over its management. A few years later and Harewood oversaw the company change of name to English National Opera. Meanwhile, London opera-goers got to know Mackerras on a regular basis from the Coliseum auditorium; I got to know him from the pit.

Beyond that it is easy to overlook nowadays the side-show that was starting to play out as rehearsals were commencing. Industrial action in one department of the house resulted in closure of the theatre. It was a damaging situation and for a while, seasonal performances were lost. Yet, there was a positive outcome for the planned *Der Rosenkavalier*. It created extra time for Mackerras, the company and orchestra to rehearse. The unfamiliar became very familiar and it showed on the first night.

From the opening upward rush of horns and bassoons to the concluding tutti chords, the premiere was technically excellent yet had an easy natural flow. At curtain fall there was no doubting the audience's ecstatic response. Its approbation was mirrored by press reviews praising singers, producer, designer, conductor and orchestra. Mackerras had put his stamp on a notably complex work. As his career confirmed many times, he was at his best when giving himself challenges.

His adaptability served him especially well when progressing through the many rehearsals. After Act Two's busy opening comes the slow-paced Presentation of the Rose. Within its measured tempo, the passage lingers even further to allow *Sophie* to accept the Rose and muse on the flower's heavenly scent. The moment is dream-like, requiring the conductor to create a framework in which singers and orchestra have freedom. He achieved this by broadening his gestures and sensitively indicating where the beats fell. This visual

image produced the desired aural effect. I never saw him use this technique anywhere else, but was reminded of it many years later when he was recalling a different performance at the Vienna State Opera. He said he conducted it with no orchestral rehearsals. Thinking of *Der Rosenkavalier*'s known pitfalls, I wondered whether he had found it daunting. For a moment he looked quite serious and replied, 'Well the orchestra knew it and I knew it. If I can't show an orchestra what I want, then I'm not a proper professional conductor.'

It was a recurring theme. Musicians and singers appreciated his concern to make his intentions clear. In rehearsal he solved technical problems by interpretation and thus drew more out of the music. After he relinquished his position as ENO's music

director, he returned frequently as a guest. A memorable appearance came in the early 1980s when he conducted a revival of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* (*Mary Stuart*). Featuring Dame Janet Baker as Mary Stuart and Rosalind Plowright as Queen Elizabeth I, it was among a group of performances showcasing Baker's farewell to the operatic stage.

At this point, the Coliseum's original production of *Mary Stuart* was close to being ten years old and its return was an emotional reminder that Baker and Mackerras were returning to their roles in those initial

performances. But first Mackerras needed to demonstrate that for him time had not stood still. Energetic as ever, he brought fresh thinking to the revival.

For his first orchestral rehearsal (it took place at Morley College), he explained why he had asked for the singers to be present – not usual practice in a major opera house. Orchestration was not Donizetti's strong point. There were many places where the accompaniment was simple. With singers at the rehearsal more work and interest could be sustained.

At a later time in the morning he delivered a short history lesson, which remains one of the best I have ever

attended. He said that in the composer's day it was the custom to have the brass face the stage. It generally kept the singers in tune. The rest of the orchestra faced the audience. Nowadays with the brass seated across the orchestra pit, the scoring becomes too heavy. His instructions were for the brass to play lightly at all times and for the strings to play with a full symphonic tone. This was proof, if proof were needed, that a conductor can change the sound of an orchestra. But this was a rehearsal for Baker's farewell performances. Her work at ENO had been an illustrious chapter in company history and audiences loved her for it. When the final bows were taken, the predicted sentiment ran deep.

During his ENO years, there were times when I saw Mackerras on a daily basis. With the 1980s, there were fewer meetings, but they were more significant. In mid-decade he was approaching a crossroads of sorts: he was coming to the end of his time as Chief Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, while his 60th birthday, on 17 November 1985, was planned for celebration at Australia House, London.

As a party format, Mackerras chose a charity concert conducted by himself, followed by supper for the artists and guests. Although the elegant main hall in Australia House appears spacious, it does not allow for large groups of performers. Given that background, Handel became the featured composer, requiring just a small orchestra and a few singers. There was the co-incidental advantage that 1985 was Handel's tercentenary year.

Like most people I was unaware of these plans until, mid-year, when Mackerras surprised me by asking if I would 'fix' the musicians. He meant, of course, assembling around two dozen members of the ENO Orchestra. For them, an all-Handel programme was familiar territory, as it was for the singers: Valerie Masterson, Anne Murray, Philip Langridge, John Tomlinson and Christopher Robson. That said, 'fixing' an orchestra was an aspect of the music profession I was new to. The job should have been straightforward enough and coming from Mackerras, it was an offer I couldn't refuse. But I hadn't reckoned on the players it was *not* possible to invite. If I'd flattered myself that I was a popular member of the orchestra, it took a knock when some aggrieved members demanded to know

There were many memorable first nights, not all of them under Mackerras. One of his – Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* – was especially noteworthy.

why *they* had not been asked. It was the first indication I'd had that Mackerras had metamorphosed into that rare state of 'respected maestro' within the music profession.

The concert was a joyous occasion with fine playing, singing and memorable speeches. Although a public event, it also offered a private view into the Mackerras family with his grandchildren attending. Nancy Phelan (Mackerras's biographer), records that sadly, the youngest, Alice (4) had earlier been diagnosed with leukaemia. She had been the 'main inspiration' behind the event's charitable purpose. Nearly £4,000 profit was made from the evening with a large proportion donated to the Malcolm Sargent Cancer Fund for Children and a smaller sum going to the Australian Musical Association.

High-powered that evening as always, Mackerras couldn't ignore his recently diagnosed hernia. (I later learned that it was a triple one!) The day after his birthday he was already booked into the Wellington Hospital in St. John's Wood, where I visited him post-operation. Clad in his dressing gown, he lay on his bed looking miserable, but rallied when we started talking 'shop'. Generalities over, we moved on to the Sullivan Violoncello Concerto. A generation earlier in 1953 he had been the last conductor to direct a performance (broadcast on the BBC Third Programme), before a fire at Chappell & Co's publishing house destroyed Sullivan's autograph score and parts.

The concerto was lost. The years went by and its one-time existence became the property of folklore, until, that is, the Sullivan specialist David Mackie found an extra copy of the soloist's part lodged in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. The discovery was sufficiently itemised for Mackie and Mackerras to reconstruct an orchestral score. A big help in this department lay in Mackerras's detailed recollection of the single performance he had directed. But one thing concerned him: the BBC had long been accessible from around the world; domestic recordings of broadcasts were commonplace; what if someone had recorded his broadcast which showed his reconstruction to be inaccurate?

It's a safe bet that a rediscovered manuscript from an acknowledged master will always be of interest. Press coverage thereof might even find a place

somewhere beneath the headlines. I have always admired Sullivan for his genius to entertain through the medium of quality music. Mackerras's project would reveal more of the composer's serious side and I was keen to follow the story. As I left Mackerras, I was already enslaved to my own plan of researching the concerto.

In the days that followed I read up on as much of Sullivan as I could and discussed the work with as many cellists as I could find. Then a most extraordinary development occurred. From among the players I talked to came another copy of the solo 'cello part. It had been used by the soloist, May Mukle, at an early 20th century performance in Bournemouth. Once again there was a sprinkling of orchestral cues, but this part contained indications of the orchestral bass line, a crucial feature as it would confirm whether Mackerras had correctly remembered the harmonies. I handed him the manuscript at his north London home in Hamilton Terrace. He examined it like a surgeon assessing the results of a recent operation. 'Well,' he said, 'I was pretty damned right!'

A premiere performance and a recording followed early the next year with Julian Lloyd Webber and the London Symphony Orchestra. When the score was published Mackerras presented me with a copy inscribed: 'To Tom Higgins with many thanks for your help with this work. Charles Mackerras – 20/4/86 premiere

date'. It was a nice gesture, not a great one to the outside world, but typically considerate of him. He had good manners, but they were the sort of good manners from someone who knew the importance of saying "thank you". After every ENO premiere he conducted, he unfailingly expressed his appreciation of the orchestra in a note pinned on the band-room notice board.

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Back to the early 1990s and he was approaching the end of his time as Welsh National Opera's Music Director. Up to this point our association had been mainly player/conductor. Gradually the status changed, but not the relationship. When I commenced my conducting career, his advice was invaluable, especially when I was directing opera. Much later I realised that there were many others he privately monitored, but he had the knack of making you think you were the only one. It was a trait he seemed able to impart whatever the occasion. Sometimes we served together on the annual Australian Music Foundation jury, or we met over lunch, or at a reception.

Notes for an article I wrote about him in the mid-1990s were made when I visited him and Judy on a health farm in south-east England. It was always the same: his repartee drew you in with stories designed just for you.

In the last ten years of his life, I saw less of him than I might have, but meetings

Some would argue that there was a different Mackerras, well-known for his outspoken comments. He could be very direct, especially in rehearsal. Others would argue that he established fine relationships with many orchestras at home and abroad. Seldom argued is the conclusion that his straightforwardness was what gave his personality its fascination. He was notably appreciative of orchestras and the members he got to know. Towards the end of his life I asked him if he was now working with the children of players he started his career with. 'Children?' he queried. 'More like grandchildren!' The grin came on cue.



## Makropulos Affair



Photo: Welsh National Opera / Andrew-davis-nikolaus-lehnhof

were always fruitful. When I was preparing for my German conducting debut in 2003, (it was the New Year's Day concert at Dresden's Staatsoperette), I programmed the Finale from the *Pineapple Poll* suite. The librarian in Germany was having trouble getting hold of the orchestral parts – could I help? I called Mackerras and asked for his help. Pausing only to thank me for programming his piece (the extent of his humility was always surprising), he offered to lend me his manuscript parts. When I arrived to collect the material, there was an unexpected bonus: he took me through the score; a privileged masterclass of one.

A few years later in 2008 and I was again bothering him for help. With the SOMM label and soloist, Roderick Williams, I was planning to record Elgar's song cycle, *The Fringes of the Fleet*. There hadn't been a fully professional recording since Elgar's own in 1917. Some money already had been raised, but more was

needed. Remembering the number of works Mackerras had revived, I figured the project would attract his interest. I wrote to him asking if he might be kind enough to lend his name in support of my requests for sponsorship. In reply he said I certainly could, subject to his approval of how I used it. When the CD was released the following year, I invited him to the launch. He accepted, but later had to withdraw.

Into 2010 and the months had gone by without a meeting. I determined that I ought to try and see him soon. A catch-up lunch mid-year had been under discussion. But it was not to be. He died in July. Nearly another year went by before I was able to reminisce about him with the clarinettist, Tony Lamb, also a member of the ENO orchestra during my time.

Now together we decided to pay our belated respects with a memorial concert at the Royal Academy of Music. An orchestral tribute was beyond our means,

so aspects of his career became our focus. Bearing in mind his start as an oboist and his innovative editions of 18th-century repertoire, we chose Mozart's *Serenade in B flat major K361* for 13 Wind Instruments (*Gran Partita*). Tony played in the ensemble and I conducted. Many of the musicians who took part had also played variously for Mackerras. It was the same for the other instrumental item in the programme: Dvorák's *Serenade for 10 Wind Instruments, Violoncello and Double Bass in D minor Op 44*. This marked Mackerras's life-long association with Czechoslovakia, later the two separate states of the Czech Republic (Czechia) and Slovakia.

Also noted was his 'Down Under' background: the Australian Music Foundation (Heather de Haes, chair, and Michael Letchford, secretary) took over managing the event. As things were to turn out, the Royal Academy of Music was an appropriate venue for our Mackerras eulogy. In the year before

he died he bequeathed to the academy his personal archive of music material. Named the Charles Mackerras Collection, it resides in one of the large rehearsal rooms and is tangible evidence of a fine musician with a strong sense of adventure, a combination which enabled him to absorb any style he chose to take on.

But it was his interpretative gifts we should be grateful for. His pleasure in music is what he aimed to pass on to us. It is what finally places him in the ranks of great conductors.

Tom Higgins © January 2025.

Bibliography: *Charles Mackerras: a musician's musician*. Nancy Phelan. (Gollancz)

# Glimpses of *Astra*

## What would Bruckner's unwritten opera have been like?

Dr Martin Pulbrook

Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, in a 1970 book, has given us a tantalising glimpse of Bruckner's unrealised plans for *Astra* [in *Bruckner*, published by Calder and Boyars London, p.99]:

'During [his] last years Bruckner also toyed with the idea of composing an opera to a libretto by Gertrud Bollé-Hellmund with the title *Astra*. The subject had been selected from a novel, *Die Toteninsel* by Richard Voss, and was, as Bruckner had demanded, 'à la *Lohengrin*, romantic, full of the mystery of religion, and completely free from all that which is impure.' There, however, the matter rested. Bruckner never made as much as a preliminary sketch, and it remains an interested matter for conjecture what an opera by Bruckner might have sounded like.'

There is, I feel, something off-key and inappropriate in Schönzeler's dismissiveness here – the implication being, clearly, 'an opera by Bruckner couldn't have been any good, so we may not in fact be missing very much.' I think the implication is wholly wide of the mark and undeserved, and I wish here to try to approach and evaluate the question of *Astra* from a more sympathetic point of view. For it seems possible and likely to me, *pace* Schönzeler, that Bruckner's death in October 1896 has robbed us of what would have been a masterpiece of its kind.

Rather over forty years ago I wrote (for *The Maynooth Review*, Vol. 7, 1982) an article on the essential unity of Bruckner's music: I argued that there was an underlying sameness of purpose despite out-

ward differences of form. This has particular relevance to what *Astra* would have been, as a follow-up to the Ninth Symphony. And in an address, *The Mystical Genius of Anton Bruckner*, given at the Blackpool Unitarian Church on October 5th 2014 (and published in *The Bruckner Journal* Vol 19, no 1 p.24), I ventured the opinion that 'it is certainly part of my thesis here....that [Bruckner's] Ninth Symphony, by some long distance, is the most profound musical work ever composed ... There is as yet no adequate acknowledgement, either from musicians or the Christian Church, of the enormity of

the achievement of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony ... Bruckner's world is a timeless world, an eternal world, an essentially true world, for those who are willing to take the time to accompany him there.'

In these particular circumstances it is reasonable to wonder, with bated breath and expectant awe, what possibly *Astra* might have contained and consisted of. For any work exploring spiritual matters at the level of profundity evident in the Ninth Symphony would have been bound to command the listener's most careful attention and respect

But our hands are tied by the special circumstances applying in this case. While Richard Voss's *Die Toteninsel* (*The Isle of the Dead*) can of course be described and analysed – which will follow in due course – what exactly Gertrud Bollé-Hellmund made of the story in her libretto for *Astra* cannot now be known, as the libretto has been lost.

Bollé-Hellmund worked on the realisa-

tion of it between the spring of 1894 and the summer of 1895, when it was sent to Bruckner for perusal and comment. But in the rather-over-a-year from then that Bruckner had remaining to him, he was all accounts too absorbed by the finale of the Ninth Symphony, which he was still working on, and carrying out adjustments to, on the very morning of the day he died, for there to have been much chance of any serious concentration – let alone action – on the *Astra* libretto.

Bollé-Hellmund appears to have left her affairs in considerable disorder at her death in Berlin in 1910; and thus we cannot be too surprised that, fifteen years after its completion, the *Astra* libretto did not survive on her side. It is perhaps more remarkable that Bruckner's copy is not extant – unless he had sent it back requesting amendments (which perhaps in the event never materialised). For as Schönzeler's assertion at the start makes clear, Bruckner's determination that the libretto should be 'completely free from all that is impure' would have made him very fussy in respect of what he felt to be acceptable. Thus in the end our evaluation of what was involved, for Bruckner, in this project must inevitably depend on study of Voss's *Toteninsel*.

But before we turn to the text of that *novella*, one other matter should be looked at and clarified. On all the evidence, it is probably a mistake to see the projected *Astra* as an example of opera, except in the most general sense of that term. Rather, as in the case of the stage-works of Wagner, *Astra* would have been a music-drama, with an orchestral Prelude rather than an Overture and the action dependent upon continuous melismatic 'periods' or 'scenes' rather than the separated and self-standing 'numbers' of conventional opera.

1876 was the year in which Bruckner went to Bayreuth for the opening *Ring* cycle, and by all accounts he was completely 'bowled over' by the experi-

In these particular circumstances it is reasonable to wonder, with bated breath and expectant awe, what possibly *Astra* might have contained and consisted of.



ence – by the orchestral effects of Wagner's score, in particular. And my guess is that Bruckner, as a result of the experience of 1876, came under the immediate spell of the possibilities, for him, of music-drama, and conceived the wish to write such a work himself in the future. And the *Astra* project of twenty years later would have represented the eventual realisation of this long-held and long-germinating hope. If this is a correct evaluation of developments over the twenty-year period 1876-1896, *Astra* cannot be viewed as a hypothetical possibility for Bruckner among other possibilities, as Schönzeler seems to suggest. For Bruckner had wanted to do something specifically of this nature for a long time, and the completion of the Ninth Symphony would give him the opportunity at last of doing it. If his health had not deteriorated so markedly during 1896, he was indeed facing into a very exciting and challenging period of work.

Richard Voss lived from 1851 to 1918, and his lays and novels were being published from the 1870s. *Toteninsel* was the second of two *novellas* published together, its earlier companion being *Kentaurenliebe* ('Centaur love'). *Kentaurenliebe* occupies pages 3 to 40 of the original German edition by Philipp Reclam, Leipzig, which is undated, and *Toteninsel* pages 41 to 93. For the purposes of the following survey, I have used the 'Project Gutenberg' English translation, released on June 11, 2024.

*The Isle of the Dead* is set in and near the city of Rome at the time of the Emperor Nero (late '60s first century AD), and Voss draws a vivid contrast between the splendour and glories of the ancient city and the uncertainties and turbulence, particularly for Christians, of the recent social and political circumstances. And it is against that background that the personal tale unfolds.

And this give a valuable guiding hint, I believe, to an essential contrast of mood that would almost certainly have featured in the Prelude to *Astra*: on the one hand, the whirl of turbulence and insincerity characteristic of the surrounding physical world, and on the other, themes exemplifying the positive qualities of faith, constancy, hope, love and the other virtues. These seem tailor-made to fit in with, and serve as illustrations of, Bruckner's deepest convictions and aspirations.

It must be said at once that *The Isle of*



Bruckner in approximately 1895

Photo: Wikimedia

*the Dead* is in no sense (in my view) great literature. It is a relatively simplistic story, of no very great psychological depth. Were it not for the fact that a group of early Christians – here going by the name of 'the Nazarenes' – is involved in a central role, the events told would be eminently forgettable. And it is the struggle between 'the Nazarenes' and the Romans – with predictable results in the Romans' favour – which becomes the

*dénouement* of the tale as Voss tells it.

The island at the centre of the story is a small volcanic outcrop. Too sparse for such human habitation, and hence used as a graveyard over the years by mainland families, off the coast of Latium, and within striking distance of both Antium and Rome. The initial events are set on the island, with Antium the nearest place accessible by sea; but the drama reaches its climax in events set in Rome the

following year.

*The Isle of the Dead* comprises 26 pages of continuous text, pages 29 to 54 in the 'Project Gutenberg' English translation, representing – as mentioned earlier – pages 49-93 in the German Reclam edition. But it is not difficult to discern how this material may be divided and set out in three acts, which – following the Wagnerian model – would presumably have been Bruckner's intention. But the material, it must be emphasised, is slight; and it seems to be doubtful whether each act would have been more than thirty or forty minutes at maximum. Therefore *Astra* would have been a shortish opera, lasting about two hours.

Act I, on this reckoning, comprises pages 29-37 of the 'Project Gutenberg' translation (pages 41-59 in the German text), and is set exclusively on the island. The inhabitants are few in number, five in all, divided between two families. Atinas is the senior figure on the island, the pagan priest responsible for the daily ceremonies for the dead. He lost his wife Trivia many years ago, but he has a son, Tullus, now in his teens. On the opposite side of the island live Daunus and his wife Larina and daughter Acca, of about the same age as Tullus. Daunus is the keeper of graves, and general factotum for the islanders' needs, travelling by boat to Antium once a month to replenish stocks. And it may be added at this point that Atinas, Tullus and Acca emerge as the three principal characters of the drama.

The rhythm of life is slow and monotonous and repetitive. The question has to be asked: did Bruckner intend to use 'leitmotifs' as did Wagner? I think the answer to that question is probably 'Yes'; in which case various possibilities stand out. First of all, there is the over-riding question of travel and the sea; and clear inspirational models exist in Mendelssohn's *The Hebrides Overture*, in Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) and above all in Bruckner's *Helgoland*. There is every reason to believe that Bruckner would have risen successfully to this dramatic challenge. Secondly, there is Atinas, 'an extremely God-fearing man, strict and zealous in his faith'. But, as will emerge later, there is a hard and cruel streak in Atinas, and something like the *leitmotif* for Hunding in *Die Walküre* would be appropriate.

Thirdly, there is the growing friendship,

blossoming into love, between Tullus and Acca. And fourthly there is the question of the model of the behaviour of the Christians ('the Nazarenes'), news and a report of which is carried back from Antium by Daunus. This would have brought forth music of nobility and aspiration and hope from Bruckner; and on this note Act I would have reached its resplendent conclusion. Clearly, even if the material is slight, there is every likelihood that Bruckner would have turned it into music bearing his own unmistakable stamp.

As we have seen at the end of Act I, the mention and arrival on the scene in Antium of 'the Nazarene' is a matter of profound celebration and rejoicing, musically, for Bruckner. But not so for Atinas, who is cast into deep and long-lasting despondency by Daunus's report.

There are two main pivots to what I perceived to be Act II (occupying pages 37-47 of the 'Project Gutenberg' translation, pages 59-80 of the German text). After much thought Atinas decides to depart for the mainland, leaving his priestly duties on the island in the temporary care of Daunus, with help from Tullus while he is away. He leaves for Rome, where he intends to raise an army to hunt down 'the Nazarenes'. We must imagine the twin 'leitmotifs' from Act I of the 'travel theme' and the 'Atinas theme' being deployed and amplified and varied as symbolic of his journey. After this, we hear no more of Atinas in Act II, and may presume that he reaches Rome and sets about trying to fulfil his mission.

The second element of Act II involves Tullus and Acca. As they mature, their love and devotion deepen progressively, and they come to find the restrictions of island life more and more limiting of imaginative and personal progress. And, notwithstanding their youth, they decide, sometime after the departure of Atinas, to leave the island too. Their actions are very much a 'spur of the moment' thing, although probably they will head eventually for Rome. In this case, we must expect music involving the 'travel theme' in the direction of love and eager expectation and hope. And so they embark on their journey, first by sea to Antium, and then overland to

Rome. Exhausted on arrival at nightfall, they fall asleep in a cave.

Act II is a short act, and now we approach the climactic moment of it. It seems reasonable to surmise that Bruckner would have composed 'sleep music' to accompany Tullus and Acca while they were asleep in the cave. This would have been music of exceptional peace and calmness, a sort of Brucknerian equivalent of the music with which Wotan puts Brunnhilde to sleep at the end of *Die Walküre*; and the 'Tullus and Acca theme' might somehow have been entwined and enmeshed in the 'sleep music', symbolic of their love.

Acca wakes first to find that the cave has filled suddenly and quietly with worshippers; they beckon to her in friendship, and she joins them, filled with joy. What follows when Tullus wakes may be quoted directly from Voss ('Project Gutenberg' text, p.47):

Then the old man spoke, and they wept at

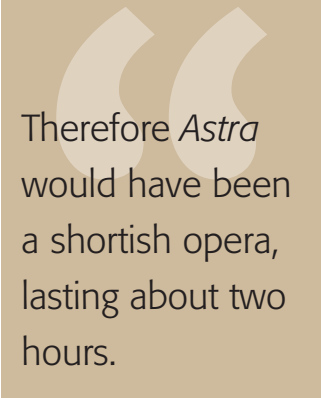
his words, which sounded great and powerful.

'Good people, come.'

Tullus looked at the assembled people; then the young man approached him and invited him to join them. They also led him before the venerable old man, who addressed him with gentle words and welcomed him. Turning to the others, he said: 'Prepare the holy feast of love. Even if these two whom the Lord has sent us are not of our faith, they are nevertheless of our spirit; for see how heavenly love shines from the eyes of both of them. Therefore, may they take part in our feast from afar and dwell in peace among us.'

A basket was immediately brought; in it was a jug full of wine, a cup and a loaf of bread; they were taken out slowly and solemnly, as if they were holy things. The old man stood behind a stone like an altar, all the others lined up in front of him. The two youths, however, stood at the old man's side.

He spoke in the middle of a great silence: 'The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would be better for that man if he had never been born.'



Therefore *Astra*  
would have been  
a shortish opera,  
lasting about two  
hours.



And as they were eating, Jesus took bread and gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said: Take, eat, this is my body.

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them: and they all drank of it.

And he said to them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.

So the old man took a jug and a cup from one of the young men and poured it out. All came forward, one after the other, and drank the wine. Then the old man took the bread, broke it, and the congregation came forward again to receive the bread. Only Tullus and Acca stood at a distance, both deeply moved by the solemn and mysterious process and not daring to approach the noble man. Then the latter looked over at the two of them, beckoned them to him with a kind smile and said: 'The saviour and redeemer can also be born to you, who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

And so Act II ends, in Eucharistic peace and calm. Assuredly the composer who had given us the three numbered Masses of the 1860s, the *Missa Solemnis* and *Requiem*, and the three early 'short Masses' of 1842 and 1844 would have felt completely at home in setting this passage of Voss's text; for nothing could be more Brucknerian than this.

There is the parallel to this of the depiction of the Eucharist in *Parsifal*, which has been heavily criticised by some. Otto Klemperer declared that *Parsifal* was 'not far short of blasphemous' and that 'Wagner's theatrical exploitation of Christian ritual was offensive ... it was at best a parody' (Heyworth's Klemperer biography Vol I, p. 316 and Vol II, p. 331). It would have been difficult to make this criticism of Bruckner, for whom the depiction of the early Christians at their devotions (at the end of *Astra* Act III) would have been neither 'theatrical' nor 'a parody', but coloured through and through with purity and simple truth.

Act III (*vide*: 'Project Gutenberg' translation, pp.46-54; original German text, pp. 80-93) is again a short Act, though it contains much gruesome detail of tragedy and great suffering. Initially, I wondered how, after much of the positivity of Acts I and II, Bruckner would have coped with the negative emphases of Act

III. It is even possible, I felt, that Gertrud Bollé-Hellmund might have moderated the savagery somewhat in her libretto in order to provide a less horrific ending. But we should bear in mind Robert Simpson's description (in *The Essence of Bruckner* p.179) of the Ninth Symphony as 'music ... often dark to the pitch of blackness, and rent with such anguish as [Bruckner] had until almost succeeded in keeping out'; and should in consequence quell our doubts about Bruckner's ability to articulate and represent tragedy of this level. And if the tragedy of Act III had been less, so too would the catharsis of the story's final chapter be less.

Atinas and his posse of troops have the cave surrounded and all the Christians,

including Acca, are taken away to be killed. Tullus evades capture for the time being, but is picked up later, when his unceasing attempts to locate Acca draw the attention of the authorities. We must imagine the 'Atinas leitmotif' surging triumphantly at this point, and overwhelming with its power the 'Tullus and Acca' theme.

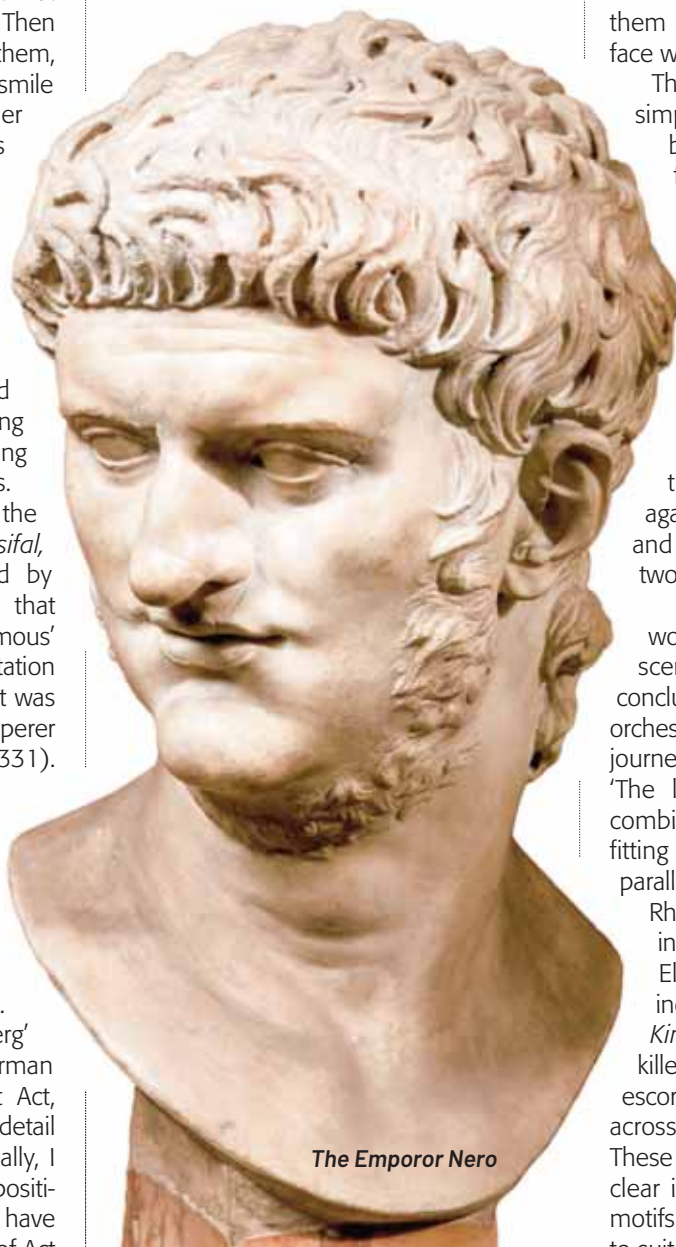
A huge public spectacle is being prepared by the Emperor Nero, as a thanksgiving and celebration of the capture of the Christians, who will be burnt on raised bonfires. But when Tullus is captured and brought in, Acca is exempted from the flames, and she and Tullus are hurried before Atinas. The cruel side of Atinas now shows itself. Extraordinarily, Tullus and Acca are allowed to marry, which is their heartfelt wish. Then Atinas compels them both to drink poison, covering his face with his cloak until they are dead.

The final chapter is very short and simple: Atinas escorts the two dead bodies by boat back to the island; for their homecoming will also be their burial:

'Purple dawn lay over sky and seas; the glow of the fading day illumined a mighty cloud that floated slowly and solemnly along; the morning air blew, gliding over the eternal fact of the sea like a tremor and a shiver.

Atinas steers the board through the vast solitude of the waves, against whose planks the waves rush and run. Two dead people sail away, two united towards home.'

I have wondered how Bruckner would have rendered this final, simple scene. And I have come to the conclusion that he would have written an orchestral Postlude depicting the haunting journey. The 'leitmotifs' of 'travel' and of 'The love of Tullus and Acca' would combine together to bring matters to a fitting and respectful close. There is a parallel of sorts in Wagner, in Siegfried's Rhine Journey and then Funeral March in Acts I and III of *Götterdämmerung*. Elgar did something similar in his incidental music to Laurence Binyon's *King Arthur*: after Arthur has been killed in battle at Camlaan, his body is escorted by boat to his final resting-place across the water in the Isle of Avalon. These are not exact parallels; and what is clear is that Bruckner would have used motifs in his own particular manner and to suit his own particular needs.



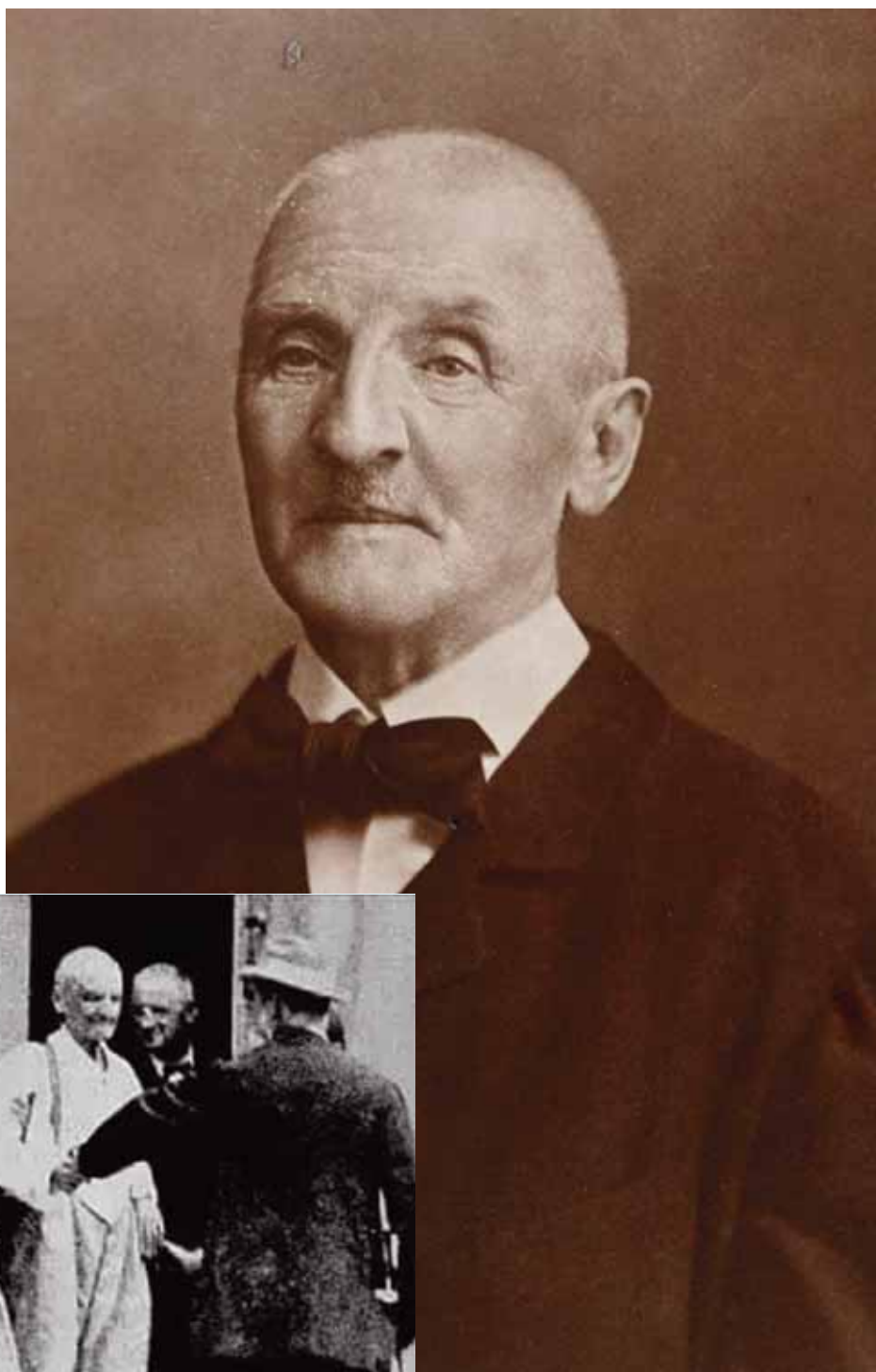
The Emperor Nero

I have only brief things to say in summing up. The innocence, simplicity and purity of the story-line of *Astra*, and particularly of the young lovers in it, would have made this, in spite of the many conscious reminiscences and undertones of Wagner, a very different work from Wagner's music-dramas. It would have had a *verismo* and unselfconscious naturalness more characteristic of a composer such as Puccini – which would have been a remarkable development in German late-Romantic opera.

And why, one may ask, Bollé-Hellmund's title *Astra*? What does it mean in the context of this work? One of the Oxford Dictionary definitions of 'satellite' (= German *astra*) is 'a community or town dependent on a nearby larger town.' *Astra* is thus a somewhat elaborate allusion to the island (Voss's *Insel*), as the heart and centrepiece of the action of this story.

*The foregoing is of course my own purely imaginative reconstruction of what Bruckner's Astra might have been, had he lived to compose it. Of course, I accept that the human mind is completely unpredictable in artistic affairs, but if Astra had been anything like what I have suggested here, it would indeed have been a deeply moving, even overwhelming, experience.*

**Anton Bruckner  
(already unwell: he  
died three months  
later) and his brother  
Ignaz outside his  
apartment at the  
Belvedere Palaxe,  
Vienna, in July 1896.**



Anton Bruckner





# Opera Reviews

## Wagner: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* Staatsoper unter den Linden Berlin

It is almost 30 years since my wife Heather Harper suggested to her good friend Dr John Evans, then Head of Music at the BBC, the name of an English singer to represent England at the BBC Singer of the World Competition. They quickly agreed on the suggested candidate and he went on to win the Lieder prize. I have followed his career closely since. Always a refined singer, he gave priority to words and meaning, his diction always crisp without losing colour nor legato line. He was slow to develop an international career, priority given to other singers who were, so to speak, more operatic. His big breaks came abroad, like with oh so many, an international cast on European TV of Strauss *Die Fledermaus*, a *Rigoletto* and a *Don Giovanni* at the Staatsoper. So when I saw his name for the revival of 2015 production of *Die Meistersinger* I did not hesitate. I had to be there. And yes, Christopher Maltman was going to sing his first Hans Sachs. So let's start at the end. When was the last time any public gave a first time Hans Sachs a spontaneous standing ovation? And it was a German public giving an ovation to a British singer. But of course, this was no run-of-the mill Sachs. Over my many years seeing opera I have heard many famous singers singing this role, including Fischer-Dieskau at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin and, for those interested in these things, Plácido Domingo sang Walther von Stolzing and Eugen Jochum got the biggest ovation. People are not stupid. I have no hesitation in naming Maltman as one of the best singers (and there are precious few) I have heard in this complex role, ever. The voice carves its own space, it has an immense resonance and clarity, the diction is Lied-like delivered with ease, never forcing, never losing colour, always with a careful and long *fiato*. This was not just an interpretation, it was a singing lesson at the highest level for a role which finds weak points in every singer I have heard. It is either the top, or in some cases the lower range, but there is always something not right, even if the interpretation is fine. None of these criticisms apply to Maltman who seems to have solved all the problems of a bass-baritone at one stroke. I have not heard his Wotan though,



Photo: Bernd Uhlig, Wartheasse

but given this Sachs I have no doubt it will also be something to relish. Of course one has to consider also that the Staatsoper is a small theatre, ideally suited to hear singers (if one has conductors of such sensitivity as Alexander Soddy), Covent Garden does not have such a sympathetic acoustic, nor does the Met. But La Scala, Munich and Vienna, all big theatres, are very good indeed. From my seat I think I saw Maltman moved by the spontaneous standing ovation.

There was also another outstanding participant in this performance and that was the conductor, Alexander Soddy, heard recently in *Fidelio* at the ROH. I have seen Soddy several times already and mostly in heavy German repertoire, but he does not make it sound heavy. On the contrary, his *Elektra* is near to what Richard Strauss wished, sounding transparent and also full blooded but never saturated. *Die Meistersinger* is a different type of score, one can get too enthusiastic with the brass and something like this happened during the Prelude, but I believe this was a matter of local acoustics rather than Soddy's fault. Maybe a listen from several parts of the house would solve this small problem. In fact once the proper opera started there were no problems, just a show of complete ability to let the main sections sing with the singers, or with the chorus. It was a feast for the ears, the horn section, crucial in this piece, shone at every opportunity with a mellow German sound; other soloists and sections shone too, in fact this whole

orchestra never ceases to surprise me; also without Barenboim, the sound is full but never heavy, the orchestral soloists should not envy anybody else from any other orchestra, being as it is possibly the best orchestra in Germany. And it was not just Sachs or the conductor who shone. Even with his fully paid detractors Klaus Florian Vogt has been a fine Walther von Stolzing for quite a while now. Allowing for the passing of time, his voice was clear, well focused, no stress, crisp diction, boyish and impetuous and yes, also fine in the very big moments where power was needed as well as stamina. Fresh as a daisy. Christoph Fischesser played a classical Pogner with soft authority and fine voice; Martin Gartner gave it all as a totally unsuitable Beckmesser, singing with complete self confidence and acting as if the world owed it to him to marry Eva; Jan Martinik delivered a pragmatic Kothner, trying not to get into difficulties with anybody. For those with a sentimental vein, Balthasar Zorn (as on previous occasions with this work) was sung by Siegfried Jerusalem – bringing a load of excellent memories. It was lovely to see and hear Siyabonga Maqungo as David, making his large frame count against the other apprentices and singing with a clear-voiced, almost pedantic Mozartian, tone in all the difficult passages. Katharina Kammerloher repeated her always credible and attractive Magdalene. Hanna-Elisabeth Müller looked ravishing as Eva, depicting an impetuous, independent young woman. Her singing though was less convincing;

without a vocal line, the voice production was not even and the sound acid. The nine-year-old production by Andrea Moses has several virtues, the main one being not to get in the way of the work, and that is already a big plus. This is not the first production which mixes present and older times, with an emphasis on the present. But it also introduces a look back to Germany's *WunderWirtschaft* (economic miracle) with a well known triangular automaker insignia gyrating behind a large window in the background. It reflects the piece and provides the public with several lines of thought. After all, don't we know that *Die Meistersinger* brings very strong political baggage, especially today?

The universal validity of the work became clear from the beginning, with the modern chorus singing towards the public inside a modern church and when the priest arrives to sing the main sermon they turn round to face him military style. The chorus was simply excellent and the main characters were well presented but not overtly characterised, just that little bit of exaggerations here and there to make a quick impact. All in all, not a revolutionary production, but all the same well thought out adhering to the principle, if it ain't broke...

**Eduardo Benarroch**

### **Puccini: La Bohème**

**Komische Oper, Schiller Theater Berlin**

Fresh from my encounter with the Götz Friedrich production at the Deutsche Oper last December – reviewed above – I decided to continue my own homage to Puccini by attending another production of this most performed of Puccini's works: Barrie Kosky's. Rather than fall into a strange and unnecessary *Konzept* we were presented with the bare minimum, a small stage above the stage depicting an attic room without walls: the entrance is, of course, through a trap door on the floor. There is just enough space to fit a stove and a long pipe to extract the fumes when it is rarely lit, as well as a camera with several backdrops, because Marcello is a photographer not a painter, and just one chair. There is no Benoit, the four main characters pretend to be him giving supposed answers to their own questions; it is actually quite funny and it works, even if it leaves one singer out of a job. The second act consists just of one



**La Bohème**

Photo: Jan Windszus

curtain, ochre colour, depicting a lonely street in turn of the century Paris. For the final act we are back to the small room and the chair. The colourful Café Momus is where Kosky lets rip with a huge crowd front of stage whilst the sets get ready behind, a *coup de théâtre*. Rarely has there been a busier ensemble, things that the Komische Oper do so well, it is like real life, everything natural, even if at times outrageous. But this is Kosky, isn't it? And all the better for it, as we see not just caricatures but what seemed to me real people, depicting a gathering where men look for women, where women look for men and those with money enjoy themselves, and the rest enjoy themselves rather less. We see a difference in the characters. Mimi is not shy, she is much more forward, reticent perhaps but she relishes the encounter with Rodolfo as much as he does. They kiss very quickly. In fact this is part of this *régie*, everything is fast, life is short, there is no time to waste. For the record, and perhaps a tribute to Harry Kupfer's production, as Mimi is about to depart going down the trap door she leaves her hand on the edge for much longer than usual, enough for Rodolfo to catch her and sing *Che gelida manina*. It is staged but oh so charming. Musetta's entrance is that of a well practised courtesan, and behaves exaggeratedly. Marcello and Musetta follow the words correctly, that is, they love independently and they love each other. The end is unexpected as it is moving. After falling onto the floor Mimi sits on the only chair and is given the gloves (rather than mitts) Musetta bought for her. As the scene is coming to its dramatic end all characters walk backwards towards the corners of the stage, leaving Rodolfo and

Mimi alone, then as she dies he also walks backwards into the dark leaving Mimi alone under a spot light sitting with her head down, dead. I do not think there was a dry eye in the house. Now we all know that a production alone does not fulfill all expectations, right? How do they do it I do not know, but on January 31st there was a sensational young cast for the public to enjoy. Ruzan Mantashyan was a beautiful Mimi, singing with a rather larger lyrical voice than usual but extremely expressive, well controlled and careful with her phrasing. Oleksiy Palchykov sang one of the most satisfying Rodolfo's I have heard for a very long time, and this includes some well known names. His voice was free from vices, sounding Italianate, with an ever-present *squillo*. He sang the arias and duets with ease, never forcing, always maintaining the colour no matter at what volume. A tremendous find.

Noam Heinz was the reliable and sonorous Schaunard, Hubert Zapiór sang and acted a splendid Marcello with a beautiful baritone sound and Tijl Faveyts delivered a very fine Colline. Penny Sofroniadou excelled as a blonde bombshell – Musetta singing with impeccable crisp voice and acting shamelessly. As Kosky has always done, his *personnérégie* was masterful, every member of the company had something convincing to do and it was done to perfection; this is the Komische Oper after all. And again there was Jordan de Souza at the podium to conduct a score as if it was composed recently, sounding fresh, never trivial, full of humour and tragedy in equal parts. The Schiller Theater was full. It would not be difficult to book a cheap flight to Berlin and enjoy this top notch *Bohème*.

**Eduardo Benarroch**



## Puccini: La Bohème Deutsche Oper Berlin

When is a traditional looking production not traditional? When it is done by a mastercraftsman, a person of the theatre, and a person with enough respect for the work he is presenting. London knows Götz Friedrich well, having been director of productions for four years and he is in my opinion the man who brought modern working practices to the Royal Opera House singlehandedly. He was not a man to have strong "Konzepts" although he would use them such as with the long black coats in his *Tannhäuser*. But that was also a German trend during the '70s. His work at the Deutsche Oper, where he remained almost 20 years, was legendary and in the year when Puccini is being celebrated, what a good tribute to revive Friedrich's production of Puccini's tearjerker which oddly enough I had never seen before. Having worked at the Komische Oper with Felsenstein, Friedrich belongs to a trilogy of supreme German directors, including Harry Kupfer and Joachim Herz, all of them different, and all of them committed to presenting fully functioning operatic works and all of them with different styles. In common was the *Personenregie*, something which today is relegated to second tier behind *Regie-theater*, and this is what made the difference to this 36-years-old production. Famous singers and stars have participated on this stage but few have given the flavour, the simplicity, the enthusiasm and their all as these young singers did on December 6th. There was no need to announce that tenor Andrei Danilov was suffering from a cold, because he sang with full tone, the top of the voice clear and focused, the passage to the very top easily achieved and never sounding under stress. Danilov also acted convincingly, although one can also say that the whole cast acted with conviction and were very much into their roles. I did not know Aida Pascu. Her Mimi was a delicate creation, not too timid but timid enough, and yes, it makes quite a difference inasmuch one can believe in the character or simply refer to it as a stage role and no more. In fact, what Friedrich (who died in 2000) achieved with this production was to make the characters (all of them) believable and therefore much more moving than usual. Dean Murphy was a charming and friendly Marcello, Kyle Miller an engaging Schaunard, Patrick Guetti a deep sounding



Photo: Bavarian State Opera

Colline, not forgetting Australian Alexandra Oomens's sprightly and expressive Musetta. What does one want in opera? Good singing for a start, a production which does justice to the work and – as in this case – leaves the spectator with more than one tear. Helped by Friedrich Praetorius, who is a Kapellmeister at this house, the orchestra sounded as if born to sound mellow, enveloping, cajoling, a main interpreter in this story of short happiness and, yes, death. The sets by Peter Sykora made an instantaneous impact, a typical Parisian loft with large windows with the accumulated dirt of years. The loft was almost empty, but not "designer empty", just disarranged, messy, one could smell the dust, feel the cold and the humidity. In the second scene, the Café Momus was seen only as the entrance on the right corner, the main action being in the centre where there was a bridge and an intricate mix of meticulously rehearsed *Personenregie*. The third scene was as traditional as we are all accustomed to see, but even here there was a touch of something special. As Mimi and Rodolfo confront each other and sing "Addio senza rancore" they sing with their backs to each other, only when about to finish turning simultaneously to face each other. In the theatre it worked a treat. The final act/ scene finds them in a cellar, with large sewer pipes running along the ceiling. The arrival of Musetta carrying Mimi down a miserable staircase was as credible as one can get, and at the end, when Rodolfo starts closing the curtains in the only high window to make it look as comfortable as possible for Mimi, brought (as Puccini wanted) strong emotions forward. What a superb homage to Puccini in his special year. The theatre

was full to the rafters, a young public, casually dressed, enthusiastic, applauding not just the singers but also the production as it unfolded. I keep saying that the young public like opera, they enjoy it when it is well done, and they can afford it if they choose to buy tickets, prices being around €100 maximum. So why are politicians so much against it?

**Eduardo Benarroch**

## Richard Strauss: Der Liebe der Danae Bavarian State Opera Munich

*Der Liebe der Danae* (The Love of Danae) is Richard Strauss' last opera, composed during World War II, finished in June of 1940 when the composer was 76 years old. It is loosely based on a Hugo von Hofmannstahl sketch. Hofmannstahl intended it as a satiric comedy, a *la* Offenbach. Two factors influenced the final version of the opera. The first was the libretto itself. Had Hofmannstahl lived, he would have been forced to emigrate well before 1940 or he would have perished in the gas chambers. Strauss's only other outstanding librettist was Stefan Zweig and he too was forced to emigrate, committing suicide in Brazil in 1942. Strauss turned reluctantly to Joseph Gregor and the libretto became the Achilles' heel of the work. The second factor was the effect the war itself had on Strauss, with his beloved Munich lying in ruins before the opera's semi-premiere in Salzburg in 1944. Only a dress rehearsal was allowed as all theatres were officially closed owing to the final war efforts. The first staged performance took place in Salzburg in 1952, 3 years after the composer's death.

Although there remained some elements of comedy in the work, it became a work of farewell – the God Jupiter is losing his power, no longer able to be seduced by means of gold, his former mistresses have grown old, and his new conquest, Danae, rejects him, choosing love over gold. Strauss's orchestration is still masterful, bursting with youthful energy. Typical for Strauss, he has given his leading tenor a treacherously high lying, heroic part; the baritone Jupiter needs a Wotan-like voice and the part for Danae is equally demanding. Had the libretto been better, the opera would certainly have less foot-shuffling and would have been more to the point. Still, this new production (seen on February 11 at its second evening in the Nationaltheatre) proved that it is worth reviving.

Stage director Claus Guth has given us an apocalyptic view of the world. We begin in a modern, large open-plan office (Sets: Michael Levine) and this, in various forms of destruction, becomes a unit set for the entire work. Through oversized windows, we see a modern city which could be the bankers' city of Frankfurt or almost anywhere of that ilk. In the final act, the office is in disarray and populated by the hungry and homeless, hoping to avoid war's final destruction. In that act, Jupiter appears costumed very much like Wagner's Wanderer and, having lost his powers, sings, Wotan-like, an emotional farewell. The final visions, seen through the rear windows, are of a totally destroyed Munich in 1945, juxtaposed with contemporary images of the octogenarian Richard Strauss. Surely an extreme dose of 'kitsch' but somehow, sitting in a theatre in the middle of Munich, very moving.

In December, I heard Christopher Maltman sing a superb Hans Sachs in Berlin. His Jupiter here was similarly outstanding. The part requires extreme range and vocal strength throughout and he seemed to have limitless resources in both cases. Andreas Schager, a true heroic tenor, was

ideal for the role of Midas. Nothing in the daunting part, including the many exposed high notes well above the staff, caused him any problems. His second act was particularly memorable. The title role was to have been sung by Malin Byström, who, due to illness, cancelled after the dress rehearsal. She was replaced by Manuela Uhl, who, to her credit, saved the performance and, having performed the role before, had a nice feeling for the part but who was vocally only slightly better than adequate. She deserves great credit for jumping in but one wonders what might have been with a vocally stronger Danae.

The four mythological Queens, all ex-mistresses of Jupiter, were superbly cast in Sarah Dufresne (Semele), Evgeniya Sotnikova (Europa), Emily Sierra (Alkmene) and Avery Amereau (Leda). Tenor Vincent Wolfsteiner gave a wonderful rendition of the eternally bankrupt Pollux; tenor Ya-Chung Huang was a vocally agile, dancing-prancing Mercury. The Chorus (Christoph Heil) was spot-on. Conductor Sebastian Weigle seemed to bathe in the score's lush orchestration and the sheer indescribable sound produced by the orchestra. This made for stunning portions, particularly the all-important Interludes but often made it difficult for even the singers with the largest voices to cut through the orchestral volume.

**Jeffrey A Leipsic**

### **Puccini: Turandot** **Deutsche Oper Berlin**

It seems that musical qualifications and being Italian are not a sure base when it comes to productions of *Turandot*. It is a difficult work, but there have been (as at the Staatsoper unter den Linden) – and I am sure there will be – good productions in the future. But not in this case. On February 7th musically-trained Lorenzo Fiononi proposed an authoritarian state

ruled by a middle-aged dark-suited Altoom and his equally dark-suited henchmen standing on an upper balcony above the stage. *Turandot* is part of the system. In such a terror state where citizens live in constant fear, the state provides entertainment, for instance executions. Of course they would. Therefore, it seems against the tide to have Altoom suddenly behaving like a human being towards Calaf warning him of the danger of applying to solve Turandot's riddles. It is a pity that the text says so and goes against the basic idea of the production. Ping, Pang and Pong are part of the entertainment, Pong camping it dressed as a female. It was like *Turandot* meets BGT. Oh well. Timur was an old drunkard who is not blind. Luckily, both Liu and Calaf were largely untouched. At the end of the final duet Turandot takes the knife Liu had used to kill herself and when her father Altoom advances to congratulate her she kills him. Then she gives the knife to Calaf who walks towards his drunken father lying on the floor and kills him too. They then join hands holding the knife and advance towards the end of possibly the most horrible production I have ever seen of this work.

Yes, yes, in psychology killing one's parents has a meaning, but that does not mean we actually go about killing one's dearest. But it was well rehearsed, the opera attracts its public, and people love large loud spectacle so it is no surprise that there were loud cheers afterwards. If that makes people happy so be it. I just hope some part of the public went home and read about what really happens in that work. Having seen a fine production last December only a few kilometers away it made me think, why? I suppose the answer is because they can? The cast was up to the task, Saoia Hernández showed a large, well placed vocal instrument, dispatching *In questa reggia* with ease and not encountering even the slightest of difficulties with the final duet. Alfred Kim enjoyed himself as Calaf, his voice has a



Photo: Deutsche Oper



nice colour and a natural *squillo* but he tends to force and the voice dries up when doing so. Sua Jo impressed with the slightly larger voice one is accustomed to for Liu, but in such a context it was fine and she did very attractive things with it. Her death scene was very moving and even credible. I also enjoyed Michael Bach-tadze, Kangyoon Shine Lee and Thomas Cilluffo, who accurately sang a very well coreographed Ping, Pang and Pong. Clemens Bieber was the mafia-style Altoun and Byung Gil Kim was the lugubrious Timur. The house chorus is a fine one, always, and provided a suitably large sound when needed. Only the conductor, Jordan de Souza, usually very reliable, never found the ideal balance, the narrative disjointed, as if being distracted by what was in front of him. Let's blame the production then.

**Eduardo Benarroch**

### Verdi: *Il corsaro*

Bari Teatro Petruzzelli

Those who witness this Verdian rarity will think when listening to the orchestration that it is a very early work and that Verdi's inspiration from later works was more developed. In fact, *Il corsaro* is his twelfth opera, composed in 1848 after *Nabucco*, *Macbeth*, *Attila* and *Ernani*, to mention the best known. The opera is based on a story of the same name by Byron, and although it is not part of any repertoire, it is a valuable work, with intense drama which requires more than good singers. So how does a theatre without a huge budget do it justice? To paraphrase Da Ponte in Figaro, *con astuzia con arguzia* (with cunning and wit).

First of all, an Italian director has to be chosen, if possible, one who knows the Verdian language thoroughly, and after working with the orchestra, one needs a group of young singers who have enough ability (if not maturity) to face a score full of difficulties even for very experienced singers. The Petruzzelli is a unique animal, from the opposite side of Italy to the San Carlo in Naples. Without the funds to bring in Netrebko, this opera theatre puts on very interesting seasons, with repertoires that many theatres do not dare to present. This year, among other things, *The Rape of Lucretia* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* will be seen.

The sets by Marco Capuana were



*Il Corsaro*

Photo: R. Ricci

absolutely traditional and the *régie* by Lamberto Puggelli was basic, but one was not expecting much in this context in any case. It was a co-production with Teatro San Carlo in Naples and the Teatro Regio di Parma. On January 21st the cast did it justice. Kosovian tenor Rame Lahaj embodied the Corsaro Corrado with a firm voice with a slight degree of throatiness that did not take away from his pleasant timbre. He handled well his first bravura aria *Si di Corsari il fulmine!* and the duet with Medora *Per me infelice vedi costoi*. The young Chinese soprano Guankun Yu sang with a sweet and expressive voice, she knows how to move and has a beautiful figure, very likeable on stage and singing her difficult aria *Non so le tette immagini* with good schooling and control. But the most demanding role is that of the other soprano, Gulnara, the favourite of the Pascha. Her's is a truly high-level *bel canto* tessitura, with filature, high notes and an expressive range that demands much from the soprano. Georgian-born soprano Salome Jicia demonstrated fine Verdian schooling, singing with ease and an attractive voice, both in *Vola talar del carcere* and in *Ah conforto è sola la speme*. Verdi would not be Verdi without an important baritone role and here that role is that of Pascha, a character not completely evil but understanding. Vladimir Stoyanov gave authority, good singing and good schooling to a role that needs help to be credible. Mauro Secci and Emanuele Cordaro were good as Selimo and Giovanni and as always the house choir was excellent, singing with strength and great sound.

If there was a star it was the conductor Stefano Montanari who made the orch-

estra sound with that typical Verdian flavour that only those with deep knowledge of the style and work with the orchestra can achieve. Montanari raised the spectacle in front of an always excellent orchestra. Another triumph for the Petruzzelli with a full house.

**Eduardo Benarroch**

### Richard Strauss: *Elektra*

Staatsoper unter den Linden Berlin

The reader will notice an abundance (hopefully not an excess) of reviews of this particular production of *Elektra* signed by Patrice Chéreau. On the surface it says little. The only set by Richard Peduzzi is a simple, oppressively monochrome courtyard with a large sliding gate on one side. At the centre back, another door leading into the palace from where Klytemnestra appears. Some steps down is the proper courtyard where Elektra lives and where the servants dutifully clean and sprinkle water to avoid the dust. Nothing more, nothing less.

The production itself precedes the music, i.e., a cleaner with a broom made out of branches clearing the steps down to the courtyard, a repetitive task, done who knows how many times every day? When she gets to clean the last step the orchestra begins with dark forebodings; this is not a nice place to be, nor to work, nor to exist. Those who may read this review in Milano or frequent the Aix-en-Provence Festival, or attend the Met in New York, or the glorious Finnish Opera in Helsinki or even the Grand Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona will know what I am talking about as this is a co-production

with all those opera houses. But I do not think it has been performed more often in any of those theatres than here in Berlin, where it is a staple fare, rather a supreme banquet. It was premiered in 2016 (Chéreau died in 2013) and it has always been revived with splendid casts. The last revival marked last year Waltraud Meier's farewell from the role of Klytemnestra, a role she had redefined. On January 29th there was no fear it would be weakly cast, as in this revival none other than Evelyn Herlitzius (the original Elektra) took the role and redefined it once again.

What is it with dramatic sopranos and Klytemnestra? What entices them to sing and growl and exaggerate and still maintain credibility on stage? Herlitzius has an impacting voice, clear diction, volume aplenty and a stage presence that is not just strong, it is commanding, authoritarian, with just a small bit of vulnerability which she immediately hides lest it gives Elektra an opportunity to strike at her. One can see a noble woman but one who has been and still is merciless, and who sees in Elektra the same strength that she still has, albeit for different motives. Mother and daughter are equals here. One can



photo by RStaatsoper Berlin

just go to see *Elektra* for Herlitzius alone but one would miss a lot then. Because Irene Theorin showed that she can sing with full terrifying volume and also diminish down to a light *pianissimo* with marvelous control. It shows that Elektra can be sung by both *lirico spinto* and full dramatic, if the dramatic is not overpowering and shows contrasts for expression. Theorin did. In such a strong women's environment appears a young woman who desires nothing more than to get

married and have children; it does not matter if her life is not luxurious, almost any man will do. Chrysothemis is such a young woman, tired of Elektra's machinations, exhausted with life in a palace dominated by her mother and a capricious and vain man (Aegisthus). Vida Mikneviciute was the lean virgin with a strong voice, able to convey her *angst* without losing focus, with very good phrasing and plenty of appropriate expression, her confrontation with her sister

## Mozart: The Magic Flute

### Charles Court Opera, Wilton's Music Hall London

I had high hopes of this show and every one of them was fulfilled. This was Mozart as you've never seen it before. The Charles Court version is meticulously fresh, beautifully sung and very funny. Director John Savournin is himself an accomplished singer and actor so he knows exactly how to make this material work in a way which trusts the material but isn't afraid of originality. The gloriously witty translation and Eaton's musical direction from the keyboard ensured that the whole experience was a pleasure.

Matthew Kellet was outstanding as Papageno, played as a mercurial, down-to-earth man-of-the-people who manages the leafy garden of Sarastro's temple, including of course, the birds. Kellet hops about (often in rhythm) engages with the audience and gets our

sympathy. He is master of comic physicality and his diction was the clearest I've ever heard in this role.

Martins Smakustelis gave us an earnest Tamino, an explorer with satchel (we're loosely in the early 20th century) having first been freed from netting by the three ladies – conflating him with the monster that they're usually dealing with in the opening scene which is an ingenious idea. He too, like everyone else in this fine cast of nine, is a compelling singer.

Peter Lidbetter's Sarastro packed all the gravitas you could wish for – a well articulated contrast to Kellet's Papageno – singing all those very low bass notes with precision. Of course The Queen of the Night is a challenging role because her two big numbers are very well known indeed and the audience awaits them expectantly. Eleri Gwylm, looking terrifying with a scarlet band of makeup across her face, long grey hair and lots of lace, rose to that challenge, hitting every high note with aplomb and exuding malice.

This is a revival production with new work from revival director, James Hurley and revival designer Lucy Fowler (original design by Simon Bejer) and it sat happily in the space at Wiltons with its central steps leading downstage. The ultra-violet lit puppet snakes are a bit of a show stopper.

As you'd expect from Charles Court this was a bijoux take on *The Magic Flute* running just two hours, plus interval. Cast size meant that there was doubling of some roles but it was done adeptly and made for some very clear singing of ensemble numbers. Die hard traditionalists might object to the cuts but it flowed, and the story telling was much clearer than usual. The plot is bonkers but this version made it almost coherent.

Charles Court Opera is celebrating its 20th year in 2025. Here's to the next twenty and I'm looking forward to *Patience* at Wilton's in September already.

Susan Elkin



and even more her moving encounter with Orestes giving her hope. Lauri Vasar was Orestes, the brother who comes to put things right, and he does in some way. He lances the boil so to speak, or two boils in this case. In fact Aegisthus is killed by Orestes's companion. Here the production takes a darker tone, because for all his emotion recognising Elektra and embracing Chrysothemis, Orestes has another agenda, he has come to finish off this regime come what may. He has to break with the past and he leaves, leaving Elektra sitting alone in the courtyard and Chrysothemis tentatively following him. Stephan Rügamer had been a capricious, vane and unpredictable Aegisthus, singing almost with violence in his voice, trying to convey authority. And the smaller roles were not just given to any singers. Anna Kissjudit had been the sensational third maid, with a voice that should serve as a measuring stick for any contralto. In fact, all of the other singers were extremely well cast. And if this would not be enough Alexander Soddy demonstrated once again (how many times now?) that he is one of the most important conductors of his generation. He let the orchestra rip but never out of control, the *tutti* always in focus, the many sections of intimate scenes delivered with silky phrasing, this was a reading which could easily be compared to the best, like Kempe. I am glad for him, because in Germany he will have plenty of work at the highest level, and the Staatskapelle played like angels for him.

Next time this production comes into the repertoire, make a trip to Berlin, you'll not regret it. This is opera at its highest level.

Eduardo Benarroch

### Donizetti: The Daughter of the Regiment Munich Bavarian State Opera

The last new production of Donizetti's opéra-comique *La Fille du régiment* at the Bavarian State Opera was in German (as *Die Regimentstochter*) and dates from September of 1935. The nearly 90-year gap is at least partly due to a general rejection in Germany of anything French during and immediately after the war years. It is also due to the State Opera generally turning up its nose at most lighter works, pointing them across the city to the smaller, more folk-minded Gärtner-

platz-Theater. Donizetti's score, though perhaps not his finest, is full of melodic inspiration, is full of humour and even boasts a touch of social criticism.

It also demands two first-rate singers and, as seen in the Nationaltheater on January 3, the State Opera has mined pure gold. As Tonio, Spanish tenor Xabier Anduaga, not yet 30-years old, was nothing short of sensational. His voice is tonally rich, his musical instincts unfailingly appropriate and his top notes – including flawlessly facile high Cs in *O mes amis* – were thrilling. His Marie, South African Pretty Yende, showed perfect coloratura, glittering top notes, great sensitivity in *Par le rang et par l'opulence* and a wonderful comedic touch in the opening scene of Act 2 in which she, both musically and dramatically, tries in vain to fit into an aristocratic mould. Bass Misha Kiria was a melodiously comic, sympathetic Sulpice and it was a pleasure to welcome back Dorothea Röschmann, as La Marquise de Berkenfield, and more of a pleasure to note that her voice is more than intact. Conductor Stefano Montanari led with verve and spirit. Damiano Michieletto's production was witty, if it at times suffered from over-activity. Once again, the stage director felt it necessary to fill the overture with pantomimed stage action.

Although the action itself was cleverly choreographed, it distracted from one of Donizetti's most imaginative overtures. Sets by Paolo Fantin were sparsely suggestive of time and place. The Achilles' heel of the evening was, however, the decision

to replace the all-important dialogue between sung numbers with German language narration by actress Sunnyi Melles in the role of the Duchess of Crakentorp. Not only did this unbalance the opera, reducing it to a series of musical numbers interrupted by narration, but the texts themselves, consisting of a combination of Dramaturg Mattia Palma's Italian narration translated into German by Saskia Kruse with the addition of Sunnyi Melles' own texts, turned comedy into embarrassing travesty. Ms. Melles' delivery was outrageously over-the-top, devoid of wit and tasteless at best. The nadir of this one-woman show was the Duchess' comment in Act 2 that Marie was unacceptable because – translated from the German – she was "different". Considering that Pretty Yende's skin colour is indeed "different" than anyone else onstage, this backhanded remark might well be interpreted as racist. As there were titles projected in two languages, there was no reason not to include at least parts of the original dialogue. To do so would have rescued wonderful singing and a clever production from its descent into farcical parody.

Jeffrey A. Leipsic

### Verdi: Macbeth Berlin Deutsche Oper

Artificial insemination does not always work in real life, and when it is shown in a work such as this it leads to un-



The Daughter of the Regiment

Photo: Geoffroy Schied

necessary revulsion and switch off. Even a German audience gave it a resonant *buh*.

Is artificial insemination or masturbation part of Shakespeare's story? Are there not enough elements in the original that one has to suffer these amateurish and misguided productions? Does one have to mention the name of the person responsible to warn others? Before the overture, this *Macbeth* started with an artificial image from a gigantic tablet suggesting investment opportunities, the witches seemed to have borrowed the costumes from a well known musical, the movements on stage are not particularly consistent. When Macbeth assassinates Duncan he is seen crossing the corridor by a servant, on the corridor's floor lies the body of a bodyguard who had been given a bottle of Scotch (single malt?) by Lady Macbeth. A naked man with a deer's head symbolizes power? fertility? Banquo's son is almost poisoned with a cake. But all these deviations do not compensate for the lack of concentration on the main subject. This is a complete mess. No amount of dramaturgical justifications will do.

This *Macbeth* must be scrapped and never seen again. A great pity given that musically it was more than acceptable. On December 4th Enrique Mazzola had all the credentials for conducting a fine and exciting early Verdi score. All the fire and right orchestral inflections were there, the choruses were powerful and well shaped, and he guided his singers with a flexible tempo. Roman Burdenko's Macbeth was an introvert, insecure, full of anxiety, his

voice edgy, not a typical Italian rich sound, making the character even darker and his downfall even more inevitable, almost desirable. Felicia Moore acted the Lady whilst Anna Pirozzi sang from the side, having arrived with two hours to spare. It did not matter. The voice was all there, the top notes, the difficult coloratura, the long soft notes, all showing that she would have probably been a very good first choice for this difficult role. Marko Mimica had sang a reliable Banquo, but there had been no true comradeship between the two warriors. Attilio Glaser gave an air of stability with his delivery of *Ah la paterna mano*.

The excellent house chorus provided full-blooded sound when required and the orchestra never faltered under the expert baton of Mazzola. A pity one has to mention that the production was a waste of money and time.

**Eduardo Benarroch**

**Richard Strauss:  
Die Frau ohne Schatten  
Berlin Deutsche Oper**

Strauss's and Hofmannstahl's problem child (or child of sorrow) is a problematic subject which needs a lot of respect. Mainly one has to treat it as an overblown fairy tale, a dark *Magic Flute*, a pacifist and conciliatory message after a war which everybody thought would be the last. It has also real characters, somehow Pauline (Richard Strauss's wife) served as an

inspiration for the bombastic Dyer's Wife. But it is the Woman Without a Shadow, i.e., the Empress, who has to go through trials and resist temptation as Pamina does in *The Magic Flute*. We respect Mozart's opera, although in Germany it is a free for all and there is a new production at the Staatsoper which is unacceptable, so much so that it runs parallel to the old production by August Everding.

Having said that, nothing prepared me for this new production by Tobias Kratzer, who has become a favourite of many opera houses. I saw his take on *Intermezzo* last year and a fine effort it was. But *Frosch* is a totally different animal, one cannot reduce it to a domestic mis-understanding. I saw the premiere on January 26th. The triviality in Kratzer's so called *Konzept* is catastrophic, it is not even funny, it is a childish affront to a difficult work that works well if one leaves it alone with minimal adornments. Kratzer proposes that Barak and his wife have not understood each other for a long time and she believes he takes her for granted (which is true), also the Emperor and his wife are so consumed with their own things (sex mainly) that they do not deserve to procreate. Then there is the mother-in-law type, an elegantly dressed Amme, as if coming from a designer shop, who pretends to help but actually gets in the way. Barak is not a dyer but runs a Laundromat, his wife irons shirts and takes care of the cash register. Would they actually have a donkey to do the deliveries? *mmmmmm*, I do not believe so. Probably a clapped-out white van. Keikobad's Messenger is an Amazon driver, the fish are fish fingers out of a freezer, the Young Man appears all in white and dark glasses, being called by phone, which – by the way – the Amme seems very fond of using as much as possible. Oh dear.

The wonderful Christine Mielitz used a mobile phone in her production of *Macbeth* at the Komische Oper in 1997 for Lady Macbeth to receive the letter, well before smart phones, These sort of things have to be used sparingly because if not they fall into a farce and diminish the work. At the beginning of Act three both Barak and his wife attend a session with a marriage-counselor: it does not work out, which contradicts the text. There is also an appearance of Keikobad as a late sixties grey-haired intellectual, looking prosperous as head of the family. In the third act, the Empress's family gathers to celebrate

Adam Eike Walkenhorst



*Macbeth*



(what?) and when the Empress enters she is warmly greeted. But then come the trials and as she refuses what Keikobad offers her, this suffices for him to leave in a huff! After this, the Finale disintegrates into a complete mess. Whoever approved of this *konzept* needs to have his head examined. There were two changes in the cast. Clay Hilley sang the Emperor (instead of David Butt Philipp) with his usual loud delivery, mostly well, but also demonstrating that a Wagnerian tenor tends to have trouble with Strauss's high register. Daniela Kohler also was taking over the role (from Jane Archibald) and her Empress succeeded up to a point, her high notes were mostly clear, but her lower register often deserted her. Her first words are *ist mein Liebster dahin?* which is in the middle range and this was inaudible, followed by a *melisma* which was skidded over. Yes of course, it has been like that for a very long time, very few sopranos have sang it right. It is a very difficult role.

Marina Prudenskaya's Amme was often too high for her range; the rest of the time she did a designer caricature (not her fault) of this most complex of roles. Catherine Foster's Dyer's wife showed a mixed bag of high sounds and stressed top notes, and it was only Jordan Shanahan who one could say sang Barak convincingly from beginning to end. Everybody else fell short in one way or another. Nor was it a star night for Donald Runnicles, who conducted without any sense of urgency or drama. Yes, it was loud at

times, as it is written, and mostly it is quiet but never achieved that elegant intimacy and danger one expects from the orchestra. Maybe he was affected by what he saw on stage, which would put off most people. Is there no way to stop these productions before they get on to the stage?

**Eduardo Benarroch**

### **The Cunning Little Vixen** **Janáček Festival Brno**

In its centenary year, the festival staged two productions of this comedy, the first was a staging from the Ostrava Moravian-Silesian Theatre, and this Brno production was first seen here in 2018. I must confess that I have always found this opera difficult to understand; is it a children's comedy, or is it a more profound reflection on society? I must admit that at the end of this evening that I was even more perplexed.

The composer's interest in writing the opera seems to have come innocently by a suggestion from his housemaid when he found her laughing at a feuilleton in the *Lidové noviny* paper. He asked what was making her laugh, to which she replied, 'It's Bystrouška, sir' and she handed him the paper with a picture of the little vixen, and she continued, 'Sir, you know just how animals talk to one another, you're always noting down the voices of birds – well, this would make quite an opera!' Following this, Janáček kept his eye out for

future instalments about the little vixen and her adventures.

Another source for Janáček was the countryside surrounding Brno, he spent much time walking through the extensive woods listening to the birds and animals, taking down notes of their speech melodies. In a letter to Kamila Stösslová, he wrote, 'I have started writing Vixen Bystrouška. A jolly thing with a sad ending. And I am taking up a place at that sad end myself. And so I belong there!'

The libretto for Janáček's opera was influenced by Rudolf Těsnohlídek who had started writing feuilletons for *Lidové noviny*. His experience in writing 'From the Courtroom' for the paper allowed him to discover the world of Brno folk and their unique dialect. Těsnohlídek was able to skilfully describe the characters of the local folk with great sensitivity that he came across in the courtroom. This was advanced in his other writing projects, and he loved to spend his free hours in the woods and forests near the city. On one occasion he discovered a half-frozen baby hidden in the undergrowth. Thankfully, he discovered the mother who had given birth illegitimately and concerned about the plight of unwanted children, Těsnohlídek started a campaign for the sale of Christmas trees to raise funds for a children's home in Brno. This became a widespread campaign across the country, and the first home was opened in December 1929 – sadly after Těsnohlídek had passed away.

However his most celebrated literary creation was *The Cunning Little Vixen* published in instalments between April and June 1920, and in book form a year later. The animals have their own characters – from mosquitos to frogs, birds, hares, foxes and badgers. Těsnohlídek uses dialect to describe his characters, and divides the human world distinctly from the animal kingdom, there are two elements of language – Haná and South Moravian. At one point, the Líšeň dialect is mixed with the reverend's interjections in Latin and Greek.

Leoš Janáček studied the behaviour of wildlife intensely, a friend, who was a gamekeeper, sought out a fox's den so he could observe the life of the young cubs. As Janáček wrote: 'Quiet seclusion, sleepy forests. I am writing the libretto for Bystrouška and am not far from the end. Almost at the last act.' Janáček took ten chapters from the novella by Těsnohlídek,



Photo: Foster Shanahan PrudenskayaKoeher

less than half, into the three acts, and changed their order. Important was the changing seasons, and he excised political aspects while emphasising the poetry of the opera – unscrambling the chronicle demonstrated the finality of the human world and nature's eternal cycle. Appropriately, the premiere of *The Cunning Little Vixen* took place in Brno on 6 November 1924, and today is together with *Jenůfa*, Janáček's most popular opera.

In the opening scene of Act I, images of a children's home in Brno from 1928 were projected onto the backdrop, with the children playing games in the foreground, and among them old men lurked, at work looking after the children – these were the founders of the school. The staging by Dragan Stojčevski employed great substituting levels which opened out to become either a roof, or later to open up to reveal the sky and the woods outside. The colour scheme was of bright yellows and orange shades, both for the sets and most of the costumes.

Of the singers, the Sharp-Ears of Katerina Knežíkova was the outstanding vocalist together with a characterisation that should be a model to any other singer. Her luxuriantly flowing soprano was quite extraordinary and dominated every scene. I recall her singing at the Edinburgh International Festival a few months ago in a performance of the *Te Deum* by Dvořák which was very impressive. She has a great presence, at times witty, and other times cuddly. Her partner in Václava Krejčí Housková's Gold-Stripe was superb with her mellifluous mezzo soprano and bringing out all the mischief of her role, mixed with affection and love. Their performances were outstanding. Of the other roles, I was impressed by the flowing lyric tenor of the Schoolmaster Petr Levíček, and by the Parson of Jan Štáva with his darkly handsome bass and fine characterisation, the Forester of Adam Plachetka was tremendous as if has been singing this role and in grand voice. The children were amazing in their play acting and delightfully entertaining games across the complete width of the stage. A fine trick was the emergence of the chickens bursting through the base of the upper staging and amusingly singing at the surprisingly entertaining events around them.

Of the secondary characters, there were excellent performances by Petr Karas' Mr Pásek, the Harašta of Tadeáš Hoza, but one has to mention the splen-



Photo: Laurent Compagnon

did contribution of the Brno Childrens Choir whose startling acting, together with their singing was a highlight of the whole evening, and were admirably assisted by the Chorus of the Janáček Brno Opera company. The orchestra were excellent with the fine solos from the flute, bassoon and the trumpets, plus the glorious harp. All of these supplemented the action on stage, the uninhibited folk dancing at the close of Act I was magnificently enacted.

The choreography was excellently directed by Patricie Částková making full use of the huge cast, and adding to the dramatic excitement for the audience. Alexandra Grusková's costumes were masterful in underling the role in the drama of each scene and the character of the main cast members. The lighting by Daniel Tesař Janáček worked well allowing the atmosphere in each scene to dovetail into the action. In all this was a masterly staging by Jiří Heřman whose work impressed me on my last visit to Brno with his production of *Jacobin*. This production is another magnificent success for the Brno company and not only closes the 2024 Janáček Festival magnificently but also honours the centenary of the opera's premiere.

**Gregor Tassie**

#### **Dvořák: Rusalka** **Janáček Festival Brno**

The opera was first staged in Brno in December 1904 at the Theatre on Vevelí, and since which there have been eighteen productions in the city, this latest staging was premiered on 5 April 2024.

One was first drawn to the opening scene's association with Wagner's *Das Rheingold* by the three wood sprites and Dvořák's gloriously evocative scoring enhanced by the harps and verdant strings. As the curtain rose, the scene was of a great chamber, yet this looked onto the lake in the foreground in which the wood sprites frolicked in a manner familiar to the opening stage of *Der Ring*. The scene had three piers decorated by shrubbery and the windows of the house look outwards to the Prince's house. The singing of the wood sprites was beautiful, and the Vodník of Jan Štáva immediately arrested one with his deep bass voice and his commanding presence. A strange figure lurking in the widow was the spectre of Rusalka's alter ego figure looking inwards. Searching for a white doe, the Prince enters and on seeing the water nymph Rusalka – he falls in love with her. The Prince of Peter Berger has an excellent tenor voice and fine characterisation, and the Rusalka of Jana Šrejma Kačirková has a fine soprano – her 'Song to the Moon' was wonderfully evocative. The scene of Ježibaba giving the potion to Rusalka and her departure with the Prince was both innovative and disturbing.

In Act II, the walls of the house disappear, and we saw the tremendous depth of the stage open up to reveal the Prince's Castle in the far background while in the gardens – threateningly – the Prince's guests attired in uniformly black costumes and hats giving an ominous presence in the weirdly executed choreography of their dance. These self-important figures represent high society, and they listened to Rusalka and her lover, as





Rusalka

the Prince was making love behind the door. As the Foreign Princess tries to cast her spell over the Prince, tragedy develops for Rusalka as the Prince and the Foreign Princess become lovers and Rusalka is cast out.

After Rusalka has been scorned by the Prince, in Act III, following Ježibaba's offer of a knife to kill the Prince – and now appearing as a water nymph – Rusalka invites a kiss from the Prince, and he dies, leaving Rusalka distraught. Once again, Rusalka's alter ego appears in the window, closes the shutters and the opera ends.

I was most impressed by the Prince of Peter Berger whose lyrical tenor combined with his finely portrayed characterisation of a womaniser and rogue was superb. Of the female roles, the Ježibaba of Václava Krejčí Housková was magnificent – she is a great actress with a superb contralto, and in every scene evinced menacing peril. I was very impressed again by Eliška Gattringerová as the Foreign Princess – after her stunning characterisation of Kostelnicka in the Olomouc Opera's production of *Jenufa*, she revealed she is a flawless actress and a luxuriantly assured mezzo soprano. The Rusalka of Jana Šrejma Kacirková was excellent, and her 'Song to the Moon' was wonderful – her opulent softly toned soprano enriched this performance, and she was a superb actress throughout. The Vodník of Jan Štáva was excellent, his cavernous, almost stentorian bass was instantly impressive, and his portrayal of an over abusive and over sexed water goblin was masterful as if playing Alberich in Wagner's *Rheingold* as he attempts to cast his spell over the wood sprites. The three wood sprites were

magnificent in the singing, reminding one of Rhinemaidens, in the same tonality of Wagner's operas. Their playing with the Vodník and their dancing around the stage was well crafted. An additional feature of this staging was the alter ego figure of Rusalka who appeared in the windows of the house and who disappeared as Rusalka discovered her love in the Prince.

The staging was simple and very effective, especially in Act II where David Radok made full use of the huge spaces of the Janáček Theatre revealing a cavernous stage taken up by the chorus dancing and strutting as the Prince's guests. In this staging, Radok was inspired by the 2012 production by Lars-Ake Thessman at the Goteborg Operan. Last year here in Brno, Radok impressed me in his *Salome* – his gift is to allow the audience to appreciate the story telling of the opera without excessive decoration or staging. Zuzana Ježková's costumes were masterfully adapted to suit the wondrous fairy-tale scenes and suited the narrative with the most gorgeous being those for the Prince's guests with their black silk dresses and top hats giving an almost bleak and indeed threatening vision and added to the societal resentment of the young lovers. Most striking were Ježibaba's black dress adding to the evil temperament of the witch. The soft green colours given to the wood sprites and to Rusalka were appropriate to their characters and set off the contrasts between the guests and to society and reminded us that this a fairytale, in an almost dreamlike creation.

The choreography by Andrea Miltnerová added to this stunningly, with the

Prince's guests dressed in black, moving in swaggering fashion or dancing rather morbidly and scorning the young people, the movement on stage and also the attempt to hear the lovers ensconced behind the door was very effective. In all, this was a terrific production with excellent singing enhanced by magnificent orchestral playing, most notably the harps, and the woodwind group in bringing out all the glories of the score. This was masterly directed by Marco Ivanovi who brought out every hint of colour from Dvořák's writing.

This production could hardly be bettered, David Radok brings out all the intriguing symbolism of this fairy tale, introducing innovative elements which bring out sinister aspects of the people, and the dark figures of the characters, most of all the Foreign Princess, and that of Ježibaba. Most of all, this is a fairy tale which can be renewed through the ages and most certainly this production from Brno will remain memorable in the history of operas from the pen of Antonin Dvořák.

**Gregor Tassie**

## Jenufa

2024 Janáček Festival, Brno

At the heart of this new production is the plight of women in society, a theme displayed in a full-frontal projection with a backdrop showing multiple female genitalia before the opera started and was raised beforehand. The 'artwork' was based on the British artist Jamie McCartney's *The Great Wall of Vulva* which is intended to draw attention to the women who go through plastic surgery on their genitals, often because of the porn industry. This prepared us ominously for what was to come.

This production of *Jenufa* was not only an attempt to examine the origins of Janáček's music, but to examine the topic of motherhood from a contemporary perspective. The charitable organisation 'A Mother's Smile' collaborated in the opera's project, and the show involved non-professional performers who had suffered from pre-natal and post-natal depression. The programme told us that in the Czech Republic 'A Mother's Smile' is absolutely critical to women's mental health. During the ten years it has been in operation, it has managed to support thousands of mothers, but it still has a lot



of work ahead of it, and today's *Jenůfa* can help us with this.' According to the project leaders: 'We were interested in the personal life of Gabriela Preissova, who was completely crushed by the reaction to her drama [...]. And then we projected our own – maternal – destinies onto all of this to some extent.'

In Preissova's own words, 'the literary field was a sanctuary for me – where horror and lamentation, passion and crime are allowed in the poet's images – honest judgements of taste, principles, impressions – that is what I thought before. And now I know that if I set foot on that field, ugliness will crawl at my feet [...] I it has a little value, it will survive the years – otherwise, to hell with it.'

The director of *Jenůfa* Veronica Kos Loulová studied at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, and in 2015 founded the artistic group RUN OPERUN and has led numerous successful projects exploring new ideas in opera, and wrote the *Zabijáka* opera which was commissioned by the Czech government during the Czech Republic's presidency of the European Union. Since 2022, Loulová has been the director of the Moravian Theatre in Olomouc – the youngest opera director in Europe.

Loulová writes, '*Jenůfa* accompanied me from the first months of my pregnancy and the premiere is to take place when my child will be almost a year and a half old. The female collective of the production team gave me the opportunity of processing all the frustrations and joys and prioritising the experience lived by myself and other women, mothers, non-mothers,

daughters, victims... Raising this topic at an international festival as Janáček Brno fills me with immense satisfaction. The hope for our future, as a future that is empathetic and uplifting for the underprivileged, is fulfilling, and I know that culture is often the first thing to move things forward.'

Before the performance began, two ladies dressed in 19th century dress walked around the auditorium, and before the first bars, entered the stage disappearing into the rear – we were to see their contribution to the performance at the very end. At the opening of Act I, the action took place in the living room of a village house with a table and several chairs in the centre with a bed in the corner and windows overlooking the garden, with trees outside and above the house. The opening scene revealed Jen fa, Kostelnicka, Laca and two friends Karolka and Barena.

The setting of Act II was again of the home with rearranged furniture with Jen fa asleep in her bed, an off putting introduction into the central part of the act was a voice offstage heard through the loudspeakers relating the afflictions of women going through birth in a monotonous dictation which was disturbing. This ended and the music started again. The set of Act III again had the village home at its centre with a garden in front at the core of the action, and at the end, the women gather together embracing in sharing their tragic fates before the final terrible climax.

Of the principal singers, the finest singing and portrayal of the evening was the Kostelnicka of Eliška Gattringerová –

she has a strong and powerful soprano and embraced complete mastery of her tragic role. The Jenůfa of Barbora Perna was a little underwhelming in this challenging role, her soprano was a little weak in the high notes, yet she provided a strong portrayal of the title role. Josef Moravek's portrayal of Laca at times exhibited outstanding singing, especially in Act I, yet sometimes lacked projection, however his acting was exceptional. The finest male voice of the evening was the Števa of Raman Hasymau – a fine vibrant tenor and with excellent characterisation. The secondary roles were finely portrayed – but both Karolka and Barena had little to do or sing in this staging, this opera is mostly around the four main characters.

Irina Moscu's sets were simple in invoking the timescale of the late nineteenth century while the costumes were colourful with greens and browns to the fore in this country setting. The choreography was well enacted, and the cruelty of Jenůfa's tragedy was accentuated with Laca playing with items of ladies underwear in portraying Jen fa's tragic and oppressed state as he displayed them to the villagers. The folk dancing by the village folk seemed bizarre and appallingly caustic in the social stigma of Jenůfa's plight. In a departure from the text of the opera, at the finale, a child runs on stage embracing Jen fa and bewildering the audience.

The orchestra was of chamber size with about forty musicians, which did not always rise to the dramatic requirement of Janáček's score, lacking weight and dramatic power, yet was very skilfully directed by Anna Novotná Pešková in evincing the most expressive moments of the score.

The opera ended strangely after the tremendous orchestral conclusion, two ladies walked on stage accompanied by technicians who placed electronic keyboards and began singing a rock opera song. This completely spoiled the ending, and regrettably left one with an adverse opinion of this innovative staging. For this writer, Janáček's opera is one of the most terribly heart-breaking operas in which all the horror of societal oppression against women is openly expressed, for me this should be portrayed through the music and performance – not through peripheral means which can be thought to be stunts.

**Gregor Tassie**



## Smetana: *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*

Ostrava, Moravia

Following five years in Sweden – for his first opera – Bedřich Smetana was inspired to portray the history of the Czech aspiration for freedom and chose a libretto by Karel Sabina that describes a traumatic period in Czech history between 1278 and 1283. Sabina based his text loosely on the eponymous story by Josef Kajetán Tyl and Vaclav Tomek's *History of the City of Prague*. Smetana entered this opera for a competition under the motto: 'Music is the language of emotion; the word is the language of the idea.' Premiered in 1866, the opera won the competition two months later. For his first opera, the composer adopted the style of French grand opera with the chorus playing an important part in a plot set against a historical background and a love story. The background follows the factual circumstances of the death of Premysl Otakar II, after which the Kingdom of Bohemia fell under the rule of the Margrave of Brandenburg – Otto I, for a spell of five years. The tyrant Otto – regardless of family relations – imprisoned his nephew Prince Václav leaving his mercenaries to pillage the country.

The opera opens with a plea by the Bohemian knight Old ich to the Mayor of Prague to resist the German invaders, and warns of traitors nearby, yet Volfram shows reluctance to fight and seeks a peaceful resolution, but a young townsman Junoš declares that fighting has already broken out in the city, and the Brandenburgers have taken hostage the Queen and Crown Prince. Everyone rises up and take their swords into battle. Volfram's soldiers cry out in challenging the incursion, 'Slavnýá Praha', ('Glorious Prague!')

On Volfram's estate, Volfram's three daughters enter and are spied upon by a young German Jan Tausendmark who has been promised the hand of Ludiše by Volfram – but she rejects him. Tausendmark makes a deal with the Brandenburg Varneman to kidnap Ludiše and her sisters, Vlšenka and Decana. Now, in a Prague square – as the Brandenburgers loot the city – the poor rise up against the townspeople who support the Germans. The rebels make the former serf Jíra their king, and he leads a great chorus 'No more in poverty's plight. Now we triumph

in our fight!' In desperation, Ludiše pleads for help, Jíra disarms Tausendmark, yet the Brandenburgers capture her again and the scene closes with a dance portraying the struggle between the Brandenburgers and the townspeople of Prague. In an attempt to restore order, the Mayor of Prague Volfram arrives with his entourage and faces down the rebellion. Tausendmark – now entrusted by Volfram – falsely accuses Jíra of abducting the girls – and Volfram has Jíra arrested.

In Act II, the poor people of Prague flee from the Brandenburgers, in their plight, a patriarch utters a prayer, and the people are inspired by his singing, 'Holy God!' raising up a cross above in a chorus seeking salvation, but now in leaving the pillaging of Prague, the Brandenburg captain Varneman and his troops stops them. Now, in a total reversal of fortunes – Otto of Brandenburg has sent a messenger to declare the mercenaries must leave the city in three days. Back in the city, the Prague nobles condemn Jíra to death, and in his defence, Jíra accuses Tausendmark of using his position to befriend the German invaders. Tausendmark acts as prosecutor and the en-chained Jíra is taken away on a cart to face his punishment.

In Act III, intent on taking Ludiše, Tausendmark offers Varneman a ransom for the freedom of the Volfram's daughters, hoping that he can leave with the Brandenburgers, however Varneman resents the treacherous Tausendmark, and he stands by as the people rise up – and led now by the young citizen of Prague, Junoš – the people free Jíra and capture Tausendmark. Volfram thanks Jíra for

freeing his daughters, and in celebration of the victory of truth, justice and sovereignty of the Czech lands, the people rejoice.

It is easy to see why this opera is so rarely performed – firstly; there is the imbalance of the male and female voices with the domination by six male voices, contrasted by one leading female role in Ludiše. The libretto is also flawed with the extended original version of unwieldy length, compared to this condensed version in the second and third acts. There is also a sharp disparity in the first act between the uprising of the poor people of Prague against the wealthy townspeople who support the invaders, and the scene of prayer and the sacred chorus in the second act. However, a powerful feature of the opera is the marvellous choral singing for both male and female choirs and the mixed choir in emotionally moving scenes, firstly of nationalist fervour, later of revolutionary chants, and the sacred prayers, and finally the victorious liberation of the Czechs in the grand celebratory finale.

Jirí Nekvasil's staging (first seen in 2018) set the tone for the evening by opening impressively with Volfram's court surrounded by his soldiers, while above on a bridge, Old ich tells of the invasion of the mercenaries from Brandenburg. A very effective scene was that during the narration by Oldrich, the Brandenburgers in their helmets and armour entered the auditorium staring menacingly out at the audience. Throughout the performance, the bridge structure dominated above the stage – from which narrations were voiced – alternating with ballet dancing portraying



Photo: Jmartin Popelar Prodana Nevesta

the conflict between the people and the mercenaries.

Of the male characters, Roman Vikovic's Oldřich was a dramatically imposing baritone, while the Volfram of Michael Kube ka was a splendid darkly toned bass (he was always seated on his throne and wheeled in and off stage which seemed to impart his weakness against the invaders). Martin Bárta's villainous Tausendmark had an imposing stage presence – and for me – was the finest male singer of the evening with his vibrant, rich baritone and powerful characterisation. The tenor Petr Levček's portrayal of Varneman was outstanding with an important role throughout the show, and the poor people's anointed king – Jíra of Gianluca Zampieri played his part to the full in his vibrant tenor and moving portrayal. The Ludiše of Veronica Rovná was by far the finest female singer, she has a wonderful soprano, with great projection and a warm timbre able to portray all the

passion of her role. I was already impressed by her singing in *The Two Widows* earlier this year, and also by her portrayal in *The Kiss* which were featured in the Smetana Festival here in Ostrava last March. Her tremendous performance overshadowed her two sisters, Vělenka and Děčana – the soprano Anna Nitrová exhibited fine singing, as did the contralto Šárka Hrbáková – yet had little to show as Ludiše enjoyed the best of Smetana's vocal writing of the three sisters.

Zuzana Bambušek Krejzková's costume designs related to the period of the middle ages, and they differentiated between the Bohemian reds and blues against the grey and dark hued colours of the Brandenburgers. The sets and the backdrops by Petr Matásek posed a sleeping maiden and the fields of Bohemian countryside with simple designs for the Mayor's palace and the Prague square, and facilitating the opera's narrative. The choreography by Lea Bessoudo Greck and the movement

by Jana Tomsová enhanced the whole show with the mercenaries entering the auditorium making a connection with the audience, as did several of the singers to emphasise the incursion by the Brandenburgers, and this was added to by the dancing portraying the struggle of the people against the invaders.

This was an outstanding production (seen on December 5) revealing the early promise of Smetana as an opera composer and which was brought out fully by the brilliant orchestral performance directed by Jakub Klecker, showing Smetana's maturity as a composer, and by the terrific choruses and by the singing of the principal characters of Ludiše, Tausendmark, Varneman, Volfram, Jíra and Oldřich. This was a fine culmination to the Smetana anniversary year, and accentuated that Bedřich Smetana was a composer with the history and fate of the Czech nation close to his heart.

**Gregor Tassie**




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# Orchestral Reviews

Augustin Hadelich



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## A mixed bag LPO/Gardner/Hadelich

The concert by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edward Gardner at the Royal Festival Hall on February 26 featuring violin soloist Augustin Hadelich opened with a premiere by the English composer, David Sawer, best known, perhaps for his operas. The new work carried the title of *Sphinx* and is based on exploring the idea of the mythical Sphinx in its Greek rather than its Egyptian form. The programme note went into great detail on the story line and seemed to be as about transparent as the work itself. It is certainly fully scored with little respite for trying to understand the composer's intentions other than when he writes "this constantly evolving, morphing thing – which was what I wanted to write." It has some interesting paragraphs but it needs more performances for this critic to make sense of anything other than the merest of outlines.

After the dense scoring of *Sphinx* the Britten Violin Concerto is a model of orchestral clarity. This helps a lot in allowing the violinist to be heard and to shine forth. Particularly as the wonderful soloist was Augustin Hadelich, a performer of great accomplishment in all the works I have heard him in. His penetration of Britten's youthful but enormously enjoyable concerto was perfection in itself. He is truly one of the greats of this age on the concert platform.

I sometimes wish Edward Gardner

would offer his players a bit more latitude away from the conductor's beat, in this case the firm technique that Gardner always employs. If there is any work needing such treatment it must be the *Symphonie fantastique* by Hector Berlioz, which ended this rather curiously constructed concert. The first movement, in particular, requires a giving and taking of tempi to allow some breath into the mix of sounds. This performance was too constrained in its forbearance and lacked subtlety. The other movements were better in seeking the balance between control and orchestral freedom and the howl of applause greeting the final climax was to be expected and well deserved.

Edward Clark

## World premiere of Jay Capperault's *Bruckner's Skull* Easterbrook Hall, Dumfries

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra continues to champion the music of their associate composer Jay Capperault, in an exemplary way. A concert at Easterbrook Hall, Dumfries on 19 February, featured the premiere of a new work by him, with two further performances taking place in Edinburgh and Glasgow over the following couple of days.

To begin, Schubert's Symphony No.1 received a brisk and crisply stylish account. Preceded by a brief introduction of majestic, stalking octaves, the opening movement's main Allegro vivace was

fluent and carefully balanced. A reflective Andante was shaded with melancholy, while the rustic trio section of the Menuetto had a delightful, chamber-like intimacy, the orchestra's principal conductor Maxim Emelyanychev content to observe and appreciate rather than intercede and impose on this cherishable, confidential playing. The finale was exuberant and pacy, with woodwind and horn writing subtly highlighted.

Soloist Ivan Podyomov was an engaging soloist in Mozart's Oboe Concerto. In keeping with the Allegro first movement's outgoing, exuberant character and marking of *aperto* (or 'openly'), he played to the left and right sides of the room in turn, seeming to address each concertgoer personally and a devoted audience rightly rewarded him with rapt attention. The central Andante was shaped and shaded with the expressiveness of an operatic aria and the wit and warmth of the buoyant, concluding Rondo gave much pleasure.

After the interval came the first performance of Jay Capperault's *Bruckner's Skull*. Written as a death-mask homage to Anton Bruckner in the 200th anniversary year of his birth, the piece was inspired by the Austrian composer's morbid obsession with death and, specifically, the two occasions he is said to have cradled in reverence the skulls of both Beethoven and Schubert when their bodies were exhumed and moved to Vienna's Central Cemetery in 1888. *Bruckner's Skull* explores the composer's fixations and passions, distorting fragments of his music. Representing Bruckner's counting compulsion, or arithmomania, there is a fixation in the score on the number 14, with references to both Schubert (String quartet No.14 in D minor, *Death and the Maiden*) and Beethoven (Piano Sonata No.14, *Moonlight* and String Quartet no.14 in C sharp minor, Op.131).

The result was a strikingly inventive, dark-hued treat, with driving rhythmic patterns, majestic climaxes and shadowy gestures serving to create a feverish, eerie and, at other times noble, tender and sorrowing, landscape of the mind. Quotations were deftly incorporated into the vividly drawn narrative and Bruckner's spirit was cannily conveyed by the use of closely repeated rhythmic motifs, at one stage reminiscent of those in the composer's Eighth Symphony, for example. Jay Capperault frequently exploited the

orchestra's wide expressive range, from subtle wisps of sound on the edge of audibility to tumultuous tuttis of raw, elemental power. Players and conductor clearly savoured the score's richly varied sonorities and bold, dramatic gestures, delivering a highly polished and assured interpretation.

To round off their programme, the SCO gave an exhilarating reading of Beethoven's Symphony No.1. The outer movements' main sections crackled with energy, the Andante offered elegance and dry wit and the third movement, a scherzo in all but name, was dynamic and playful. Scheduling the symphonic debuts of the two composers referenced in Jay Capperault's new piece was a satisfying stroke in a first-class concert that provided a thoughtful context for an immensely enjoyable new work.

**Paul Conway**

### World premieres by Susannah Self

In the inspiring surroundings of Ely Cathedral's Lady Chapel, the combined forces of Ely Collegium and the North Sea Voices and Orchestra opened their evening concert on April 13 with the world premiere of Susannah Self's *Stabat Mater*. This fluent setting of the 13th-century Latin hymn incorporated verses from another medieval text, Planctus ante nescia, and was scored for soprano and alto soloists, mixed chorus and a small orchestra consisting of oboe, trumpet, strings and organ. The instrumentation



Photo: www.gsmd.ac.uk

was designed to complement the forces required for Vivaldi's *Gloria*, also on the programme.

Lasting around 45 minutes, the *Stabat Mater* was conceived on a substantial scale and benefitted greatly from a clear and cogent formal structure. The thirteen sections were variously scored, with the vibrant sixth movement providing an emotionally climactic point at the heart of the piece and the opening and closing movements drawing upon the same, instantly memorable material. With eloquent solos for violin and cello, as well as oboe and trumpet, the instrumental writing was as expressive and complementary to the text as the music for voices. Soprano Elizabeth Willmot and alto Kate Arnold brought interpretative flair to their key, and occasionally floridly melismatic, solo contributions, which ranged

from serene and radiant to resolute and energetic. Arresting though some of the individual sections were, it was the cumulative effect of the score as a wonderfully cohesive whole which made a lasting impression. The composer's supportive and encouraging conducting ensured her musical intentions were effectively realised by the performers and her ability to keep the narrative flowing resulted in a fresh and inspiring account of her new score. I do hope there will be a recording of this intensely personal treatment of the *Stabat Mater* in due course, as its directness, sincerity of purpose and generosity of spirit would elicit a warm response from the widest of audiences.

After the interval we heard the first performance of another piece by Susannah Self. *Dare* was a short, concertante-

### An Alpine Symphony LPO/Gardner

The London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, London on February 21 was conducted by Edward Gardner, but the original piano soloist, Alexandra Dovgan had to withdraw due to visa difficulties. She was replaced by Steven Osborne.

The concert opened with a European premiere, *Pasajesd* by the orchestra's *Composer-in-Residence*, Tania Leó. This was written in 2022 and is in four sections, each section recalling scenes of the environment where the composer grew up. The whole work seemed to be

a pean for nature, allowing episodes to describe sounds from the Caribbean habitats. There were no melodies as such but rather bird calls and recalls of events she remembers from her early upbringing. The result was a continuing flowering of nature calls among the various instruments of a large orchestra. It was invigorating and well put together.

Edvard Grieg's famous Piano Concerto was in Steven Osborne's safe hands, a seasoned pianist who always gives satisfaction if not revelations in his playing.

*An Alpine Symphony* needed a capacity arena to accept all the many instruments Richard Strauss needs to express the experiences and impressions of a

group of people climbing among the mountains. All the necessary events were portrayed resulting in a mammoth, sumptuous musical travelogue.

Gardner seemed to have no difficulty in keeping everyone safe on the path, with occasional wanderings allowed. The huge ensemble sounded in brilliant form, each section complying with Gardner's guidance. My memories are not of a vast sound or a gathering up of instruments, rather those moments when all was quiet except for solos from bassoon, flute and oboe. Everyone to their needs be and the whole enterprise was warmly received by the capacity audience.

**Edward Clark**





Benjamin Grosvenor

like score for oboe, horn and trumpet and string orchestra, inspired by the idea of risk-taking in order to achieve goals. The wind players were rewarded with wide-ranging lines, in which intricate solo passages lay adjacent to trenchant unison statements with the strings. Conducted by Saba Safa, who is also a violinist in the North Sea Orchestra, the performance was graced by considerable good humour and conviviality, entirely appropriate in a work written for the composer's friends and colleagues.

Susanna Self then took up the baton again for a rousing, ideally paced reading of Vivaldi's Gloria in D major, RV 589. Soprano Alexandra Nicole and alto Tamsin Jones, Ely Collegium and the North Sea Voices and Orchestra all gave of their best

in a well-prepared, carefully structured interpretation that raised the spirits in the more extrovert numbers, yet also generated emotional intensity in more intimate sections. Making a satisfying counterpoise to the stirring immediacy of Susannah Self's contemporary setting of the Latin hymn to the Virgin Mary, Vivaldi's uplifting music brought to a joyous close an evening of exceptional music-making in East Cambridgeshire.

**Paul Conway**

#### **LPO/Andrey Boreyko/ Benjamin Grosvenor**

The concert by the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Festival

Hall on January 29 was book-ended by two tour concerts, first at Nottingham, then London and finally Bristol. The original conductor, Karina Canellakis, was indisposed and was replaced by Andrey Boreyko. There was also a change in the programme. For the London concert the planned *Lemminkäinen Suite* by Sibelius had to be replaced due to the change of conductor. Instead Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony was performed.

Despite the programme change, Sibelius was performed with his *En Saga*, which opened the concert. Boreyko gave an exceptionally fluent performance, entering the mysterious Nordic landscape devoid of any human habitation. We heard the usual revised version (Sibelius's wife preferred the original) in which Sibelius softened the contours of the orchestration but retained the amazing originality of sound. The orchestra caught the elemental atmosphere with some wonderful soft playing along with the more trenchant episodes.

Benjamin Grosvenor was the soloist in Mozart's famous Piano Concerto No 21, K 467, immortalised by its association with the film, *Elvira Madigan*. He gave a beautifully crafted performance, combining the fluidity in the outer movements with the beauty we heard in the *Andante* middle movement.

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony received a heart-warming performance under Boreyko's dynamic baton. He recognised the disparity between the four move-

#### **LPO/Lozakovich/Sokhiev**

This concert was confirmation of how popular certain works have become after two generations of neglect. It was given by the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Tugan Sokhiev, at the Royal Festival Hall, on February 20. To begin came a fine performance by the young virtuoso, Daniel Lozakovich, whose prowess was put to good use in Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto. Like a number of 20th-century violin concertos this received an early recording by Heifetz which put the work on the musical map. It has never really left it but it seems to be played quite a lot, perhaps to the detriment of its precursor.

The Second Concerto tests the stamina of the player in the many repetitions

in the solo part in the first and third movements but the middle movement has a gorgeous tune, once heard never forgotten. It was played with a delightful, lyrical poise by Lozakovich who entertained everyone with his encore, the Sonata No. 3 for Violin Solo by Eugene Ysaÿe. This has appeared a number of times recently as an encore and this one was up with the very best.

The concert ended with a splendid performance, under Sokhiev's keen eye for detail, of Rachmaninoff's very romantic Second Symphony. Those with long memories may recall the paucity of recordings of this work a generation ago. The only one I can recall was by the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra under Alfred Wallenstein. Today we are blessed with many fine renditions both on record and

in the concert hall. I think I can say, in recent times, none other than this one. It simply glowed from the outset, with time taken to produce a most affectionate introduction on the strings. Each movement received Sokhiev's careful attention to the many counter melodies, often heard in the violas. The clarinet solo that opens the slow movement was played by Mark van de Wiel with such a sense of gentle sorrow that it bought tears to my eyes. This touching moment was one of many that other orchestral members bought to our attention of Rachmaninoff's superb orchestration.

The exciting finale was a fitting conclusion to this wonderful work, now firmly in the hearts of millions of concertgoers around the world.

**Edward Clark**



Johann Matthias Sperger

ments so that the composer's different moods were clearly heard. It was an exhilarating experience, one that left the audience in a high state of excitement at the end.

Edward Clark

### The Hanover Band at Kings Place

Leon Bosch

In one of the always fascinating concerts presented by The London Chamber Music Society there were two points of especial interest to musical watchdogs at this Kings Place concert with the Hanover Band on February 23. Firstly, for the musical detectives of this world, there was a little if not unknown name amongst the composers on the programme: that of Johann Mathias Sperger. Secondly, for those ever on the lookout for a well-known name in an unusual place, there was the familiar figure of the great Bass player Leon Bosch, not playing his Gagliano double bass but on the podium.

Sperger was a prolific Austrian composer and bass player, attached to the Hofkapellen of Pressburg, who wrote over forty symphonies as well as concerti and sonatas in the latter half of the 18th century and start of the 19th. Somehow his works fell from favour and though occasionally emerging into the concert hall they have never quite established themselves in the orchestral repertoire. But Bosch makes a very good case for him, somewhere between Haydn and Mozart, encouraging his pupils at Trinity Laban to perform his works for the bass, and hoping to be able to record at least a selection of some of the other concerti.

Bosch, for many years Principal Bass of

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields was urged on when he relinquished his post there after nearly 20 years, to take to conducting by his mentor Sir Neville Marriner. Like many eminent predecessors moving from playing to conducting such as the former cellist Sir John Barbirolli or the timpanist Sir Simon Rattle he proves a natural, assimilating something of the style and eloquence of Sir Neville but establishing very much his own buoyancy and grace, knowing when to let a lyrical line speak for itself and when to move along at a faster pace.

Forgoing a baton, Bosch's expressive hands gave clear directions to the ensemble and elicited some fine playing from the Hanover Band responding with their accustomed panache in a programme appropriately bookending Haydn and Mozart along with Sperger and Cimarosa.

The evening opened with Haydn's Symphony No 22, nicknamed – though probably not by the composer – *The Philosopher*, possibly for its *Adagio* opening. Dating from his Esterhazy years, the name fits the opening with its counterpoint between the horns and the cor anglais better than the *Presto* finale, but conductor and ensemble conveyed well the subtle nuances as well as the contemplative mood of the Symphony.

Following the Haydn came the Sperger Cello Concerto with Sebastian Combetti, formerly Principal Cello of the London Mozart players as soloist, bringing all his well-known sensitivity and virtuosity to this concerto, giving a performance that well earns the concerto a place in the repertoire and leaves one anxious to hear more of his mostly unperformed concerti.

After the interval oboist Geoff Coates brought a lightness of touch to Arthur

Benjamin's attractive arrangement of Cimarosa's Oboe Concerto, which he initially made for Evelyn Barbirolli. The soloist immediately endeared us to his playing with the appealing opening *Larghetto* before taking us with him into the *Allegro* with its references to Italian opera. The third movement, a *Siciliano* has a beautiful solo line which in Coates hands soars over the orchestra's dotted rhythm. An *Allegro Giusto* brought the concerto to an exuberant and heart-warming end.

The concert ended with Mozart's Symphony No 29 written when the composer was only eighteen, displaying the influence of Papa Haydn, making an appropriate end to this excellent concert referencing us back to the start of the evening and Haydn's *Philosopher*.

Alan Barton

### Scottish premiere of James MacMillan's Concerto for Orchestra, 'Ghosts'

In a highlight of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra's current season, Sir James MacMillan curated a concert at City Halls, Glasgow on February 20 featuring the Scottish premiere of his recent Concerto for Orchestra, *Ghosts*, together with works by six composers, five of them hailing from his home country of Ayrshire, whom he championed, through commissions and mentoring, in his own Cumnock Tryst festival. Sir James directed the orchestra in all nine featured works, showing an affinity with the impressively diverse music he had programmed.

First up was the UK premiere of *Solos and Tutti* by the Yorkshire-born, Copenhagen-based composer Matthew Grouse. Originally commissioned in 2020 and postponed due to the pandemic, the work was recast to include evocations of the sort of content that appeared online during lockdown from individual players and electronically combined ensembles. The composer adopted a playful attitude to these experimental dialogues, including in his droll piece suggestions of such technological frailties as buffering, glitching, and unwanted room noise. The score is subtitled 'a vestige of an unheard season', referring to cancelled concert repertoire of that period and, among sporadic full-orchestral chords and instrumental gestures, there were fragments in the music of such mainstream



staples as Robert Schumann's *Spring* Symphony and Mendelssohn's *Scottish* Symphony. The most memorable of these allusions was a passage from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, fixated upon by various solo cellos in turn, at first tentatively and insubstantially, and then gradually more insistently, as if performing in fierce competition with their fellow section players. Fanciful, waggish and disorientating, *Solos and Tutti* made a quirkily entertaining curtain-raiser that mined pawky humour from imperfect attempts at music-making during the stay-at-home orders and the ensuing piecemeal return to live concert appearances. James MacMillan and the BBCSO presented the constantly shifting, mosaic-like material with wit and warmth.

*Visions of the A-Frame* (2023) by Michael Murray was a deeply felt, sorrowful meditation on Ayrshire's mining past. Taking as a starting point the Barony A-Frame monument to four miners who were killed in a shaft collapse at the Barony Colliery in 1962, the music reflects on the loss of an industry that once shaped the landscape and contemplates the future of the Ayrshire community. With impressions of roiling machinery and subterranean sonorities, this short piece had a powerful sense of place, encapsulating the history, symbolism and reson-



Sir James MacMillan

ances of the preserved pithead structure, near the composer's home village of Auchinleck. Deep-rooted and resolute, *Visions of the A-Frame* acted as a rapt, sincere foil to Matthew Grouse's mischievous concert-opener. It was performed with care and palpable understanding.

There followed two evocative, nature-inspired tone poems by Electra Perivolaris. *A Wave Breaking* (2022) followed the progress of a breaker from sea to shore. The score was influenced by Scottish/Algerian poet Janette Ayachi's *Sea-Rattle*, in which the sea approaches and engulfs a Glaswegian tenement flat. The sea is a

constant source of inspiration for the composer and there was a strong sense of her vividly etched soundscape offering listeners a precious glimpse into something eternal and limitless. After an unsettled opening section, with evocative solo writing for cor anglais, solo viola and violin, edgy and increasingly dynamic episodes led to an unerringly placed climax, a genuine point of arrival. In a tranquil, lilting conclusion, the music suggested the wave flattened out on the beach.

*A Forest Reawakens* (2022) conveyed the indomitable persistence of nature, exemplified by the natural regeneration of

## Two Nordic Rarities RPO/Shiyeon Sung/Johan Dalene

This enterprising concert was given by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Shiyeon Sung, at Cadogan Hall, London, on February 27; the violin soloist was Johan Dalene.

Fans of Sibelius and Nielsen were heartened to hear two less-well works by the two Nordic giants. *Nightride and Sunrise* is a mature tone poem, dating from 1909. As befits its title it is one of the Finnish master's most literal orchestral works. In broadly two sections there could be no doubt about the opening tempo of the night ride gallop, here taken with a fast pulse to set the scene of, to quote Sibelius, "the inner experiences of an average man riding solitary through the forest gloom". In fact, the work is a fascinating example of Sibelius's orchestral abilities in keeping

our attention by constantly varying the string orchestration and sonority of the music. The second section gradually heralds a Nordic sunrise that eventually bursts forth with a great eloquence. Shiyeon Sung held all the different components together, allowing the musicians to dig deep and show how to weld a work of different parts into a compelling whole.

The second rarity was the Second Symphony by Carl Nielsen, composed in 1901-2. It was given the title *The Four Temperaments* by the composer, and he later, in 1931 wrote an extensive explanation of each movement of the human meaning behind each one. It is almost completely hidden from view today, as the three middle symphonies that followed have eclipsed it in popularity. So it was a wonderful opportunity to make this invigorating work's acquaintance. Shiyeon Sung opened the flood gates of sound at the beginning in a most

delightful way, driving the music forward. Thereafter each movement expanded the meaning of each human temperament in a variety of ways. The finale shot out of the traps to lead to a final march, played with such enthusiasm by the orchestra that it surely claims many future performances.

To calm the nerves of concert goers who find difficulty in attending concerts with too many little known works, the middle work was the tried and tested Violin Concerto by Tchaikovsky. It was well played by the orchestra's artist-in-residence, Johan Dalene. He has a firm tone and it carries well in this concert hall. His interpretation contained many features that kept our attention, right through to the exciting conclusion. The audience loved it and the little encore ended this enterprising concert in a dignified and soulful way.

Edward Clark

forest areas surrounding the composer's home on the Isle of Arran. Gaelic Psalm-singing influenced the music, with exposed, single melodic lines followed by embellished, communal responses. A desolate first section featuring etiolated violin lines grew with stirring inevitability to a dignified, resounding conclusion charged by a primordial brass refrain, representing the breaking of dawn on an awe-inspiring expanse of trees. Vibrantly coloured and lucidly structured, both pieces showed Electra Perivolaris to be a natural symphonic thinker. Players and conductor seemed to relish these evocative, often lyrical scores, which were enthusiastically received by the audience.

Next came the Scottish premiere of Jay Capperault's *Inertia of a Bona Fide Psychopath* (2014), which explored the logic and non-logic of human interactions and was specifically concerned with the social discomfort in the urge to snicker when giving or receiving bad news. In this gloriously anarchic score, majestic, elegant wind chorales were constantly disrupted by increasingly unruly and frenetic, amplified harpsichord outbursts, supported surreptitiously, in due course, by various instrumental allies. Deftly balancing pastiche and traditional elements, Jay Capperault's unorthodox concertante work offered moments of graceful lyricism, feverish intensity and sheer mayhem. James MacMillan and the BBCSSO players were alert to every sudden shift in mood, ensuring the music's staid passages were equable and stately, while the more raucously satirical aspects had energy and bite.

Concluding the concert's first half was the world premiere performance of Scott Lygate's *Engines and Men* (Concerto for contrabass clarinet and orchestra) dating from 2024, in which the Ayrshire-born composer was the nimble and expressive soloist. In a link to Michael Murray's piece, the single-movement concerto evoked Scotland's post-industrial landscape, this time in the form of the abandoned Dalmellington Ironworks situated at the core of Ayrshire's Doon Valley. A direct link to the place was ensured with materials borrowed from the site used, to powerful, and occasionally tintinnabulatory, effect, in the percussion section. Though large and unwieldy, the solo instrument has an unexpectedly wide expressive range that Scott Lygate exploited throughout the piece, finding a songlike, melodic quality in the upper register amid the more predi-

Gillian Walker



Photo: gillianwalkercomposer.com

cably resonant, subterranean-sounding, deep tones. In a dramatic, sometimes jazzy score, the articulate, often virtuosic soloist was accompanied receptively and with flexibility.

After the interval came a pair of short, strongly characterised pieces by Ayrshire-born composer Gillian Walker which celebrated the power of folk music to foster identity and a sense of belonging to a community. *Saat i de Blöd* (2022), which translates to 'Salt in the Blood' from the Shetland dialect, was inspired by Roseanne Watt's poem of the same name. The work is concerned with dialect words and sounds which have been lost through lack of use. Half-remembered, ethereal sounds located at the beginning and end of the work were contrasted effectively with vibrantly colourful, sweeping, melodic passages elsewhere in the score. *Saat i de Blöd* had an important role for timpani, regularly struck with soft and hard mallets, which established a regular pattern, like a vital heartbeat, sustaining life, and with it, language and culture. This thoughtful and haunting piece was carefully, and persuasively, shaped and balanced by James MacMillan.

Gillian Walker's second piece, *Jean Redpath's Skippin' Barfit Thro' the Heather* (2023) was inspired by singer Jean Redpath's 1962 LP recording of a traditional Scottish folk song. Cast in five verses, separated by silences, the piece presented five varied aspects of the tune and chords derived from it, as if the music was being learned, recalled and passed down from one instrumental group to another. The players were asked to hum the theme as well as play it, resulting in a gentle, murmuration like a hazy aura which the tune emerged from and faded

back into. Deeply affecting and texturally enterprising, this gentle meditation on a folk song recording cast a spell over the auditorium. It was interpreted with sensitivity and imagination.

Before the last scheduled item, James MacMillan was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Philharmonic Society. This adventurous, creatively programmed concert provided an ideal setting for such a well-deserved honour.

The last work to be performed was the Concerto for Orchestra, 'Ghosts', by Sir James MacMillan, receiving its Scottish premiere. The subtitle refers to other, earlier musical spirits that inhabit this single-movement piece, from allusions to dance forms (folk and electronic), Eastern European hymnody and Scottish traditional music, as well as references to Beethoven's *Ghost* Trio and Debussy's Trio for flute, viola and harp. Such avid eclecticism suggested some kinship to the preceding works by Matthew Grouse and Jay Capperault and, especially, to Gillian Walker's second piece, pervaded by the spirit of Jean Redpath's recording. In MacMillan's Concerto, the unique aspects of traditional and non-traditional genres were savoured and celebrated, nowhere more so than in delirious, unbuttoned evocations of electronic dance music juxtaposed repeatedly with a chant for brass sextet in the second half of the piece. Solos, duets (notably piccolo and tuba and, later, flute and muted trumpet), trios (including for three bassoons), music for string quartet and various other chamber groupings were subtly incorporated and impressively rendered by the BBCSSO players. As might be anticipated by the work's 'concerto for orchestra' designation, each instrumental section had several



opportunities to shine. The writing for celesta and harp was effective throughout and the closing *Larghetto* section, in which a hymnic theme that has permeated the score achieves a quiet apotheosis, was serenely beautiful and startlingly poignant, as if we were being transported to a kind of celestial resting place to join the preceding spirits and memories. This richly hued, well-proportioned and instantly communicative score provided a fittingly climactic conclusion to a memorable concert of considerable range and distinction.

**Paul Conway**

### **Moments Remembered** **LPO/Gardner/Isabelle Faust**

The programme by the London Philharmonic Orchestra on January 15 heralded a new concert series; the conductor was Edward Gardner and the violin soloist was Isabelle Faust. An essay by Jeremy Eichler under the heading, *Moments Remembered* attempted to try and link three, very contrasting works under the question, "Is music the ultimate medium of memory?"

Gardner began with a vote of confidence in his string section with *Metamorphosen* for 23 strings by Richard Strauss. This is a late work of a poignant reminiscence for past German glories. At the time of its composition, 1944-45 Germany was in ruins and the proud composer structured a solemn and entirely authentic work that, under Gardner's baton-less hands gave much pause for thought. His confidence was well rewarded with wonderful string sonorities that burned into our souls.

Talking of which, Alban Berg's late Violin Concerto was also concerned with un-earthly matters. The composer inscribed the score with "To the Memory of an Angel", referring to the death of Manon Gropius, the 18-year-old daughter of Alma Mahler and Walter Gropius.

Isabelle Faust gave much aforethought in her command of the many felicities Berg includes in the score. But Berg's orchestra simply overwhelms the soloist when he releases the orchestra in full cry. (A recording can counter this imbalance with discreet balancing). However most of the work received a compelling and thoughtful performance from Faust. Gardner kept his louder sections in control so as to minimise the imbalances mentioned earlier.

His approach to Brahms' Second Symphony coupled a wistful grace in the many glorious themes with an exciting degree of energy. Late in life, Sir Thomas Beecham recalled his early studies of Brahms' symphonies and confirmed his view that "Brahms was essentially a romantic composer, as far removed as conceivable from the true classical spirit." Gardner's fine performance, aided by his alert players, seemed to agree.

**Edward Clark**

### **BBC Proms** **Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham**

Part of a weekend of events marking the first ever visit to Nottingham by the BBC Proms, an engaging and high-spirited concert was given on September 8 by the BBC Concert Orchestra with their chief conductor, Anna-Maria Helsing at the city's Royal Concert Hall. A diverse bill of fare featured local history and legend.

The overture, *The Men of Sherwood Forest* got proceedings underway in style. This music, which originally opened the 1954 Hammer film of the same title, was composed by Doreen Carwithen and later arranged for concert performance by Philip Lane. A brightly hued introduction to the daring-do, romance and merry-making of the folkloric tale of outlaw Robin Hood, the vibrant score wore its faux-medievalism lightly and with good humour. The BBC players and Anna-Maria Helsing underlined the music's charm and sense of spectacle in their energetic, free-

flowing rendition.

There followed the world premiere of Elizabeth Kelly's *Lace Machine Music* (2024), a BBC Proms commission. The American-British composer, who grew up in Los Angeles, currently lives on the edge of the historic Lace Market area in the centre of Nottingham and her piece explores aspects of that trade's history. She was especially inspired by the sound of lace-making factory machines, which were evoked by mechanical, repeated figures in the percussion. The intricacy of lace making was mirrored by a trombone motif that gradually twisted its way up the orchestra and transformed into a sinuous waltz for harp and strings near the end, before the spirit of the implacable lace machinery was finally laid to rest. Framing the score were bell sounds, marking both the ringing of brass bells to signify the completion of a rack of lace and the sounding of the sonorous 'Little John' brass bell that chimes the hours from Nottingham Council House. *Lace Machine Music* was an instantly communicative piece that integrated various descriptive elements cogently and with sensitivity. A fine balance was struck between the recurring metrical patterns and the lyrical aspect of the writing, heard at its most sophisticated in the serpentine counterpoint of the waltz episode. This thoughtful crowd-pleaser was deservedly well received by the capacity audience.

The solo pianist in Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (1934) was Clare Hammond, who grew up in Nottingham. Noted for her refine-

*Elizabeth Kelly*



Photo: elizabethkelly.com

ment and virtuosity, she brought considerable panache and expressive sweep to the piece. Every section was sharply characterised in a fluently unfolding narrative that struck an ideal balance between playfulness and elegance. Bravura passages were delivered effortlessly, but brilliance for its own sake was never part of this consummate performer's considered and imaginative approach to the music. Anna-Maria Helsing and the BBC Concert Orchestra provided keenly responsive support, ensuring this beloved mainstay of the repertoire sounded fresh and compelling.

There was a delightful, brief encore from the soloist in the form of Cécile Chaminade's Etude Op.35 No.5, Impromptu. Clare Hammond was alert to every shift in mood and shade of colour in this delectably mercurial miniature.

After the interval came Korngold's suite of music from his film score for the 1938 Hollywood epic, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. The performers embraced the work's almost operatic sense of drama and characterisation, tender and warmly romantic in the 'Love Scene' and, by turns, thrilling, noble and heroic in the concluding 'Fight, Victory and Epilogue'.

To close, Sibelius's Third Symphony of 1907 received an affectionately played, vividly detailed account that afforded equal importance to the music's formal logic and its painterly, folk-like aspects. Conductor Anna-Maria Helsing studied at Helsinki's Sibelius Academy and her deep admiration for this score was evident throughout. Classical restraint was satis-



Tomáš Brauner

Photo: elizabethakelly.com

fyingly offset by intense expressivity and atmospheric mood-painting. After Korngold's technicolour outpouring, this cool, finely concentrated Finnish soundscape was a bracingly direct way to round off a rewardingly varied programme.

**Paul Conway**

### **Treats galore/Prague Symphony Orchestra/Tomáš Brauner/ Gabriela Montero**

The Zurich International Orchestra Series allows London audiences to experience music from visiting orchestras' homelands, often played in ways that surprise in the nature of the sound as well

as the interpretations. This welcome visit by the Prague Symphony Orchestra was given at the Cadogan Hall, London on Wednesday February 12. The conductor, Tomáš Brauner, is the Chief Conductor of the orchestra and the soloist in Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto was Gabriela Montero.

As well as offering Dvorák's most famous symphony, No.9, *From the New World* the audience had the delight of hearing the opening work by the same composer, *The Noon-Day Witch*, a far less familiar offering to London audiences. This a mature symphonic poem, one in a set of four all based on the ballades of the Czech author Karel Jaromír Erben. It was written on Dvorák's return from America

### **Symphonic Dances: LPO/ Juraj Valčuha/Boris Giltburg**

The Russian programme by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Juraj Valčuha at the Royal Festival Hall on February 19 featured piano soloist Boris Giltburg. The opening work was the Concert Waltz No.1 by Alexander Glazunov, one of the most gracious examples of taking a musical form and producing a work to delight our senses. The guest conductor, Juraj Valčuha, achieved an eloquent account from his orchestra. It was written in the hey-day of balletic waltzes that tickled the fancy in 1893 and which eventually led to the destruction of the waltz as an art from

with Ravel's coruscating, somewhat nihilist response soon after World War I.

Approaching yet another crowd-pleasing performance of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto often fails to summon up the blood, but not here. Boris Giltburg gave an account of such sublime perfection that I wondered if I, or anybody else in the audience had ever heard this work before. It is difficult to capture how this was achieved except to say how Giltburg reinvented the music before our ears. It possessed a mastery of execution that spun fantasies of sound and technique in the most amazing way. I doubt, after sixty or so years of hearing this work (like many teenagers, it was this work that introduced me to classical music) I will

hear another account that was so spell-binding, so utterly plausible. Valčuha's accompaniment galvanised the orchestra to a notable sense of excellence.

Valčuha opened the second half of this rewarding concert with Rachmaninoff's last orchestral work, written in America for the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy, which must always put everyone today on their toes. The result was another superb account of what is now a familiar romantic outing for audiences. It was an energetic and gorgeously framed performance which allowed the orchestra to relish the many episodes needing individual flair and execution.

**Edward Clark**



and offers a programmatic portrayal of the story on which the work is based. It gave great delight in its effusion of music wedded to the plot and often drawing on influences from the composer's *Slavonic Dances*. It was played with heart-warming enthusiasm under the experienced baton of Brauner.

Gabriela Montero followed with playing of tremendous intensity in Prokofiev's familiar Third Piano Concerto, the favourite of audiences out of the five he wrote. Not only did she woo the audience with an abundance of her pianistic skills, she gave, as her encore, a delightful surprise not known to me in 60 years of concert going! She asked members of the audience to sing or hum a tune which she would embellish on. One brave soul volunteered *Greensleeves* which received the response, "Oh do you mean this tune?" tapping out the melody on the piano. This gave her the opportunity to display not only her pianistic skills but also her compositional ones too. There followed five minutes of an extemporisation on *Greensleeves* that drew a thunderous response from the audience at the end. This is one musician to remember with great fondness!

Dvorák's famous Ninth Symphony, *From the New World* ended this fascinating concert with playing of true insights into the composer's gifts for melodies arising from both his homeland and, as is well known, those from America, of which the latter were described by Dvorák as being "pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will". This performance seemed the personification of these words and Brauner brought out so many felicities that this critic forgot the cares of the world and submitted to the glorious music that so entranced Brahms, who wrote "It is so unspeakably gifted, so healthy, that one must rejoice in it". The *Slavonic Dance* encore was clapped to the echo.

Edward Clark

### **RNCM International Brass Band Festival** **Royal Northern College of Music**

At the heart of the three-day International Brass Band Festival held at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, two major concerts held during the afternoon and evening of January



Edward Gregson

Photo: edwardgregson.com

25 exhibited this annual event's hallmarks of adventurous programming and first-rate musicianship. This year's repertoire included tributes to the late Elgar Howarth and a conspectus of the music of Edward Gregson to mark the composer's 80th birthday year.

In a mid-afternoon recital in the RNCM Concert Hall, Tredegar Town Band, conducted by Ian Porthouse, offered a bold and wide-ranging bill of fare that began with Judith Bingham's *Prague* (1991), a vividly programmatic piece of symphonic proportions that marks the titular city's turbulent history and celebrates its resilience, as well as being influenced by legends of the Golem. The musicians caught the work's tumultuous, disruptive elements, driving home its ritualistic, motivic iterations, while at the same time unfolding a coherent, sharply characterised narrative.

Soloist Ben Goldscheider joined the players in Edward Gregson's French Horn Concerto (1971). In the wonderfully assured opening movement, the music's symphonic heft did not preclude a secondary idea of lyrical beauty and the performers were keenly alert to both aspects of the writing. The melodic flow of the warmly hypnotic, central slow movement was interrupted midway by a series of spectral cadenzas, an ear-catching moment, imaginatively fashioned. A crisply rhythmical rondo finale rounded off the work with ebullient good humour. Throughout, Ben Goldscheider combined bravura technique with an acute sensitivity to the music's expressive qualities. Conductor Ian Porthouse maintained a lively tempo in the outer movements and allowed the Andante cantabile to flow naturally. This was a superb

rendering of a gem of the repertoire.

Next came a brief and welcome tribute to Elgar Howarth in the form of his short, reflective piece, *The American Dream*. The players captured the music's sumptuously melodic, intoxicating blend of Hollywood opulence, flecked with Copland-esque, open-air vistas.

Inspired by Robert Frost's poem, Philip Sparke's *A Road Less Travelled By* was a musical evocation of a composer's journey, valuing the path over the destination. A lively, bustling moto perpetuo was followed, without a break, by a languidly atmospheric nocturne, laced with eloquent solos and ensemble passages. A driving scherzo-finale brought the music to a rousing conclusion. Tailor-made for the players' individual and collective musicianship, this compact, directly communicative work offered much to engage heart and head.

Finally, the players gave the world premiere of Ed de Boer's *Homage to Julian Assange* (2024), a substantial, twenty-minute sequence of eleven short, interlaced movements in the form of a theme and variations, each highlighting a facet of controversial activist Assange's life and work, including his whistleblowing website WikiLeaks and years of solitary confinement. The music culminated in a grand fugue, signifying release and freedom. A recurring motif was derived from the letters of the dedicatee's name. Containing allusions to folksong, national anthems and featuring a xylosynth in the percussion section, the music had wit and verve as well as seriousness of intent. This intricate, thoughtfully written score received a polished and confident first performance, providing a weighty conclus-

ion to a satisfying concert of substance.

The evening concert in the RNCM Concert Hall by Black Dyke Band showed a characteristically adventurous approach to repertoire. Each of the featured works was presented to the highest technical standards, with considerable interpretative flair.

Jacob Larsen's brilliant *Ad Astra* ('To the stars') made an impressive curtain-raiser. The spirited outer sections were delivered at white heart, while the hushed, awe-struck central episode featured elegantly shaped flugelhorn and cornet solos.

There followed a first performance of Philip Wilby's *Astralis*, in a version with accompanying film containing images taken by the James Webb Space Telescope, launched on 25 December 2021. With titles such as *Black Hole* and *Nebula*, the five movements, were evocative and atmospheric, with compelling, visionary climaxes. Especially memorable was the song-like, unaccompanied flugelhorn solo that began solemn second movement, *Deep Field*. In this recent work, the composer's evident command of the medium was matched by a gratifying freshness and sense of discovery, relished by the players and their conductor.

David Childs was the soloist in Peter Graham's euphonium concerto, *Force of Nature*, inspired by the life of American novelist and short-story writer, Ernest Hemingway. The vivid, flamenco-influenced opening movement, *Matador* paid tribute to the American novelist and short-story writer's fascination with Spanish tradition. *The Wayfarer* captured the writer's melancholic discontent, delivered with restraint, warmth and emotional honesty in this searching account. *Pilar* was a musical evocation of Hemingway braving the seas on his beloved boat. A bravura reading, no doubt, but one which evoked the music's subject matter with painterly skill.

The last work before the interval was Karl Jenkins's *Fragile Earth* (2024), the composer's first large-scale work for brass band. Concerning climate change and nature's restorative power, the piece had an urgency and directness of utterance entirely in keeping with its theme. The steely intensity of the outer sections of the opening *Scorched Earth* movement was well contrasted with the supplicatory middle episode. *The Blue* refers to the oceans and the Antarctic Blue Whale, the latter evoked by blowing air through instruments without producing a note. At



Photo: andreapricemusic.com

the heart of the movement was a noble melody reflecting the grandeur of the music's dual inspiration. Finally, *Flight* was a study of forced migration of all living things, which moved from a desolate soundscape with tolling bell to a bold statement of hope for the future. In this deeply committed performance, the strength of the composer's convictions and the force of his message were conveyed with skill and empathy.

After the interval, came the world premiere of Andrea Price's *And Earth Raised Up Her Head*. The composer, who is also percussionist for the Black Dyke Band, conducted her colleagues in this performance. An evocation of Earth raging at humanity for destroying nature, this was a powerful, concentrated piece with moments of serenity and lyricism, as well as raw energy and towering climactic points. Written as a tribute to Edward Gregson and containing some quotations from his output, this was a strongly individual statement, superbly played.

Soloist Ian Bousfield joined the players for a gloriously assured account of Edward Gregson's Concerto for Trombone. Originally written in 1979 for trombone and orchestra, the composer created a version for brass band in 2013, commissioned by the Black Dyke Band and Nicholas Childs. In one continuous movement, divided into three distinct sections, the concerto is based on the measured, fanfare-like material introduced by the soloist in the opening bars. In this alert and characterful performance, each shift in mood was sharply etched, with drive and purpose in the march-like episode of the first section, fluency and grace in the lyrical central Andante and high spirits in the dance-like

closing scherzo. Ian Boustead found dignity as well as wit in the solo lines and held the attention without indulgence in the variegated cadenza that preceded the finale. Nicholas Childs ensured the work evolved naturally, keeping the overall structure firmly in place, while responding to every expressive nuance on the way.

To conclude their official programme, the Black Dyke Band and Nicholas Childs presented Edward Gregson's *Of Men and Mountains* (1990), which stemmed from a cross-Canada train journey undertaken by the composer and his wife in July 1989. It is a substantial and visionary piece that captures the majesty and sweep of the landscape that inspired it. From the numinous, hushed opening section in which the work's main themes drifted and gradually coalesced, to the rhythmic drive of the faster episodes and the music's noble and joyful climax in which the main material was heard in its most fully realised form, the score was presented with ideal clarity and imagination. The conductor's skill in maintaining the music's overarching narrative, while bringing to light individual effects and sonorities en route, paid considerable dividends. This was a consummate reading of a magnificent piece that deserves to be at the heart of the brass band repertoire.

As an unscheduled but welcome encore, the band paid tribute to Elgar Howarth by performing his John Bull arrangements, the deeply felt *Pavane* and the imposing *King's Hunting Jig*, from the *Music From the Elizabethan Court*. These finely crafted miniatures made an affecting conclusion to a concert of notable depth and brilliance.

**Paul Conway**



# Paul Conway at Large

## Art Sung – Edith Sitwell: Behind Her Façade

Late Music Concert Series 2025-2025  
at Unitarian Chapel, York

Late Music's winter 2024 season ended on December 7 at the Unitarian Chapel, York in impressive style with 'Behind Her Façade', an evening of song, words, image and dance devised by the creative group Art Sung to celebrate the life of Edith Sitwell. Divided into two equal halves, the musical entertainment charted the life of the poet and author from an unhappy childhood in her ancestral home, Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire, to her life of celebrity in London, Paris and America. The narrative also covered her relationships with the Chilean artist and boxer Álvaro de Guevara and the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew, her friendship with William Walton and encounters with Noël Coward and Marilyn Monroe.

Sporting a green, jewel-encrusted, turban-like headdress, mezzo-soprano Lucy Stevens inhabited the role of Edith Sitwell, showing vulnerability beneath the eccentricity, while versatile tenor Michael Gibson adopted several different guises throughout the evening. Both singers were accompanied resourcefully and with flexibility by pianists Nigel Foster and Elizabeth Mucha, founder of Art Sung. These musicians presented a range of songs, including three numbers written especially for the production. A backdrop of film and animated sketches, provided by videographer James Symonds, subtly illustrated Edith's reminiscences and a couple of dance interludes from Roxani Eleni Garefalaki, notably to music from Satie's ballet, *Parade*, were elegantly energetic. Modest but effective staging included the curtain backdrop from the 1923 premiere of *Façade*, a precious artefact casting a spell of authenticity over the production.

Of the trio of new songs, *Be a strange bird in a tame pond*, for contralto and piano, by Hayley Jenkins was an assured, variegated setting of words by the American poet Olivia Diamond that considered Sitwell's constant tussles with her critics. In tarantella rhythm, the music shifted impulsively between fiery resentment, quiet fortitude and mischievousness and exploited to expressive effect Lucy Stevens' wide vocal range. By contrast, *Edith Regina*, for tenor and piano, from the same poet and composer, was an



Edith Sitwell

Photo: Wikimedia

affectingly direct, measured tribute to Sitwell's grace and regal aspect. Her affinity with Queen Elizabeth I, on whom she wrote widely, was deftly underlined by the piano's simple, archaic-sounding harmonies and gentle counterpoint. Michael Gibson imbued the vocal line with a simple nobility. 'Pavel ... You...', for contralto and piano, with music by Dominique Le Gendre and text by Olivia Diamond was a sombre dissection of Edith's unhappy affair with Pavel Tchelitchew, which concluded with the poignant observation, 'You dispensed with Edith the woman but used the muse of Edith as your own'. Compelling use of the singer's lowest register added melancholic resonance to this setting.

Apart from Walton's *Façade*, which was selectively and intelligently plundered, extracts from other music woven into the proceedings included Sitwell settings by Ned Rorem and Michael Head. One of the most moving contributions was, *Still falls the rain*, Sitwell's heartfelt reflections on the 1940 raids which Britten set in his *Canticle III*, sung with expressive intensity by Michael Gibson. Another musical highlight near the end of the show's second half was Lucy Stevens' impassioned account of material from Joseph Horowitz's scena, *Lady Macbeth*.

This judiciously planned and impressively executed musical evening was a fitting, incisive homage to the many sides of Edith Sitwell. The selections of existing music were well chosen, the newly commissioned songs both apt and enriching.

Late Music's 2025 season began splendidly and in style on February 1 in

the city's Unitarian Chapel with a thoughtfully anthologised lunchtime song recital of works by female composers spanning a millennium given by soprano Nia Rhein Passmore and pianist Kate Ledger. Themes of birdsong, freedom and escapism were threaded through the programme, which deftly interspersed contemporary music with voices from the recent, and distant, past.

Among the more substantial items, the seventeenth-century motet, 'O Maria' from *Sacri Musicali Affretti* by Barbara Strozzi was elegantly rendered, the richly variegated textures satisfyingly blended. In Liza Lehmann's delightful *Bird Songs* of 1907, *The Woodpigeon* was bright and airy, while *The Starling* was rendered with noble spaciousness and, in the final verse, tender lyricism. Graced with an extended piano introduction, characterfully etched by Kate Ledger, *The Wren* was simple and affectingly presented. *The Owl* brought the cycle to a close with a dash of quirky humour. First performed in January 2023, Helen Neeves' *One a Day for Five* offered a series of witty vignettes, which ranged from the freshly soaring *Skylark* to the lumbering *Torpor* with its heartfelt, unaccompanied cry of 'Oh God, I hate hovering' and culminating in a mock-anthem paeon to 'Ikea!', delivered with cabaret sophistication.

Out of the individual songs chosen for performance, Amy Beach's *Canzonetta* from *4 Songs*, Op.48, sung in French, was unerringly shaped, building to a natural climax within the final verse. Elizabeth Maconchy's *Ophelia's Song*, a hauntingly eloquent setting of words from Shake-

speare's *Hamlet*, was sensitively portrayed, the fractured silences in the piano part in the last bars tellingly effective. *Bathing* from the song cycle, *Wall* by Joanna Sleight radiated awe and serenity, while the bitter-sweet 'Sweet Little Red Feet' from Judith Weir's *The Voice of Desire* was chirpily droll, as the singer mourns the death of a 'sweet dove', unaware that excessive displays of affection may have led to its demise.

Special mention must be made of 'The Witching Hour' by Robyn Hughes-Maclean, a student at York St John University. This enchanting valse macabre created and inhabited its own distinctive soundscape, serving notice of a young composer with considerable craft and imagination.

Two brief solo spots consisted of Hildegard Von Bingen's *O Pastor Animarum*, sung with devotional purity and wonder by Nia Rhein Passmore, and Sadie Harrison's *Northern Lights*, played with a spontaneous-sounding, icy shimmer by Kate Ledger. The recital was brought to a satisfying, upbeat conclusion by Liza Lehmann's *The Beautiful World* from *Songs of a Flapper*, delivered by both performers with feeling and sincerity.

Presented with a relaxed, informal warmth, this recital featured committed and engaging accounts of varied, rewarding song settings. A pleasingly sizeable audience showed its appreciation.

In the York Late Music evening concert on February 1, the Bingham String Quartet played four compact and contrasting quartets. Of especial interest on their attractive bill of fare was the premiere of two recent examples in the genre, both written by co-founders, in the early 1980s, of Soundpool, precursor to the York Late Music series.

The music making began with a broadly conceived interpretation of Haydn's String Quartet in F, Op.77 No 2. In the opening *Allegro moderato*, the musicians savoured the clarity of Haydn's ideas and textures without lingering unduly over detail, allowing the music to unfold naturally and without excessive point-making. The scherzo-like second movement was notable for the sombre but warmly expressive trio section. At the heart of the piece, the profound *Andante* slow movement was deeply felt, while the impetuous, rhythmically intricate quick finale had verve, joy and wit.

Next came the premiere of Steve

Crowther's String Quartet No.4. Though inspired by international political events (the score's opening page carries the dedication, 'Slava Ukraini!'), the musical content was avowedly abstract and non-programmatic. The quartet unfolded in one, unbroken movement with two dynamic outer sections framing a still, central episode. Driven by motoric ostinatos, the principal material was often presented in very close canon, with each instrument giving out the same, heavily accented motifs one quaver apart. This staggered, 'domino' effect, was virtuosic and gripping and when the playing resolved into concord, the release of tension was palpable. The brief, hushed intermission at the work's core contained opportunities for extended solo lines, notably for viola, and provided a satisfying contrast with the fiery, energetic repeating patterns that dominated the textures elsewhere. The Bingham Quartet rose to the piece's technical challenges and succeeded in forging a compelling, ongoing narrative from its punchy individual motifs and gestures.

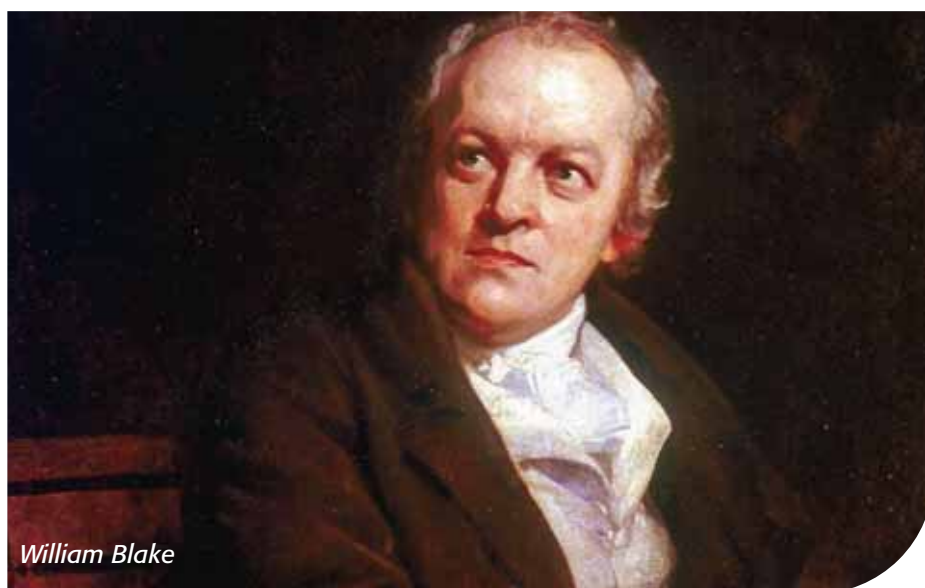
After the interval, we heard the premiere of String Quartet No.2 by Anthony Adams. Completed in 2024, the work has a long gestation period, having been started some ten years earlier. Initially, the music was conceived with electronic input, but the piece emerged in its final form with the time-honoured line-up of four string players. Written in a tough, but vivid and eminently graspable musical language, this single-movement structure caught the ear with its initial, varied statements and led the audience into a

tautly argued, clearly textured instrumental dialogue developed out of those opening utterances. The ending was particularly striking, with the viola's angular, wide-leaping line set against sustained chords from violins and cello. Throughout the quartet there was a sense of delight in exploiting the form's aptness for intimate, impassioned discourse. In short, this was an impressive addition to the repertory, eloquently interpreted.

To conclude their recital, the Bingham Quartet gave an arresting account of Philip Glass' String Quartet No.3 (1985), based on music from the film *Mishima*. They balanced and paced the six-movement work persuasively, so that what might have sounded like a sequence of disparate fragments gelled into a convincing entity. This set the seal on a memorable event which offered wide-ranging repertoire, finely executed.

**World premiere of *Blake Visions*  
by John Hawkins  
Conway Hall, London**

Comprising four internationally renowned instrumentalists (violinist Michael Trainor, violist Zahra Benyounes, cellist Jessie Ann Richardson and pianist Simon Callaghan), all of whom have considerable experience as chamber musicians, the London Piano Quartet benefits richly from the players' individual performing strengths and their innate capacity to react and respond to each other spontaneously and with imagination. These virtues were much in evidence in a well-attended,



William Blake

Photo: Wikimedia



early-evening recital given by the Quartet on January 26 at Conway Hall, London.

The concert began with William Walton's spirited, early Piano Quartet in D minor of 1918-21. In later life, Walton described this work as the product of a 'drooling baby' and it may be true to say that in this product of his teenage years, the composer has yet to assimilate creative influences, such as Ravel, Howells, Elgar and Stravinsky, within his own instantly recognisable musical voice. Yet there is much to enjoy, as the players ably showed. In the lyrical first movement, the pastoral-sounding opening theme and fluently expressive secondary idea were both judiciously characterised. The following scherzo was alive with vitality and imbued with high spirits, while the slow movement was clouded by wistfully melancholic and darkly brooding moments. Rhythmic energy and jazzy syncopations drove the rondo finale and, after a temporary lull to accommodate a reference to the opening material, the sweeping final bars were thrillingly exuberant. Ideally paced and carefully balanced, this compelling, assured account captured the exhilaration and irrepressible high spirits of Walton's youthful piece, while also being mindful of the music's more shadowy and deeply felt episodes.

The concert's first half concluded with the first performance of *Blake Visions* by John Hawkins (b.1949). This piano quartet is the latest of several pieces by the composer influenced by the English visionary poet, painter and engraver William Blake (1757-1827). Blake's use of

apparently irreconcilable, opposing ideas, as in his book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, was a particular source of inspiration for this chamber work, which responds musically to these stark contrasts. Entitled *Pity*, the deliberately paced opening movement derived from Blake's illustration, not of his own words, but of lines from *Macbeth*. The players differentiated effectively between two principal ideas, the first a wistful, gently rising figure in violins over soft, long-held piano chords and the second an impassioned idea introduced by the cello over agitated piano figurations. The fleet-footed central movement explored Blake's contrasting books of *Innocence and Experience*. Here, the music juxtaposed high-spirited, will o' the wisp motifs with introspective and sustained ascending lines. The disparate materials were closely interconnected, switching rapidly from one to another, a sleight of hand convincingly brought off in this alert, responsive performance. The bustling finale, *The Ghost of a Flea*, illustrated Blake's bizarre vision in which the sinister, muscled bulk of the spirit confounds expectations of a fragile insect. Whirring string and piano figures evoking the stalking, ghoulish flea-beast were offset by quieter, more expressive passages, taking the music into realms of imagination beyond the grotesque. Written in 2024, *Blake Visions* seemed to sum up all the best qualities of John Hawkins' music, with its engaging narratives, colourful, clear textures, inventive, yet always idiomatic, instrumental writing and capacity to evoke layers of

meaning within a single phrase or gesture. Yet there was also a liberating feeling in this inspired, insightful piano quartet of striking out in new directions, as if the composer had approached the four instruments' interplay and the ever-shifting relationships between diverse musical materials afresh and without preconception.

After the interval came Brahms's Piano Quartet No.3 in C minor, Op.60. The players caught the first movement's febrile, searching intensity and maintained impressively the stormy, rhythmic drive of the following scherzo. Ushered in by an eloquent cello theme, the tender *Andante* third movement provided the work's tranquil centre, before the uneasy, despairing finale brought the piece to a dramatic close. Teasing out the score's inner details while sustaining the overarching argument, the London Piano Quartet presented a refined, cogently argued interpretation of Brahms' imposing, Romantic chamber work that thoroughly deserved its enthusiastic reception.

**Earth, Water, Air and Fire**  
music by Deborah Pritchard and  
George Frideric Handel  
All Saints' Church, Tudeley and  
St Mary's Church, West Malling

In a mini-festival entitled 'Earth, Water, Air and Fire, Music@Malling presented three concerts held in idyllic locations, featuring the music of synaesthetic composer Deborah Pritchard, including two premiere

## Classical Music Mastermind – 73

- 1 Which famous American composer cheated death by failing to catch the doomed passenger ship Lusitania when it sailed from New York in 1917, having overslept the previous night after playing poker until the small hours?
- 2 Which Master of the King's Musik, on being asked to name his favourite composers, replied: 'Bach, Beethoven, Billy Mayerl and Schoenberg'?
- 3 Which great composer was a cousin of Glenn Gould's great-grandfather?
- 4 The Conservative politician Edward Heath was awarded the Charlemagne Prize in 1963 – what musical instrument did he buy with his prize-money?
- 5 The widow of which British composer was granted an annual pension by King George V?

### Answers to Classical Music Mastermind 72

1. Who gave the first public performance of Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor? [Hans von Bulow: Berlin, January 22, 1857]
2. Which Hungarian composer wrote a 'Romanian Concerto'? [György Ligeti – Romanian Concerto for Orchestra (1951)]
3. In which opera does the character Mrs Benson appear? [Delibes *Lakmé*]
4. The architect of Wigmore Hall in London, opened in 1900 as Bechstein Hall and renamed in 1917, designed which other famous landmark building in the capital? [Savoy Hotel]
5. Which great composer, who afterwards became a close friend, did Berlioz meet for the first time during the evening before the first performance of his *Symphonie Fantastique*? [Franz Liszt]



Georg Frederick Handel

performances, complemented by related artworks and images. Also included on the programmes were examples of Handel's finest and most popular works.

The weekend started on June 9 2023 with an evening recital of instrumental music held in All Saints' Church, Tudeley. Cellist Richard Harwood and harpsichordist Sophia Rahman began the programme with a lively, crisply articulated reading of Handel's Sonata in G minor, HWV.287.

Greta Mutlu then gave a deeply felt and gloriously self-assured account of Deborah Pritchard's *Inside Colour*, for solo violin (2016). The work is a synaesthetic response by the composer to images from the International Space Station moving through the aurora in space, with green light below and red above creating the sensation suggested by the work's title. In this gripping performance, the narrative unfolded inevitably, while retaining the surprise element of all its shifts of mood and gesture. The soloist drew the listeners in, from the gentle flickering opening gestures, featuring bowing near the bridge of the instrument, to a fiercely expressive climactic theme in the violin's highest register and then to a steady descent into shadowy regions involving powerfully charged pizzicato playing. A return of the opening material was followed by a brief closing section as the solo line ascended into the ether. Greta Mutlu was in full command of this exacting score, yet there was an engaging spontaneity in the way she approached each twist and turn of the music, ensuring the performance was fresh as well as polished.

After an invigorating, crisply articulated reading by Greta Mutlu and Sophia Rahman of Handel's Sonata in D for Violin and Continuo, HWV.371, the violinist was joined by cellist Richard Harwood for a warmly eloquent performance of Deborah Pritchard's *Couleurs Céleste* (2019), a piece which was premiered by the two players for Music@Malling in 2022. The piece was inspired by the foundation stones of the Holy City, described in the *Book of Revelation*. These precious stones are ordered as the colours of the spectrum and the work began powerfully with the red hues of 'Jasper', conveyed by the players' fiery, sonorous chords and bold unison writing. 'Jacinth' (amber) opened with ethereal textures but soon gained in strength as a descending violin line paved the way for 'Sardonyx' (gold), in which glinting violin phrases were heard over the cello's softly pulsating heartbeat. At the piece's core was 'Chalcedony' (azure), a delicate, dancing movement, leading to 'Sapphire' (indigo) which pitted a lyrical theme on the violin against vibrant pizzicato cello chords. In the closing section, 'Amethyst' (violet), the two instruments played fast and radiant arpeggiated figures against airy melodies that evanesced like distant light. Both performers showed exceptional sensitivity to the score's many subtle shifts in expression and articulation, while also displaying a firm grasp of the work's subtle narrative arc.

Violinist Thomas Kemp and violist Nick Barr then joined all the soloists who had performed earlier in the evening in the Oxford version of Handel's *Water Music*. The players ensured the dance move-

ments had an irresistible rhythmic lilt, while the song-like numbers were played with feeling and affection. This hearty, full-blooded rendering rounded off in style an instrumental recital of refined, expressive interplay and top-flight musicianship.

St Mary's Church, West Malling provided the venue for the festival's remaining two concerts. In the morning event of 10 June, the emphasis was on music for strings. Harriet Mackenzie opened proceedings with the first performance of Deborah Pritchard's *Light*, for solo violin (2023). Conceived in a single, free-flowing span, the violinist's unceasing bariolage created scintillating waves of energy. Harriet Mackenzie found shades of light and dark in the score, while scrupulously adhering to the composer's starkly contrasting dynamic markings, and her gradual relaxation of tempo in the gently fading closing bars was expertly judged. Deborah Pritchard's piece inspired the painting, *Wall of water, light* (2023) by artist Maggi Hamblin, which was on display throughout the performance, adding an extra dimension to the audience's experience. A distillation of the composer's art, *Light* would make an excellent introduction for listeners to her vivid soundscape, especially in Harriet MacKenzie's intuitive rendition.

There followed a very welcome opportunity to hear again Deborah Pritchard's exhilarating *Illumination*, for string ensemble (2022), a vibrant re-invention of Bach's rhythms in his Brandenburg Concerto no.3 in D major. This piece was premiered by Chamber Domaine and Thomas Kemp during Music@Malling's *Six Brandenburgs: Six Commissions* series of 2022 and the musicians clearly relished returning to this score in a wonderfully assured, polished account. Joyful vitality in the swifter passages contrasted satisfyingly with the tender, sustained central section, wreathed by delicate solo violin lines. A glowing serenity was achieved in the hushed, evanescent closing bars.

*Wall of Water*, for solo violin and string orchestra (2014) was written by Deborah Pritchard in response to a series of thirteen dramatic seascapes painted by Maggi Hamblin. In the spaciouly sustained opening section, Harriet Mackenzie, for whom the work was written, established a febrile, tautly expressive approach to the richly variegated score, which the other string players adopted instinctively in their eloquent contribution.



As the narrative unfolded, the music became warmer and brighter and, on occasion, more vulnerable and compassionate too, an emotional complexity persuasively laid bare in this subtly layered, urgently communicative reading.

To conclude the concert, Chamber Domaine and conductor Thomas Kemp treated the audience to a beautifully shaped, crisply articulated account of Handel's *Water Music Suite* No.1 in F major, HWV.348. There was delicacy and repose as well as unbridled joie de vivre to enjoy in this delightful performance.

In the afternoon concert on June 10 in St Mary's Church, Chamber Domaine and Thomas Kemp brought their mini-festival to a brilliant conclusion with a recital colourfully framed by a premiere from Deborah Pritchard and Handel's most celebrated and crowd-pleasing occasional piece. To begin, violinist Greta Mutlu and harpist Oliver Wass were the soloists in the first performance of Deborah Pritchard's *Chagall's Light*, for solo violin, harp and orchestra (2023). This warmly attractive score was inspired by the stained-glass windows by Marc Chagall at Tudeley Church and offers a musical description of the windows' variegated colours and subject matter.

*Edge*, for solo violin, solo harp and string orchestra (2017) is a sequel by Deborah Pritchard to her earlier violin concerto, *Wall of Water*. The later work is a response to artist Maggi Hambling's series of nine paintings of the same name on the subject of global warming and polar ice caps, in which the composer explores the tragedy of mankind threatening nature and a sense of fury at the Earth's destruction. In this gripping performance, the sombre, urgently expressive score's dark intensity was impressively captured by soloists Harriet Mackenzie and Oliver Wass, the former's brittle, often fiery passagework matched by the latter's explosively ascending scalic lines. The music's relentless insistence on a crabbed, slowly undulating figure introduced by the solo violin gave the work a powerful sense of unity amid the ever-changing textures and moods. Every bit as compelling as its predecessor, *Edge* made a strong impact in this persuasive, totally committed rendering.

Accompanied by Theresa Thomas's moving images, Deborah Pritchard's *Sky*, for solo violin and string ensemble (2021) was a delicately fashioned, intensely lyrical evocation of the changing colours and

light of the sky. Greta Mutlu's sensitive playing subtly conveyed the piece's gradual, but inexorable transition from the gentle luminosity of a golden dawn, through various cloud formations to the rapture of an azure sky and the radiance of a bright sun.

To close, Chamber Domaine and Thomas Kemp treated the audience to a spirited and affectionately hearty account of Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, HWV, 351. Opulent and spacious in the grand Overture, players and conductor found genuine exuberance in the flourishes of 'La Réjouissance' and elegance and finesse in the courtly dance movements. Handel's bold and brilliant gestures rounded off with considerable panache a weekend of inspiring music-making, enriched by the extensive and rewarding conspectus of Deborah Pritchard's vividly communicative music at its heart.

*We must apologise for the late publication of the preceding report.*

**World premieres by Sonia Allori, Simone Seales, Kate Sagovsky, Ruta Vitkauskait and Angela Elizabeth Slater**

Curated by composer Angela Elizabeth Slater, the 2024-25 Illuminate Women's Music series of concerts began on December 12 in the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Alexander Gibson Opera Studio in Glasgow with a wide-ranging programme featuring the world premiere of five new, specially commissioned works, all written in 2024 and connected to folklore or heritage. Soprano Stephanie Lamprea and cellist Jessica Kerr were the versatile, multifaceted performers.

The recital began with the first performance of *The Goddess of Ballachulish*, for cello and soprano. Sonia Allori wrote the words and music for this sensitively crafted duo, which traces the gradual awakening of an eponymous five-foot-tall, 2500-year-old wooden carved effigy of a woman excavated from peat on the shore of Loch Leven, Perthshire in the 1880s. At first sluggish and rough-hewn, the music became lighter and more translucent as the piece unfolded, attaining elegance and radiance in the closing moments before ending on a poignant question mark as the Goddess yawns and stares blinking at the audience, facing a new,

uncertain future. Both players responded astutely to every shift in the narrative, subtly gaining expressive fluency as they gently brought the ligneous figure to life with sensitivity and dignity.

Also making its concert debut, *We have cried for so long*, is a setting for soprano and cello by cellist and performance artist Simone Seales of her own text that depicts the caoineag or 'weeper', a solitary female spirit of the Scottish Highlands who foretells death in nocturnal, waterside laments. In this freely expressive, spontaneous-sounding piece, which took the form of a poem followed by a lament, the words and music conveyed the banshee's weariness, crying for all the global tragedies, conflicts and wars that persist today. Each a caoineag, brooding on, and grieving for, future tragedies, the performers suggested instinctively the fatigue and exhaustion of endless mourning. Wounded and rasping in the fractured opening poem, the musicians were eloquently lyrical in the wistful lament, bringing a heartfelt tenderness to the repeated final phrase, 'we are so tired'.

Jessica Kerr took centre stage for a performance of Angélica Negrón's *Les Desaparecidas*, for cello and electronics (2016). Using processed vocal samples and found sounds, the piece was inspired by young girls abducted and used for human trafficking, specifically the case of the missing girls from Juárez in Mexico. With tremolandos on repeated notes, the cellist's initial phrases established a feeling of anguish and agitation in an urgently committed, deeply affecting rendition.

Kate Sagovsky's *Words for wolf*, for soprano and cello, fashioned freely expressive musical material for the cello, taken from various Gaelic words for 'wolf', while the soprano line was restricted to one note, suspended in a single place. In this accomplished premiere account, Jessica Kerr was naturally eloquent in highly varied cello writing that made vivid use of trills and harmonic and glissando effects and encompassed high-spirited playfulness and gentle rustling. Stephanie Lamprea was equally spontaneous in her approach to the monotone vocal line, emotionally restrained to begin with, yet increasingly spirited and influential as the piece evolved. Thoughtful and carefully constructed, *Words for wolf* offered an engaging narrative using a refreshingly different approach to writing for the musical forces, with the stringed instrument predominating and the voice



Sonia Allori



Simone Seales



Kate Sagovsky



Ruta Vitkauskait



Angela Elizabeth Slater

assuming an accompanying role.

*Song of the Shadows*, for soprano, cello and audience by Ruta Vitkauskait was influenced by Outer Hebrides rituals and used Gaelic incantations to bless the fire in the sacred fireplace and an authentic Lutheran spell invoked to prevent one's house from burning down. Receiving its first live staging, the piece incorporated audience participation in the Introduction and Epilogue, as concert-goers created an environment of semi-present spirits in the house with the use of toys, tools and clicking or hissing vocal sounds. These sounds were imitated by the cello at the start and by the voice in the closing moments, as if the whole piece had been summoned by the assembly. A substantial piece of theatre which included an aria-like 'Blessing of the Kindling' between a lively 'Fire Spell' and 'Evoked Flame', *Song of the Shadows* required extreme virtuosity from both players to conjure up a heady brew of magic spells and benedictions. Involving the audience directly in the material was a bold stroke that succeeded in heightening the intensity of the presentation and making listeners feel personally connected with the composer's vividly dramatic setting.

Stephanie Lamprea brought subtlety as well as flair to *Social sounds from whales at night*, for voice and electronics by Emily Doolittle. Written in 2007, this piece uses the song of the humpback whale for both voice and tape elements of the score. The vocal part included rendering a transcription of the whale song, whistling in duet with the taped song and freely improvising with material based on the whale's musical language. Whether emulating the recorded material or using it as a catalyst for inventive allusions and variants, Stephanie Lamprea channelled

her vocal dexterity to serve the score in a reading of great warmth and intuition.

The performers concluded their recital with the first performance of *My skin: A Selkies Tale*, for soprano and cello by Angela Elizabeth Slater. This powerfully dramatic piece had the intensity and reach of an operatic scena. It told the story of the eponymous mythological creature able to transform from a seal into a human being by shedding its skin. According to folklore, a selkie woman has her skin stolen by a fisherman, which forces her to survive on land, separated from her natural aquatic environment. Poet and writer Kendra Preston Leonard and the composer told the tale from the viewpoint of the female protagonist 'born to the tides', firstly despairing of the loss of her skin and watery home but finding resilience and eventually happiness as she escapes back to the sea with her daughters. Angela Elizabeth Slater's deeply felt

and impassioned setting was rich in incident and imaginatively scored. Her success in wringing the maximum expressive potential from each phrase and gesture within the context of a fluent and balanced narrative suggests strongly a natural writer for the stage. The performers brought a penetrating psychological and emotional intensity to the music, from the anguished, breathless and stammering beginning as the selkie realizes what has happened to her to the gentle serenity of the concluding bars as the selkie and her 'seal-girls' return home under the moonlit sky.

This well-attended, warmly received opening concert in the Scottish-based Illuminate Women's Music series was notable for the programme's variety and inventiveness and the technical and interpretative skills of both musicians. It was also a glorious tribute to the importance and resonance of storytelling.

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## BBC Philharmonic Orchestra/ Morlot/Bertrand Chamayou

Continuing their anniversary celebrations of Ravel and Boulez, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra invited conductor Ludovic Morlot to lead their Bridgewater Hall concert on February 22nd.

The orchestral version of Boulez's *Notations 1-4* provided an interesting series of musical essays with plenty of tuned percussion, gong overtones that underpinned much of the sound, startling brass shouts and overlapping woodwind effects. This was fascinating to listen to though occasionally confusing to the ear. A more aggressive, occasional jazzy feel to the syncopation with an increased timpani presence added to the final flourish.

Ravel's *Mother Goose* was extended to include the whole ballet in this performance. With some beautiful flute solos and the silkiest of strings, Morlot drew the orchestra into this unique sound world with many fairy tale effects throughout conjuring images of magical creatures and fantastical scenes.

Bertrand Chamayou guested as soloist in Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*. One of the less obvious challenges of playing with just the left hand is what to do with the right? Chamayou chose to grip tightly onto the top of the piano with the right and to help balance himself while perched onto the tiniest corner of the stool so he could also pedal with the left foot. All very confusing for the likes of me, but Chamayou made light work of it. The performance here made the most of the intricate rhythms and virtuosic left handed playing to come up with what felt like a cinematic tour of the jazz era with nicely weighted orchestral conversations. The final cadenza revealed the never ending invention from the composer, making the piano sound like a mini orchestra in itself. An excellent performance. For the encore, Chamayou played his own quiet arrangement of an early Ravel work – probably to give his right hand something else to do.

It's been a while since I last heard Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, but it is such an irresistible work that it always brings a smile. However, this performance was quite restrained for the most part, with Morlot choosing accentuate the details within the paintings, rather than the richness of the orchestration, but the contrasting moods were realised very

ludovicmorlot.com



Ludovic Morlot

well. Telling solos throughout enhanced the performance – Carl Raven on Alto Sax particularly – though, apart from the exciting chase in *Baba Yaga*, the orchestra didn't really stretch out the volume until all the bells, fireworks and majesty of the final *Promenade* (perhaps running for the exit?)

John Byrne

## Hallé Orchestra/Chauhan/ Raphaella Gromes

In a concert billed as Prokofiev's *Triumphant Fifth*, the Hallé Orchestra presented their latest Thursday concert to a fair sized audience at the Bridgewater Hall on February 27th. Alpesh Chauhan conducted the with a huge orchestra designed to test the hall's acoustics to the limit.

Richard Strauss' early tone poem *Don Juan* opened the concert with a wonderful splash of orchestral colour and a terrific pace to wake everyone up. Drama was evident from the start as the Don went through his adventures. Quality woodwind solos and heroic horns helped drive the action forward and a telling silence followed the duel, before the music drifted away. A performance full of passion, fun and action throughout.

Next we had the UK premiere of the *Cello Concerto* by Maria Herz. Written around 1930 and at a time of toxic anti-semitism in Germany, Herz fought the odds to produce music with an individual voice and, in the *Cello Concerto*, produced a work full of poignancy and hope. In the most exuberant, glittering, scarlet trouser suit, cellist Raphaella Gromes strode onto the stage and commanded from the off. The work opens with a quiet, deep almost growling passage from the soloist

before arresting arpeggios, with double stopping and impressive agility across the instrument. After a thoughtful, yearning cadenza a pizzicato section, the orchestra upped the tempo and introduced several rhythmic twists over a ticking bassoon, perhaps hinting that humour might win out, though the cello never quite signed up to it. This is a wonderful piece of music. It is lyrical, written as a balanced collaboration between soloist and orchestra and played by a remarkable soloist who captivated throughout. In a touching moment, Gromes reflected with the audience about her worries for the issues facing society today and, for her encore (with a quartet of cellos), played a *Prayer for Peace* by the Ukrainian composer Hanna Havrylets. A moment of true reflection.

After the break, it was all Prokofiev in an exhilarating performance of the *Fifth Symphony*. Here, Chauhan took full advantage of the large orchestra to produce a huge sound at times full of contracting timbres and a mighty climax under which the gong detonated on several occasions. Prokofiev's writing for brass is always adventurous and (as an occasional tuba player myself) I often look out for my soulmate in the band and I have never heard such a telling role for the tuba in a symphony. There were some phenomenal solos from many of the principals – woodwind in particular and they all rightly received the plaudits and moment of individual applause, but Ewan Easton certainly got my vote! Prokofiev used large sections of music previously written for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, but with an invention and style that transformed them. An excellent performance full of light, humour and virtuosity.

John Byrne

## Kimichi Symphony Orchestra/ Keith Slade

If this feat has ever been accomplished before, then I've never heard of it. To perform any one of Stravinsky's first three great Diaghilev ballets – *Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring* – is a tour de force for any professional orchestra. To perform all three in one programme, and by a part-time orchestra of semi-professionals seems to be flying dangerously close to the sun or the wind.

And the result on March 23rd was a triumphant return to earth after spreading glory. The Kimichi Symphony Orchestra, one hundred strong, gave more than impressive accounts of these taxing scores, demanding both technically and physically, under the supremely calm, reliable and reassuring baton of Keith Slade.

What is their secret, one might ask? The answers are brilliantly obvious: an inspirational conductor with a flawless

stick-technique; enthusiastically motivated players devoted to their instruments; tight, efficient, rewarding rehearsing. Add to that an amazingly committed and resourceful backup team, and the result was a triumph which drew a standing ovation from a packed Symphony Hall on Sunday afternoon.

But there was further icing on the cake, choreography from Cici Howells which built from young amateur dancers a real narrative strength to complement the power of the music. Particularly impressive were Aidan Cooney as the hapless Petrushka (a pity that political correctness robbed us of the bogey-man Moor as his rival for the Doll's love), and the unidentified sacrificial victim in *The Rite of Spring*, waiting so still and so patiently before eventually dancing herself to death.

Slade conjured a continuous sense of rhythmic progression from his players, not only in the notorious aggressive outbursts, but also in the reflective, withdrawn passages. His ability to control the sustained,

sinister eeriness in *Firebird* was particularly impressive, and his aplomb in the fiendish complexities which end *The Rite of Spring* was superb.

Stravinsky's instrumentation in these scores is a brantub of delights, including Wagner tubas, piccolo and bass trumpets, alto flute, and no fewer than three harps, as well as a huge array of percussion. How Kimichi managed to source such a panoply is another example of the enterprise's magical Midas touch.

And all of this was achieved with no sponsorship whatsoever. The players willingly gave their services, and some even donated tickets to swell the coffers from audience-takings. The magnificent programme-book, treasurable as a souvenir of this tremendous occasion, must have cost a bit to produce. In Kimichi Birmingham, and the wider West Midlands, has a precious jewel. Anyone who cares about the arts must ensure it continues to thrive.

**Christopher Morley**

# Compact comments



**Bruckner:  
The Complete  
Symphonies**  
[Symphonies 1-9;  
Symphony in F  
minor; Symphony in

D minor 'Die Nullte']  
Bruckner Orchester Linz/Vienna Radio  
Symphony Orchestra/Markus  
Poschner

★★★★★ Naxos 8.501804 [18 CDs]

So here we have it, a BrucknerFest Box with two orchestras, 11 symphonies, 18 versions in 18 CDs and one conductor to join it all together neatly. The versions are those approved by the editors of the New Anton Bruckner Complete Edition. There are actually many more versions but they differ perhaps on one or several notes, or accidentals, or a slight change in instrumentation. Whilst these would normally constitute a version, for the purposes of scholarly rigour these eighteen CDs are it. Also, we are informed that the collection does not include any of the first editions that were printed without the composer's involvement. This excludes

the Schalk and Löwe versions. Before the reader considers that it would be too much effort preparing to listen and compare versions, let me advise that the best way to listen to this box is to start at the beginning and continue until you reach the last CD. Enjoy each and every version and before listening to the second or third versions, make sure that you are conscious that they are revised much, much later. For instance, Symphony No 1 (Linz) was composed in 1868. The second version (Vienna) was made in 1891. To add to the slight confusion, there is also a *Scherzo* dating from 1865 which was intended to be included in the first version.

So let's jump in. The F minor *Student Symphony* is quite a jolly piece, difficult to place in Bruckner's output. An exercise for sure, but with delightful tunes. One is reminded of so many composers, but in a perfectly formed Brucknerian context. The excellent woodwind treatment has to be mentioned as well as the use of mid-European double-dotted rhythms. The Finale is particularly vigorous. The *Nullte* (or Symphony No 0) is a totally differently

proposition being, as it is, an already well constructed 2/2 in the best Brucknerian tradition. Nobody would mistake the composer here. The use of 2/2 is prevalent and insistent. This is an elegant work, formal and if not totally original, well-constructed with impeccable technique. Symphony No 1 or *Linz*, is a good example to put to rest the usual comparisons with Mahler. Thirty-five years before we hear the same staccato double bass and celli that Mahler used to great effect at the beginning of his so called *Tragic* symphony (no 6). What is noticeable in Bruckner is the treatment of the double-basses as protagonists. This is a wholesome early work well edited by Thomas Röder in 2016. The 1895 *Scherzo* edited by Wolfgang Grandjean is a shorter version from the original, 3'15" shorter in fact, and this makes it lacking in continuity. However, in the context of the symphony it makes more sense simply because one does not notice so much the lack of development. When it comes to the second version, called Vienna, one has to know in advance that it was composed against all advice and it is quite different



from the first; some sections show changed orchestration, there is also richer counterpoint and after all being said one has to accept that Bruckner considered this his final score. The Second Symphony has a version finished in 1872 and another dated 1877. The first has a problem with continuity, the pauses are extremely long, it is certainly grand but it is the second version which is much more successful. It is quite a discovery to hear such a level of creativity and inspiration. This is a well constructed and proportioned work satisfying and original, preceding as it does, the much more successful Third in D minor. All the work, some excellent, devoted to the First and Second Symphonies comes to fruition in the Third. One could consider it his first fully formed truly grand symphonic work, full of inspiration, convincing with its subjects. Yes, it has also many Wagnerian influences but I prefer to call them tributes to an admired composer: the rest is pure Bruckner. There are three versions of the Third Symphony. The first from 1873 is noted for its length and Wagnerian quotations; the second, from 1877, excised the Wagner and was said at one time or another that it was Bruckner's favourite version. The third from 1889 inexplicably has a truncated Finale which seems unnecessary. Leopold Nowak discovered an earlier version of the adagio, dated 1876. It is eminently Brucknerian, slightly longer than the later version and melodically more attractive. Bruckner himself was adamant that he recommended his last version of 1889 to all conductors.

There are also three versions of the Fourth Symphony, the *Romantic*. The first dates from 1876 – a fine symphony in all versions in any case. The earliest one has a very fine *Scherzo*, and Bruckner began to be preoccupied by what he said, "too much counterpoint". The second version, dating from 1878/80, includes a so-called *Country Fair* Finale: the list of small changes is carefully well detailed in the thick booklet provided. It makes for an interesting and obligatory reading. Read it before or after listening, it does not really matter when, but read it you must. The symphonies are well put into context with Bruckner's life and his various tribulations.

Following his greatest triumph in the 1880s with the Seventh Symphony in Leipzig with Nikisch and in Munich with Levi, he fell into a deep period of uncertainty because of Levi's rejection of his Eighth Symphony. This led Bruckner

to concentrate on revising his Third, Fourth and Eighth Symphonies, assisted by Franz and Joseph Schalk. It is fascinating to learn that the last revision of 1888 is in private hands and that there is only one manuscript score. It can only be accessed via a set of photographs at the Vienna City Library.

As with early and mature Wagner one can make a case for Bruckner too: 'Before and after the Fifth Symphony'. This work was composed between 1875 and 1876, with minor alterations thereafter, and starts a new more self-assured chapter: Bruckner seems to shake off his fears and doubts demonstrating complete dominion of form and content. There is inner energy and almost unstoppable inspiration, resulting in a complex and demanding symphony which seems to build up to a spectacular Finale. From the depth of despair a wonderful piece of art is born. As Kirill Petrenko demonstrated last year at the Proms, this work benefits from a conductor who is not afraid of its challenges.

The Sixth, composed between 1879 and 1881 has troubled musicologists for a very long time. Donald Tovey stated that "it is the kind of music we have not heard before". Its first movement is life-affirming, wonderfully proportioned and with an inner impulse. The Scherzo starts with a few bars of strings *staccato* which Mahler used much later to start his own Sixth symphony. Bruckner employs it sporadically as support. An elegant work.

The majestic (some would say bombastic) Seventh Symphony (1881-83) was his first great success. Although there were some revisions, one can confidently say that they were minor. Not as grand as the Eighth, the E major Seventh Symphony has carved a permanent niche in most orchestras repertoires.

The Eighth, in C minor, is often called the King of Symphonies, a large four-movement work with a sublime Adagio lasting around 22 minutes, depending on the conductor. Rejected in its first 1887 version by Hermann Levi, there is a second version, dated 1890, which is shorter and has augmented woodwind. Hans Richter conducted the first version in Vienna in 1892 which was an artistic triumph. I myself prefer the first edition.

The Ninth Symphony dedicated to the Almighty was begun in 1887, working on it sporadically. In 1895 he started work on the Finale – continuing until the last day of his life, 11th October 1896 – leaving it

incomplete. This symphony is also a triumph but of a very different kind, being a very moving, reflective work, modest and ironically grand at the same time. The very essence of Bruckner's music is distilled into a work where he seems to open up to God. The *Adagio* is considered by many as his finest.

Markus Poschner conducts the two orchestras with a rather fast pace in the early works. If the reader is accustomed to weighty Bruckner, it will not be found here. There is a very fine Fifth and I did enjoy the later works very much, especially the Ninth. In some respects I also prefer Poschner's own Linz Orchestra to the Vienna Radio Symphony. All in all, this is a feast for Brucknerians who are interested in detail and also in the intricacies of what went on behind all the versions, making a very useful tool to understand Bruckner and his music a little bit better. This is a fine musical and scholarly issue which speaks very highly of Naxos' commitment to this complicated composer.

**Eduardo Benarroch**



### **Vieuxtemps**

**Grande Sonate, Op. 12/Franck, C: Andantino quietoso in E flat, Op. 6/Franck, César:**

**Mélancolie for piano and violin in E minor/Fauré: Berceuse, Op. 16/Saint-Saëns: Elégie, Op. 143; Caprice d'après l'Etude en forme de valse Bruno Monteiro (violin), Joao Paulo Santos (piano)**

★★★★★ EtCetera KTC1791 [c.68']

Here is another excellent disc from these gifted Portuguese musicians, a cleverly chosen repertoire disc with all of the music likely to appeal to the same music-lover. The repertoire is particularly interesting in that it includes the fine Grande Sonate of Henri Vieuxtemps, a work whose technical achievements will surely have inspired several Franco-Belgian composers of the era. The Sonate's expressive qualities will also likely not to have been lost on Vieuxtemps' contemporaries, and the entire disc can be played and enjoyed straight off, for throughout the performances are eminently satisfactory, as is the recording quality.

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



**Ruth Gipps –  
Orchestral Works  
Vol 4**

**Violin Concerto Op  
24\*; Symphony No 5  
Op 64;**

**Leviathan for bassoon and chamber  
orchestra Op 59\*\***

**\*Charlie Lovell-Jones, violin/**

**\*\*Bill Anderson, double-bassoon/  
BBC Philharmonic/**

**Rumon Gamba, conductor**

★★★★★ **Chandos CHAN 20319**  
[69'32"]

The longed-for exploration and rehabilitation of Ruth Gipps's music can be said, especially with the release of this admirable disc, to have been pretty much fully accomplished in recent years, for whereas older music-lovers may well recall the disdain in which the very mention of her name brought about is now completely consigned to the dustbin marked 'ignorance'; Ruth Gipps was a considerably gifted musician of no mean achievement, either as an orchestral performer (oboe), or soloist (pianoforte) or as a conductor, or – more especially from our point of view, since her death in 1999 aged 78 – as a noted composer of no mean achievement.

The Fifth symphony of 1982 (her last) is a magnificent and wholly original structure: dedicated to Sir William Walton in the year of his 80th birthday, the four movements may at first appear pretty straightforward (in 'classical-romantic' terms) but the finale is nothing less than a fully orchestral *Missa Brevis* for orchestra in six sub-divided 'sub-movements' whose continuity and material becomes a derivation of mood changes unified by clear thematic structuralisation that betokens a genuinely original symphonist – this is the kind of plan that would have appealed considerably to the late symphonism of Havergal Brian or Peter Maxwell Davies: where, incidentally, are the recordings of the latter's 8th, 9th and 10th symphonies? – are we going to have to wait twenty or thirty years for those?

Gipps's Fifth Symphony is far from being couched in the gritty languages of late Brian or Maxwell Davies, but neither does it speak to us in fondly-remembered late-Vaughan Williams language; her evolving pre-disposition to move to the supertonic is subtle and heart-warming, and the emotional content of the Symphony is clear (once the finale's structure

has been absorbed).

Nor is this all – her Violin Concerto of 1943 predates those by Bliss and Rawsthorne (No 1) yet seems to look forward to those masterworks in certain respects; the short [5'02"] bassoon concerto *Leviathan* is a welcome addition to the all-too-sparse 20th-century repertoire, and throughout this signal disc the performances and recordings could hardly be improved upon. It would be difficult to imagine finer accounts from both of the gifted soloists – Charlie Lovell-Jones and Bill Anderson are admirable masters of this repertoire. Lewis Foreman's notes, fully up to his customary high standard, complete a sterling addition to British music of the late 80-odd years.

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



**Mieczysław  
Weinberg: String  
Quartets Vol 5**

**No 3, Op 14; No 9  
Op 80; No 14 Op  
122; Improvisation**

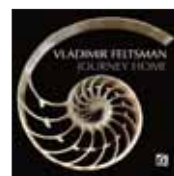
**and Romance (1950).**

**Arcadia Quartet**

★★★★★ **Chandos 20328 [81'32"]**

Time was when the BBC used to be leaders in the rehabilitation of forgotten masters, but those days have long gone: now, it is the record companies (too often overlooked by our national broadcaster) who show the way forward, and few better examples of this can be found than the rediscovery by the Chandos company of the music of Mieczysław Weinberg, whose creative perseverance throughout his life in the face of ignorance, indifference, and at times downright physical and mental torture stand as genuine beacons of how a genuine artist should behave. The three String Quartets here (Volume 5, please note) are in no way inferior to those of Shostakovich – still less of Bartók's – and cover almost 35 years of creativity. A review of this length is in no way adequate to cover the depths and meanings that lie behind these scores, but the existence of fine recordings and performances enable the genuinely interest music-lover to explore, and get to know, this music in depth. The Ninth Quartet, in F sharp minor, is probably the finest work here, but the others run it close. Bravo, Arcadia! Bravo, Chandos!!

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



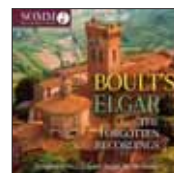
**Vladimir Feltsman –  
Journey Home**

**18 Piano Pieces by  
Rachmaninoff, Grieg,  
Tchaikovsky, Chopin,  
JS Bach/Myra Hess**

★★★★★ **Nimbus Alliance NI 6461**  
[75'25"]

It may appear somewhat difficult to evaluate an issue such as this: to list all 18 pieces individually would naturally cause the reader to search through them to find if there is a sufficient number of pieces to commend the issue as a whole, and it would be difficult in this day and age to justify playing a disc for an hour and a quarter made up entirely of items, each with a playing time of around four minutes. However, this music has clearly been intelligently chosen and sequenced, and both the artistry of this admirable pianist and Nimbus's sound quality are such as to make the experience eminently worthwhile. Clearly, this issue is not for specialists, but I found the musicianship of Vladimir Feltsman and his self-evident empathy with the music throughout so compelling that this issue deserves a strong recommendation.

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



**Boult's Elgar – The  
forgotten recordings**

**In the South Op 50\*;  
Symphony No 2  
Op 63\*\*; Four Part  
Songs Op 53; Two**

**Choral Songs Op 71; Death on the  
Hills Op 72; Two Choral Songs Op 73;  
Go, Song of Mine Op 53/  
Sir Adrian Boult in conversation with  
Carice Elgar Blake and later with  
Bernard Keefe; talk by Boult – Elgar as  
I knew him (BBC 1951)**

**\*BBC Symphony Orchestra/\*\*Scottish  
National Orchestra/BBC Singers**

★★★★★ **SOMM Ariadne 5037-2**  
[two discs – 149'26"]

The five stars in this listing imply the significance of this release, for the recordings date from between 1936 to 1967 – the earliest is an excerpt from Boult's initial 78rpm HMV set with the pre-war BBC Symphony. The sound restoration has been splendidly accomplished by Lani Spahr, whose name guarantees excellence.

Older collectors will fondly remember



the original issues of the two orchestral works – the Second Symphony comes from the short-lived Waverley label, acquired later by EMI, and *In the South* from the war-time HMV 78s – but Spahr's restorations are so good that the actual sound appears to have come from much later.

The Elgarian will have to have this set of CDs, not least for the choral works which Boult conducts with great beauty of phrasing and dynamic control – these works are not adjuncts to the large orchestral works; they reveal a facet of Elgar's creativity which is often overlooked. A valuable set, recommended strongly to all Elgarians.

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



**An English Pastoral – Ian Venables**

**Sonata for Violin and Piano Op 23; Three Pieces for Violin and Piano Op 11/Gerald**

**Finzi: Elegy Op 22/Ivor Gurney: Seven Pieces for Violin and Piano: Chanson Triste; In September; In August; Romance; Legende; A Folk Tale; Humoreske/Bliss: Violin Sonata F 192 Chu-Yu Yang, violin; Eric McElroy, piano**

★★★★★ SOMM CD 0700 [7'45"]

The issue of this disc has a musical significance rather more than would at first sight appear: the music throughout is more than eminently worthwhile, and to have Ivor Gurney's complete music for violin and piano recorded for the first time is a very considerable plus, especially when as well performed and recorded as here.

Chu-Yu Yang, known to his many friends and admirers as Joe, has lived and worked in England for quite a few years – this is his first CD, and it demonstrates the fine quality of his musicianship alongside that of his partner, the American-born composer and pianist Eric McElroy, to perfection. Joe and Eric are both long-term devotees of English music (the 2021 pandemic scuppered Joe's planned performance of the Bliss Violin Concerto in Birmingham; Eric McElroy is a senior officer of the Bliss Society), and their complete musical understanding and total technical command of the music is utterly compelling, finely recorded. Joe's own booklet notes (in flawless English) are

admirable and equally informative.

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



**Kenneth Hesketh: Hände – Music for Piano**

**Poetic Conceits; Pour Henri; Heu, heu, heu; Hände; Chorales and Kolam; Lullaby of the Land Beyond; Ausz ge aus einem kleinen Totenbuch. Clare Hammond, piano**

★★★★★ paladino music PMR0137 [70:29]

This generously filled disc celebrates the longstanding and fruitful artistic partnership between composer Kenneth Hesketh and pianist Clare Hammond. Dating from 2006 to 2023, the contents include several works written specifically for the performer. While the music offered here is searching and often technically demanding, the results are invariably engaging and illuminating.

*Poetic Conceits* (2006) is a set of six, unbroken movements in which the protean material is constantly being viewed in a different light, either through development or by varied restatement. Clare Hammond is poised and persuasive in this challenging piece, whether in the fiery opening *Epigram*, the impish *Epigraph* and the volatile *Mad Pursuits*, or in the vast stillness of the contemplative second movement and eloquent wistfulness of the opening of the fourth. By turns virtuosic, exploratory and visionary, this substantial piece, consummately played, makes a powerful opening statement.

The other two extended works presented in this conspectus are just as vivid and concentrated. *Hände* (2015), from which this album takes its title, is a wide-ranging, single-movement work that incorporates chiming desk bells and extended piano techniques. These diverse expressive means are employed solely to further a musical narrative that is far-reaching and, in the hands of Clare Hammond, deeply compelling. Written in 2023, *Auszüge aus einem kleinen Totenbuch* ('Excerpts From a Small Book of the Dead') is an elegiac tribute to the composer Joseph Horowitz, a friend and colleague of Kenneth Hesketh. Material from what is arguably Horowitz's greatest work, his fifth string quartet, is included in a musical argument that involves the occasional use of a Tibetan player bowl, a

hand-held electronic bow and plucked strings to enhance the music's rapt, devotional character. Clare Hammond's dedicated, poetic and finely realised interpretation touches the heart and always serves the music.

Of the four shorter pieces, two are memorial tributes: *Pour Henri* (2011) is a gentle, affecting homage to Dutilleux and *Lullaby of the Land Beyond*, written in 2018 in memory of Oliver Knussen, is mystically evocative. *Heu, heu, heu* (2012) and *Chorales and Kolam* (2019) are birthday gifts, the first boisterous and the second thoughtful and intricately wrought.

Clare Hammond is an ideal exponent of Kenneth Hesketh's questing and distinctive keyboard scores. Bravura passages are handled with notable assurance and invention and the quieter, more inward aspects of the music are treated with devoted care and profound understanding. Richly documented and effectively recorded, this is an extremely desirable release.

**Paul Conway**



**Respighi: Maria Egiziaca**

**Francesca Dotto, Simone Alberghini, Vincenzo Costanzo/ Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro La Fenice (Venice) -**

**Regie: Pier Luigi Pizzi Conductor: Manlio Benzi**

★★★★★ Dynamic 38050 [c.80']

A fascinating DVD distributed by Naxos presents a rare work by Respighi, described as a *Mistero in tre episodi* (Mystery in three episodes). It is a short work, a mere 80 minutes of intense but slow moving drama. The score follows the action, occasionally anticipating it, but tends to be ponderous and with little variation. It follows the story of Maria, an Alexandrian prostitute who thanks to a Pilgrim discovers her path to religion. It is all very male oriented, the sinful woman who seeks redemption and allowed by an Abbot to die as a christian after 47 years wondering in the desert. Apparently this is based on a legend and she was later proclaimed a saint. Filmed at the Teatro Malibran in Venice, the real star are the sets by Pier Luigi Pizzi, airy, evoking the sea, or the Temple in Jerusalem and finally

the desert, letting the attractive figure of Maria, Francesca Dotto, shine in a multi-faceted role, a sort of Italian Kundry. The tessitura is very exposed at times, but Dotto did it justice, with a powerful and often beautiful soprano sound. Simone Alberghini sings strongly both the Pilgrim, an inflexible religious figure, and the more sympathetic Abbot. Vincenzo Costanzo sings one of the sailors with a fine open tenor. Manilo Benzi conducts the fine orchestra in what is the first ever recording of this work. The film is excellent and the acting is more than acceptable, all in all a recommended curiosity.

**Eduardo Benarroch**



**Joseph Phibbs:**  
**'Quartets': String**  
**Quartets 2, 3 and 4.**  
**Piatti Quartet**  
★★★★★ **Nimbus**  
**Records NI 6452**  
[55:57]

Joseph Phibbs' String Quartet No.1 was commissioned, premiered and recorded (on Champs Hill Records CHRCD145) by the Piatti Quartet, who have now released a disc on the Nimbus label devoted to his second, third and fourth quartets. Coinciding with Phibbs' 50th birthday year, the new album celebrates a decade of ensemble and composer working closely together.

In the traditional four movements, the second quartet (2015) begins with a glimmering, fugitive nocturne, floating on feather-light textures, that deftly incorporates arco and pizzicato elements and, in its latter stages, summons up a slow, visionary episode. There follows a brittle, agitated fugal movement. A brief interlude featuring guitar-like pizzicato strumming in the lower strings builds to a considerable central climax. The slow finale begins in relaxed and deeply lyrical vein and encompasses an expressive, high cello solo before the ecstatic closing bars bring the piece to a radiantly soaring close. The players vividly convey the intensely changing moods of this concise, feverishly imaginative score.

Written in 2018 and revised three years later, the third quartet is cast in five movements. Preceded by a slow, introspective introduction and rounded off by a tiny coda, the substantial opening Allegro, subtitled 'Illuminations', conjures up bright city lights flashing in and out of focus. It is

followed by a quick, bustling fugue that ends in a vigorous, close canon between the violins. Entitled *Notturmo e fantasia*, the darkly expressive third movement provides extended solos for cello and first violin, the latter unfolding in freely spontaneous style. A quirkily sophisticated dance movement is succeeded by a slow finale in the form of an affecting, elegiac vocalise. The Piattis bring dynamic energy to this substantial score's swifter passages and a spacious, sustained intensity to its moments of stillness.

The fourth quartet (2024) was premiered at the Presteigne Festival by the Piatti Quartet, who commissioned it. The piece takes the form of five colourful vignettes. With a bold, driving narrative and crisp jump cuts, the opening 'Film sequence' is a homage to the world of cinema. A delicate, airy *Notturmo* finds a warmly eloquent upper-strings motif vaulted atmospherically over cello pizzicatos. At the heart of the score is a solemn *Cantilena*, which presents a simple theme that rises naturally through the instruments. After a punchy, homespun *Burlesque*, the bluesy closing *Passacaglia* includes an extended, heartfelt soliloquy for cello, superbly rendered by the Piatti Quartet's cellist Jessie Ann Richardson, for whom the solo was written.

The players have a natural empathy with Phibbs' writing, responding intuitively to the ebb and flow of each musical paragraph and offering convincingly paced and cogently structured conceptions of all three featured works. They have been recorded clearly and with refinement on this highly recommendable disc.

**Paul Conway**



**Fantasias for Piano**  
**Fantasia**  
**Contrappuntistica**  
**Op 24/**  
**Lawrence Rose:**  
**Piano Fantasia**

**Op 24/ Rachmaninoff:**  
**Morceaux de Fantasia Op 3/**  
**de Falla: Fantasia Baetica**  
**Martin Cousin piano**  
★★★★★ **Convivium CR 103 [74']**

This fine record is proof positive that what are today considered to be 'smaller labels' are in no way inferior to what used to be termed 'the majors': here is an intelligently-planned, wide-ranging disc of fine music for solo piano by four

composers, varied in their ethnicity and period, with each work or set of works clearly chosen to appeal broadly to the same music-lover, in doing so broadening their knowledge and listening experience in a wholly positive manner.

Of the four composers chosen, it is the name of Lawrence Rose which will be the least-known, but his fine *Fantasia for piano* lies in no way outside of the broad spectrum of acceptance and genuine musical interest of the other three works here. He is rewarded with a performance of considerable insight and dedication, comments which apply throughout to the repertoire on this disc, and it is heartening to see an artist of Martin Cousin's distinction presenting all four works (in the case of Rachmaninoff's Opus 3, 'set of works') with the same artistic understanding and technical command they each require.

The recording quality is excellent, as is the presentation. *This disc is thoroughly recommended.*

**Robert Matthew-Walker**



**The Age of the**  
**Russian Avant-**  
**Garde: Futurists and**  
**Traditionalists**

**Lourié, Medtner,**  
**Mosolov, Roslavets,**  
**Stanchinsky. Pianists – Olga Solovieva,**  
**Olga Andryushchenko, Paul Stewart,**  
**Giorgi Koukl**

★★★★★ **Grand Piano GP896X [8 CDs]**

This set of eight discs is of largely neglected trend setters in 20th century Russian music; if the music of Medtner, Roslavets and Lourié are better known, the creativity of Mosolov and Stanchinsky are rarely heard in the concert hall. The short life of Alexey Stanchinsky could be the subject of a tragic Russian opera. He studied with Grechaninov, Taneyev and Zhilyaev, and piano with Lhévinne and Igumnov, among others. He was blighted by poor health, and by his family's opposition to marriage to the mother of his son and he died from a heart attack trying to cross a frozen river at night after leaving home to go to his fiancée.

Stanchinsky anticipates the rhythmic intonation of Prokofiev and Stravinsky, the modality of Shostakovich, the harmonies of Hindemith together with new diatonic scales and neo-folkloric tendencies. He also created new forms in his 'sketches'



and 'canon-preludes' and remarkably makes a link between the Baroque and Romantic eras and Russian folk-music. As Olga Solovieva writes, 'Stanchinsky's music is like an exposed nerve, all at the limit of the senses.'

Stanchinsky's music was edited by Zhilyaev who was arrested in 1937, and the music disappeared with him until his archives were discovered in the 1980s and the complete edition published in 1990. Thankfully, owing to the pioneering work by Andryuschenko and Solovieva, we can hear his revelatory piano music for the first time.

Several trends are presented in this fascinating collection, from the futurism of Arthur Lourié who rejected the Petersburg school and created his own free style which was first heard pre-Great War in musical soirees in Petersburg, typical is his *Smoking Sketch*, *Masques*, and the *Petite Suite en fa* from 1926. *Syntheses*, from 1914, is a remarkable series of studies with colours and harmonies similar to Debussy's modernism.

A composer who I have tried to like both in the concert hall and in recordings is Medtner and always has disappointed me, but here with Paul Stewart's readings, I have found a quite different composer, who offers a wonderful late romanticism yet based on a structure of pianism that is based on Taneyev's strict modality. The Sonata-Skazka is a piece of unbounded beauty and astonishingly warm harmonies. This love of melody is evinced in the Piano Sonatas, especially in his Sonata Triad, and the Sonata-Elegy, the latter quotes the *Dies Irae* beloved of Rachmaninov, and there are influences of jazz in the finale. This single disc has changed my past dislike of this composer, thankfully owing to Paul Stewart's wonderful playing and interpretation I have become a late admirer of this composer.

Of a quite different order are the piano works of Mosolov, his five sonatas (one is missing) outdo the early Prokofiev in their invention, expressly the fourth from 1925, the first two sonatas prepare the listener for what is to come, by then Mosolov was a constructivist and explored new sounds corresponding to the time – clattering harmonies and dissonances abound in a fury with each note a challenge for the finest virtuoso. The fifth Sonata challenges the limits of pianism even more in its 22 minutes, while the *Turkmenian Nights* offers a more sober mind with the harmonies of central Asian folk song meeting



Clive Osgood

Photo: Mike Cooter



**Clive Osgood: *Stabat Mater* (2009)**

Jack Liebeck (violin), Grace Davidson (soprano), Mark Wilde (tenor), Julian Empett (baritone)/ The Choir of Royal Holloway/ London Mozart Players/ Rupert Gough

★★★★★ Convivium CR104

Readers of our journal will recall the feature on this British composer published in our last issue, and we trust our efforts will have gone some way in ensuring his work begins to receive the attention it deserves, not least from choral groups and similar bodies in this country and abroad. This setting of the *Stabat Mater* reveals a thoroughly committed composer of genuine gifts, one who does not strain or expect the impossible from his performers, but continues with no little sense of individual achievement to work in what might be termed traditional musical fields – certainly, with regard to technical demands and accomplishment.

There is a deep sense of pacification running through this fine work, a sense that is surely needed in these trying times,

and one that is too infrequently encountered in music today – so often arising from fashion and the latest fad. Osgood's music may have its roots in what might be termed late Vaughan Williams (of *Hodie* and the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies) and Edmund Rubbra (the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies), but this is no re-tilling of earlier furrows – such references are given to indicate the inherent nature of this fine and moving work. As Schoenberg effectively said: 'there is much good music to be written in C major', and I trust I have given sufficient indication of the kind of musical expression Osgood's work inhabits to attract lovers of British music to this very worthwhile release.

**Robert Matthew-Walker**

the composer's modernism. Scintillating miniatures of his youthful genius are revealed in the *Two Nocturnes*, and the *Two Dances* are stunningly exciting masterpieces showing every aspect of Mosolov's machine-like creations.

Roslavets' instrument was the violin however this sole piano disc reveal a composer able to write for all instruments, and his technique of the 'synthetic chord' challenging Schoenberg's atonality is revealed in several of these pieces. The most important pieces are from the war years, His *Trois compositions* of 1914 epitomise this composer linked with the futurists, and his affinity with France, this is evinced in the two sonatas from the period in which he further extends his

new musical theory. *The Cinq Preludes* of 1919-1922 are wonderful examples of his colourful harmonies in these glittering miniatures together with the *Quatre Compositions* of 1921. Roslavets' Fifth Sonata is from his spell when he was the editor of a music magazine and already a leading figure of Soviet music.

In all, for anyone interested in neglected Russian music – this is an obligatory buy, especially for the overlooked Stanchinsky, and in all performed by pianists who believe in this music and offered in brilliantly engineered recordings. The booklets in the box are highly informative in both English and German and colourfully presented.

**Gregor Tassie**

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