

Ferruccio BUSONI (1866-1924)

Orchestral Works

Orchestral Suite No.2, Op.34a, K 242 *Geharnischte Suite* (1895, revised 1902-03) [21:38]

Berceuse élégiaque, Op.42, K 252a (1909) [7:43]

Concertino for Clarinet and Small Orchestra, Op.48, K 276 (1918) [10:10]

Sarabande and Cortège - Two Studies for 'Doktor Faust', Op.51, K 282 (1918-19) [17:25]

Tanzwalzer, Op.53, K 288 (1920) [12:32]

Lustspiel-Ouvertüre, Op.38, K 245 (1897, revised 1904) [6:28]

Indianische Fantasie, Op.44, K 264 (1913-14) [23:19]

Gesang vom Reigen der Geister, Op.47, K 269 (1915) [7:14]

Die Brautwahl, (The Bridal Choice) Suite for Orchestra Op.45, K 261 (1912) [27:17]

John Bradbury (clarinet); Nelson Goerner (piano)

BBC Philharmonic/Neeme Järvi

rec. Studio 7, New Broadcasting House, Manchester, 2001/4

CHANDOS CHAN241-57 [69:54 + 64:34]

Busoni's orchestral works have not attracted a great deal of attention; at least not sufficient for there to have been many recordings of his orchestral output. In addition to this one from the early 2000s there are only the differently constituted but in places overlapping two discs from Capriccio ([review](#) ~ [review](#)).

The *Geharnischte Suite* recalls happy days in Helsinki. It is here done with enormous élan and boisterous confidence. Listen to the bragging horns in the *Assault* movement. Järvi takes no prisoners and seems to harbour no doubts. The four movements are dedicated respectively to Jean Sibelius, Adolf Paul (author of the play *King Kristian II* of Sibelius fame), Armas Järnefelt and Eero Järnefelt.

The *Berceuse élégiaque* was a companion to EMI's [Ogdon](#) recording of the Busoni Piano Concerto dating all the way back to the 1960s. For that reason the *Berceuse* might well be familiar to some readers. It's an atmospherically thoughtful piece which is here allowed space to muse and meander. The score carries the enigmatic words 'A man's cradle-song at his mother's bier'.

The *Sarabande and Cortège* was also on that 2-LP set in which the RPO was conducted by Daniell Revenaugh (b.1934) - we never hear about him. He was in fact a pupil of Busoni's pupil, Egon Petri and was one of the founders of the Busoni Society. This substantial bipartite piece (here separately tracked) contrasts a walking-pace and pensive *Sarabande* with a quick tempo *Cortège* having Sibelian overtones.

The *Tanzwalzer* - an avowedly lighter piece - is in three movements which, after some Mahlerian rumbles, lilts flightily along. It will come as no surprise that it is dedicated to the memory of Johann Strauss. Roughly speaking it belongs in the company of the orchestral waltz works of Richard Strauss, [Julius Röntgen](#), [Joseph Marx](#) and [Erich Korngold](#) without being quite as lush.

The cheery Clarinet Concertino is overture in scale. It bubbles smoothly along like a tarantella and is here under the trusty aegis and spur of John Bradbury. The effect is rather like Weber and only minimally updated.

The buzzing and bustling *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre* is a highly crafted successor to generations of 'comedy overtures' running forward from the *Nozze de Figaro*. It busily patters and crashes with the best of the genre.

The *Indianische Fantasie* for piano and orchestra is a more subtle work that is well endowed with both smiling glitter and stern virtuosity. Naturally enough Busoni has his nineteenth century credentials but here the style is more deliciously convoluted Cyril Scott than Indianist MacDowell. Goerner is a good partner to the dynamic Järvi. Neither sells the listener short.

I did not recall the introspective, murmurous *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister* but Calum MacDonald's note reminds me that this shadowy piece is described in the score as 'a study for strings, six wind instruments and percussion'. Its material has some association with the *Indianische Fantasie* in that it is based on a Pawnee song - a holy dance designed to bring back the dead. The *Gesang* is linked with American master-impressionist composer [Charles Martin Loeffler](#).

Greater exuberance and amorous sentiment is to be found in the *Die Brautwahl* suite (drawing on his opera of the same name). The Suite was premiered in Berlin in 1913 by Oskar Fried. The finale has much of the fluttering eagerness of the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre* but a degree more polish.

The notes are by two Busoni adepts: Antony Beaumont and Calum MacDonald. They are in English, German and French. Beaumont also worked with [Capriccio](#), [Chandos](#) and [Nimbus](#) as a conductor - especially in Gurlitt and Zemlinsky. His 1985 Faber & Faber Busoni study is a standard reference.

These two Chandos discs were initially separately issued and reviewed here in [2002](#) and [2005](#).

There is no direct single conductor-single orchestra competition. This in any event scores as first class value for money - no compromise, premium music-making at 2-4-1 pricing and showcasing unusual and valuable repertoire.

Rob Barnett

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Paul HINDEMITH (1895-1963)

The Complete String Quartets

String Quartet No. 1 in C Major, Op. 2 (1914-1915) [33:32]

String Quartet No. 2 in F minor, Op. 10 (1918) [30:47]

String Quartet No. 3 in C, Op. 16 (1920) [30:59]

String Quartet No. 4, Op. 22 (1921) [25:04]

String Quartet No. 5, Op. 32 (1923) [27:17]

String Quartet No. 6 in E flat (1943) [24:45]

String Quartet No. 7 in E flat (1944-1945) [16:15]

Juilliard String Quartet: Robert Mann (violin), Joel Smirnoff (violin), Samuel Rhodes (viola), Joel Krosnick (cello)

rec. 1995-1997, New York (2-6), Saundhausen (1 & 7)

WERGO WER69602 [3 CDs: 189:25]

Hindemith's seven string quartets can be divided into two distinct compositional periods. Quartets 1-5 were written between 1915-1923, when the composer was in his twenties. The later Quartets 6 and 7 date from 1943-1945, when he was living in the States; unlike the earlier works, they have not been assigned opus numbers. This cycle by the esteemed Juilliard String Quartet was recorded between 1995-1997 and originally issued on Wergo as three separate volumes. Highly praised at the time, it was awarded the German Record Critics Annual Award in 1998. The label has now repackaged the three CDs into a box set, remastering the recordings in 20-bit technology.

Although Hindemith's string quartets are technically challenging works, their adept scoring demonstrates the composer's familiarity with the medium. In 1921 Hindemith founded the original Amar Quartet, together with his brother Rudolf and two other German musicians, and assumed the role of violist. The quartets have had a rough ride in the intervening years since composition. Apart from the evergreen Fourth Quartet, the other six have been victims of unwarranted neglect.

The First String Quartet Op. 2, thought to have been lost, was only discovered in the mid-1990s. This student work bears the fingerprints of Brahms and Dvořák, oozing melody and lyricism. Many will find it the most accessible of the composer's string quartet oeuvre. It displays a wealth of ingenuity and invention. It is difficult to understand why it has not made more significant inroads into the repertoire. The structure of this four-movement work is fairly conventional, the second movement being an *Adagio*, the third a *Scherzo*.

Hindemith's experiences as a soldier during World War 1 are certainly not reflected in the Second Quartet, Op. 10. I find it quite upbeat. The finale radiates a playful exuberance. All three movements—the second is a theme and variations—are more tightly constructed than Op. 2.

The Juilliard Quartet make much of the passion and drama of the opening movement of the Third Quartet, and get fully to grips with its many complexities and changing moods. I love the contrasting middle movement, which is both sombre and reflective. In the finale, they convey generous helpings of vivacity and high-spiritedness.

The Fourth Quartet, cast in five movements, owes its popularity to a succinct expression and style. In the first movement *Fugato Sehr Langsame Viertel*, the Juilliards delineate the polyphonic strands with clarity. The performance truly conveys the mournful tread of the music. The second and fourth movements, which frame the serene and melancholic slow movement, are vital and energetic. The *Rondo* finale is genial and good-humoured.

The String Quartet No 5, Op 32 was written two years after its predecessor, in 1923. Hindemith had the Amar Quartet's spontaneous and uninhibited style of playing in his mind when he composed it.

An energetic fugue in the first movement is followed by a doleful and darkly embroidered second movement. The third movement is scurrying and crisply articulated, with a Passacaglia to top off proceedings, revealing once again what a dab hand the composer was at counterpoint.

Twenty years separates the Fifth and Sixth Quartets. The Sixth resulted from a commission from the Budapest String Quartet in 1943. They premiered it at a Library of Congress concert in Washington, D.C. on 7 November of the same year. Once again, a fugue is incorporated into the opening movement. The Juilliards play the faster section with sufficient vim and vigour. A short mettlesome second movement, quite brash in character, precedes a set of variations. The fourth movement seems determined to assert itself with grit and determination.

Hindemith's last venture into the medium was also performed by the Budapest String Quartet at the Library of Congress, this time in March 1946. At sixteen minutes, the Seventh is the shortest of the quartets. It was written for the domestic setting; Hindemith's wife was an amateur cellist and, to some extent, he took her technical limitations into account when writing the work. All four movements radiate a certain charm. A rather attractive songlike slow movement is placed third.

These are stylish and persuasive readings. Technical polish, immaculate intonation and flawless ensemble are compelling features of the Juilliard's renditions. For those coming to these works for the first time, this cycle cannot be bettered, and it gets my enthusiastic endorsement.

Recorded almost contemporaneously with the Juilliard cycle were The Danish Quartet's traversal on CPO (1995-1996) and the Kocian Quartet's on Praga Digital (1995). I happen to have these two sets, so was able to do a head-to-head. I found the Kocian's sound hard-edged, lacking the resonance and bloom of both the Danish and Juilliard cycles. How do the latter two compare? Well, the Juilliard are marginally warmer and more immediate. Ensemble of the Kocians can be somewhat ragged at times, but they do include the two parody works for string quartet: *Overture to the Flying Dutchman as Played at Sight by a Second-Rate Concert Orchestra at the Village Well at 7 O'clock in the Morning*, a delightfully entertaining piece, and the *Militärminimax*. I have yet to hear the Amar Quartet's newly released cycle on Naxos.

Stephen Greenbank

Il Cembalo di Partenope

Catalina Vicens (harpsichord)

rec. 2015, National Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota, USA

CARPE DIEM RECORDS CD-16312 [66:35]

The use of historical instruments is one of the main features of historical performance practice. However, in recordings and on the stage it is mostly copies, which are used. Authentic historical instruments are either not in playable condition or are too precious to transport. Only some violinists are blessed with the possession of a real historical instrument, whereas most of their colleagues have to content themselves with copies of instruments, the originals of which are preserved in museums.

It is easy to understand the excitement of someone like Catalina Vicens, when she was offered the opportunity to make a recording on what is assumed to be the oldest playable harpsichord. It is an instrument by an unknown builder from Naples and is thought to date from around 1525. It is now preserved in the National Music Museum of Vermillion in South Dakota, USA. In the booklet John Koster, Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of South Dakota, states that this instrument contributes to a more differentiated picture of harpsichord building in Italy. In the 17th century most harpsichords had two 8' stops, partly inspired by the need to play the basso continuo. Earlier instruments had only one 8' register; larger instruments sometimes had also a 4' stop. Harpsichords were already built in Naples in the 15th century and were exported to other parts of Italy, such as Rome. The instrument featured in this recording was restored by removing the second 8' register which had been added in the 17th century. It was also restrung and a new set of jacks was installed. "The instrument was presumably intended to be strung in brass and tuned to the pitch known as *tutto punto*, roughly equivalent to the modern $a_1 = 440$ Hz."

Ms Vicens had to decide which repertoire to play. Very little harpsichord music was published in the 16th century. Her starting point was Antonio Valente, who was blind from his childhood and worked in Naples as an organist. Two collections of keyboard music is all what he has left. The first, the *Intavolatura di cimbalo*, was printed in 1576 and contains various forms of keyboard music, which were in vogue at the time. On the one hand there are one fantasia and six *recercate*, which are dominated by polyphony, on the other hand the collection contains dances, all but in name *gagliardas*. In these the left hand mainly plays chords whereas the right hand plays figural passages.

From this collection she worked her way backwards to the time the harpsichord was built, as she puts it in the booklet. As the tracklist shows, the majority of the pieces she selected are arrangements of vocal works, especially frottolas. The *frottola* was by far the most popular genre in Italy from roughly 1450 to 1530. It is a collective term for texts of various forms and character. Its origin is the practice of reciting poems to a musical accompaniment, which was widespread in the mid-15th century. Poet, singer and performer were usually the same, and the accompaniment was mostly improvised. One of the main collections of frottolas arranged for keyboard was published by Andrea Antico in 1517: *Frottole Intabulate da Sonare*. It probably was the very first specimen of printed keyboard music in Europe. There is some uncertainty about the authorship of these arrangements. The title-page seems to suggest that they were from the pen of Antico himself as he is depicted sitting at a harpsichord. But Glen Wilson, in the liner-notes to his complete recording of this collection ([review](#)), has strong doubts. The harpsichord at the title-page is particularly interesting. John Koster writes that this instrument is very similar to the one featured in this recording.

The programme very much reflects what was popular during the 16th century in Naples, but also elsewhere. The track-list includes the names of Marchetto Cara and Bartolomeo Tromboncino. They were the main composers of frottolas. Both worked at the court of the Este family in Mantua. In addition we have some chansons here, for instance by Josquin Desprez (*Plusieurs regretz*), Philippus de Monte (*Sortez mes pleurs*) and by Claudin de Sermisy; his *Tant que vivray* is still one of the best-known chansons of the renaissance. These are played in intavolations by several composers. Antonio Valente is one of them. Marco Antonio Cavazzoni was one of the main keyboard players of his time,

who worked in several towns, among them Venice. The pieces played here are taken from his only printed collection of keyboard works, which dates from 1523 and was published in Venice. Claudio Maria Veggio seems to have worked mostly in Piacenza, but little is known about him. He published a collection of madrigals, but his keyboard music has only survived in manuscript.

Catalina Vicens not only selected keyboard works, but also turned to lute music. The lute was a popular instrument in the renaissance, and lutenists not only played original music, such as dances, but also arrangements of frottolas, chansons and madrigals, probably mostly improvised. Vincenzo Capirola was a nobleman and lutenist from Brescia, Juan Ambrosio Dalza was from Milan and was responsible for the fourth book of lute intavolations which was printed by Petrucci in Venice in 1508. Playing lute music on keyboard instruments was common practice. In the 16th and 17th centuries various collections of music were printed which mentioned keyboard, lute and harp as alternatives on the title-page.

Obviously the main attraction of this disc is the harpsichord. It is a splendid instrument, which is excellently suited for the repertoire which Catalina Vicens selected. Although the programme includes many intavolations, there is much variety in the way the different composers have treated the original material. That comes well to the fore in Catalina Vicens's performance. She delivers differentiated performances and is equally convincing in the more demanding pieces as in the rather simple arrangements and dances.

Instrument, music and performance are a happy combination here and therefore no lover of keyboard music should miss this disc.

Johan van Veen

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Christopher WOOD (b.1945)

Requiem

Rebecca Bottone (soprano)

Clare McCaldin (alto)

Ed Lyon (tenor)

Nicholas Garrett (bass)

L'Inviti Sinfonia and Singers/Paul Brough

rec. 2012, St. John's Smith Square, London

ORCHID CLASSICS CRC100068 [60.55]

The first thing that you realise, not only by reading Warwick Thompson's detailed if slightly sycophantic booklets but also by listening to this work, especially the final climactic movement, the 'Libera Me', is that Christopher Wood is a devout Christian and writes this Requiem from a strongly attained 'post-resurrectionist' standpoint. Perhaps, you might say all composers do something similar but in Wood's case his Requiem is always positive, always aiming at an uplifting beauty and always sure of itself and its direction.

So, you say, this reviewer is a fan, - a convert, this review is not going to be unbiased. Well not really, but I have started with an overall view of the piece which I'm sure the composer would concur with. But who is Christopher Wood and how did the piece come to be written, it is truly an extraordinary story.

Wood does not describe himself as a composer; he is primarily, by training and passion, a medical man, and one of some repute and success. In a sense he falls into the shoes of Borodin who was principally a chemist and they both share a powerful ability to write long, lyrical melodies, note especially the opening of the Agnus dei for the soprano and tenor soloists.

Christopher Wood became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and a consultant at the Hammersmith Hospital where he led the breast and colon cancer clinics. In the 1980's he helped to develop a new drug in a start-up Biotechnology Company and moved into the pharmaceutical industry and amongst his achievements was a breakthrough drug for children with leukaemia. But music was in his blood, growing up singing in Wales at his local church and with a mother who sang in the chorus of Welsh National Opera.

It was whilst seeing Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's funeral in 2002 where, he felt there was a genuine and heart felt sense of National mourning, that he asked himself what if these people who are filing past the coffin were a choir, what would they be singing?. The idea of this Requiem then came to him and he quietly worked on it for his own pleasure and interest, sometimes after a long, gruelling working day, for the next six years.

It was through a chance meeting with event manager David Guest and an introduction to the eventual orchestrator Jonathan Rathbone that the idea of putting this Requiem on came to fruition, the sort of luck a composer needs. Paul Brough guest conductor of the BBC Singers was brought on board and the first performance took place in December 2012 the recording being made on the same day.

Wood has divided the work into ten sections each separately tracked but some sections may contain a longer text sequence. For example the fifth movement begins with the 'Confutatis' and includes the 'Lacrimosa' and the 'Pie Jesu'. The emphasis throughout is on Peace and Beauty and even in the 'Dies Irae' and the composer admits that this section is not loud and stormy (like the Verdi.) He writes ".....I felt that on the Day of Judgement I'm not going to be shouting, I'm going to be quaking in my boots. So there's a quiet, shocked gasp in the middle of the Dies Irae" otherwise it is quite reflective.

This has led overall to a lack of dramatic contrast between the sections and a sameness of harmony and style with a strong reliance on sequential writing. Certainly there are climaxes and passionate outbursts but the language is couched somewhere between Beethoven and Verdi moving towards a sort of 'Songs of Praise' sugary quality. The rhythms tend to be rather foursquare and predictable. The orchestration by the versatile Jonathan Rathbone does , as the composer admits, turn the work from "a pig's ear into a silk purse". The use of brass in the Sanctus is most apt and noble , even Handellian, these fanfare ideas are also used in other movements.

But this is not to denigrate the performers. The soloists, whose names are not that well known are extremely convincing with young fresh voices and the L'Inviti Singers are superbly balanced with clear diction and a full-bodied tone quality. The recording needs a little enhancement from one's amplifier but is well balanced. Although recorded in 2012 the disc has only recently (2017) been released.

It is quite likely, as the work has received a number of performances, that it would have a distinct appeal to amateur choral societies who are looking for something modern which "won't scare the horses" and its quite likely that it will be found to be a fulfilling experience. For myself, as listener and reviewer I can't find much in the work that is striking and makes me want to listen to it again.

Gary Higginson

El Ruiseñor Andaluz - Un hommage musical à Federico Garcia Lorca

Benjamin Valette (guitar)

Ensemble Chronochromie (Julie Bouysson, Jenny Daviet, Aude Fenoy, Camille Slosse (soprano); Anne-Elisabeth Petit, Mélodie Ruvio (mezzo); Béatrice Pary (alto); Cédric Lotterie, Branislav Rakic, Deryck Webb (tenor); Cédric Baillegerau, Thomas Roullon, Jean-Louis Serre (bass-baritone))/Jean-Michel Hasler

rec. 2011, Fondation La Borie-en-Limousin (Solignac)

AD VITAM AV 120515 [57:53]

The Andalusian poet, Federico García Lorca (the Andalusian Nightingale) was murdered by Falangist militia during the Spanish Civil War. His writings have inspired and been set by various composers. The honour roll includes operas: Denis Apłvor's [Yerma](#) (1955) and Wolfgang Fortner's [Blood Wedding](#) (1957). Henri Tomasi, whose orchestral music has a presence in the Ad Vitam catalogue, wrote a [Guitar Concerto À la mémoire d'un poète assassiné, F.G. Lorca](#) in 1969. Add to the efforts by Crumb, Rautavaara, Revueltas, Poulenc, Lefanu and Weinberg three large-scale Lorca song-cycles by Vicente Pradal, all issued on CD by [Virgin Classics](#).

Ensemble Chronochromie and Ad Vitam intend this disc as a musical tribute to Lorca and it is equal to the implicit challenge. The only slight drift away is the intricately faceted Rodrigo piece which is an impressive and technically demanding tribute to Lorca's teacher, Manuel de Falla. Ferrer's works for unaccompanied choir open and close the disc. They are given touchingly and with considerable ardour. The recording is close and haloed but not stifling. Every gradation of dynamic is meticulously captured as is the choir's robust, swaying and dancing delivery. The final song of *Tres Canciones de Amor, Preludio*, has the strongest Hispanic atmosphere. The final sequence of three songs, *Tres Andaluzas*, written like the *Tres Canciones*, in 1997, brings the disc to a close. These Ferrer pieces are equally fine companions to the main act here which is the Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

The masterly Falla guitar solo is all half-lights, grey scales and subtle shifts. Lorca's own *Anda Jaleo, Las morillas de Jaén* and *Sevillanas de siglo XVIII* for guitar (Valette) and mezzo (Ruvio) are heavy with flamenco sparks and kindling. Castelnuovo-Tedesco spent much of his later life in the USA but the seven Lorca songs for choir and guitar, *Romancero Gitano* (1951), have a strong Spanish accent. They are seductively oblique, raucously precise, smokingly direct, liquid-cool, ornate and toe-tappingly aggressive. It's a superb virtuoso piece and rewarding for choir, guitarist and audiences. I understand that this composer also turned to Cervantes' writings for inspiration so it is no surprise to learn that Spain was in Castelnuovo-Tedesco's family bloodline.

The liner booklet has all the sung words and profiles of the artists and of Lorca. There's also a brief scene-setter by the conductor, Jean-Michel Hasler. It's light on details about the individual pieces so the music is left largely to speak for itself. English monoglots should be aware that although the background notes are in French and English, the texts of the songs are in Spanish and French; no English translation.

French musicians resonantly deliver this unusual Lorca anthology.

Rob Barnett

Track-List

Manuel Oltra Ferrer

Tres Canciones de Amor

1 Madrigalillo [2:18]

2 Eco [2:04]

3 Preludio [1:47]

Ensemble Chronochromie/Jean-Michel Hasler

Manuel de Falla

4 *Homenaje*: Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy

Benjamin Valette [3:14]

Federico Garcia Lorca

5 *Canciones Españolas Antiguas*: Anda, Jaleo [2:08]

Benjamin Valette/Ruvio

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco

Romancero Gitano Op. 152

6 Baladilla de los Tres Rios [4:41]

7 La Guitarra [3:36]

8 El Puñal [1:44]

9 Procesión - Paso - Saeta [7:34]

10 Memento [2:36]

11 Baile [2:21]

12 Crótalo [1:51]

Benjamin Valette; Ensemble Chronochromie, Jean-Michel Hasler, Jenny Daviet, Béatrice Pary, Deryck Webb, Jean-Louis Serre

Lorca

13 *Canciones Españolas Antiguas*: Las Morillas Jaén [3:24]

Benjamin Valette / Ruvio

Rodrigo

14 *Invocación y Danza*: Hommage à Manuel de Falla [9:18]

Benjamin Valette

Lorca

15 *Canciones Españolas Antiguas*: Sevillanas [2:18]

Benjamin Valette, Ruvio

Manuel Oltra Ferrer

Tres Andaluzas

16 Canción de Jinete [1:57]

17 Es Verdad [2:07]

18 Arbolé, Arbolé [3:45]

Ensemble Chronochromie

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791)

Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute) opera in two acts, K. 620 (1791) [169.32]

Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder

Cast:

Martin Summer – (Sarastro)

Yasmin Özkan – (Queen of the Night)

Martin Piskorski – (Tamino)

Fatma Said – (Pamina)

Till von Orlowsky – (Papageno)

Theresa Zisser – (Papagena)

Sascha Emanuel Kramer – (Monostatos)

Philipp Jekal – (First Priest)

Thomas Humer – (Second Priest)

Elissa Huber – (First Lady)

Kristin Sveinsdóttir – (Second Lady)

Mareike Jankowski – (Third Lady)

Moritz Plieger, Clemens Schmid, Raphael Eismayr (soloists of Wiltener

Sängerknaben – (Three Boys)

Francesco Castoro – (First man in Armour)

Victor Sporyshev – (Second man in Armour)

Marcel Herrnsdorf – (First Slave)

Tenzin Chonev Kolsch – (Second Slave)

Thomas Prenn – (Third Slave)

Jorge Abarza Sutter – (Priest)

Orchestra e Coro dell'Accademia Teatro alla Scala, Milan/Ádám Fischer

rec. live 21 September 2016 La Scala, Milan

Stage Director – Peter Stein

Additional production and recording details at end of review

C MAJOR 740504 Blu-ray [172.39]

Written by Mozart in the form of a singspiel *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)*, I have several Blu-rays of the work, but none more entertaining than this marvellous new 2016 staging at La Scala, Milan. Remarkably all the soloists, chorus and orchestra are students of the Accademia Teatro alla Scala, the educational institution, founded in 2001. Here the academy students benefit from the professional expertise of music director Ádám Fischer and celebrated stage director Peter Stein and his creative team, and the results are a credit to all concerned. A critical and public success all ten La Scala performances were sold out with a broadcast given on Arte television.

It was in 1791 that Mozart collaborated with versatile Bavarian impresario Emanuel Schikaneder who wrote the libretto for *Die Zauberflöte*. A couple of months before his death Mozart conducted the première in September 1791 at Schikaneder's own Theatre auf der Wieden, Vienna with Schikaneder playing the role of Papageno. The success was such that following its première the opera was staged over 230 times in its first ten years at the Theatre auf der Wieden. It is testament to Mozart's capacity that, at a time towards the end of his life tormented by failing physical and mental health, and mounting debts, he could write music of vital energy, jape and fantasy. Imbued in the libretto are mysterious Freemasonry rituals that directors can choose to emphasize or ignore. There is also a strong omnipresence of death and dying in the text and at the 2013 Baden-Baden Easter Festival stage director Robert Carsen remarked that death is mentioned around 60 times together with 2 suicide attempts.

Stein has presented a rather straightforward production strong on traditional aspects of the original staging. Stein's vision portrayed Queen of the Night as power-mad and vindictive, and Sarastro who develops as a fountainhead of harmony and wisdom. So crucial to understanding the convoluted plot Stein has retained almost all of the substantial and pertinent spoken dialogue, while several of the

Masonic rituals and numerous symbols have been maintained. It seems as if set designer Ferdinand Wögerbauer and costume designer Anna Maria Heinrich have based their designs on Max Slevogt's marginal sketches. Whatever the inspiration Wögerbauer and Heinrich have excelled providing attractive sets and costumes that have a quality feel and are easy on the eye. Recurring features of Wögerbauer's set used in various scenes include a reddish coloured mound positioned centre stage which serves to elevate the soloists, a pyramid shaped Temple with a prominent arch on two Greek Ionic columns, a large low altar with a substantial number of yellow pyramid lights, palm trees framing the stage, star filled night sky on backdrop. A suspended cradle is used to transport the three boys impressively through the air. Pleasing on the eye are the admirable animal costumes comprising of large airs of lions and bears, an ostrich and a bear that prowl around Sarastro. Standing out are the impressive looking flames emitted from the helmets of two men in armour. Best of all from the first scene chasing Papageno is the substantial green and yellow radio controlled snake that the three ladies kill by cutting into pieces with their axe spears. Even though I favour a traditional staging disagreeable is seeing Monostatos and eight other men blacked-up by designer Heinrich from head to foot as African natives dressed in grass skirts and black curly wigs as they dance and prowl around. Hard to stomach too are the racist remarks that have been left in the libretto and subtitles. Compared to the costumes of the men the women chorus are plainly dressed in rather dull coloured robes.

Tall and bearded Martin Summer makes a commanding yet benevolent Sarastro wearing a beige alb with matching headdress and a large octagram shaped gold medallion on thick chain. Summer exhibits immaculate diction and his projection is reasonably strong, however, a touch disappointing is his often uneven tone. Wearing similar vestments and octagram shaped broaches the 18 strong group of priests each carry palm leaves. As the first and second priests Philipp Jekal and Thomas Humer perform capably and with commitment. Making the most of her opportunity as Pamina, Fatma Said blessed with stunning looks is dressed in a low cut, sleeveless, floor length gown in brilliant white communicating the customary innocence of the character. Said creates an enchanting atmosphere and is in admirable voice revealing a lovely bright timbre that projects well together with clear enunciation. Martin Piskorski as the engagingly handsome flute carrying hero Tamino is decked out in Princely status with a magnificent red flock coat adorned with gold and green braid over a white blouse. On this evidence the bearded Piskorski is set for a flourishing career, excelling with his solid and deceptively weighty voice which is clear and appealing in tone.

Yasmin Özkan as Queen of the Night has her startling appearances accompanied by thunder and lightning. Wearing a glass diamond studded headdress with silver tentacles and dressed in a sparkly, low cut, dark blue gown, black cloak and veil not surprisingly Özkan's clothing and figure all look black in the dim lighting. At present Özkan's voice sounds undeveloped for the Queens's challenging showpiece arias. In the celebrated coloratura display passages there is expressive strain and unsteadiness in her bright voice which together with its warbling vibrato makes for a rather uncomfortable listen with repeated listening. Carrying a number of cages, a box with magic bells, pan-pipes and a roll of red rope at various times, bird catcher Papageno played by Till von Orlovsky wears the traditional outfit of a suit of feathers finished off with a red head crest and tail feathers. A youthful and lithe Papageno the baritone shines in a role he could have been playing for years. Orlovsky's poised performance and stage craft reminded me of seeing distinguished international baritone Christian Gerhaher play Papageno so successfully in the 2006 Salzburg Festival production by Pierre Audi and Brian Large. Theresa Zisser as Papagena also wears a suit of feathers with a red head crest but green tail feathers. This is a promising debut by the unruffled Zisser who I look forward to seeing in a larger role soon.

Sascha Emanuel Kramer gives a downright creepy portrayal of Monostatos singing his act 2 aria well whilst dancing lecherously around the sleeping Pamina. Marvellously co-ordinated in both moves and voice the 3 ladies Elissa Huber, Kristin Sveinsdóttir and Mareike Jankowski each wear different coloured corsets with short puffball skirts. Using the dark veils on their headdresses they annoyingly cover and uncover their faces far too often and for no good reason. Demonstrating how

entertainingly the 3 ladies can be played I fondly recall the exceptional performance by experienced international performers Annick Massis, Magdalena Kožená and Nathalie Stutzmann at the 2013 Baden-Baden Easter Festival. Singing and acting with immense gusto they virtually stole the show with their comedy antics in the Robert [Carsen production](#). The angelic looking three boys also known as child-spirits are well coached by chorus master Johannes Stecher and immediately gain audience approbation. Under the conducting of the enthusiastic Ádám Fischer the student orchestra plays quite superbly throughout and the academy chorus sings enthusiastically with taut unity.

Included in the accompanying booklet are a detailed track listing, an essay *The Magic Flute at the Scala - Faithful and Refreshing* by Karina Seligman, a most helpful synopsis and several black and white production photographs. No problems whatever with the stereo and surround sound options that have clarity and are well balanced. Roberto Maria Grassi's video direction is excellent with a reasonable variety of shots ensuring the eye doesn't tire, although some additional close-ups wouldn't go amiss. Adding to the atmosphere is some back-stage footage of the principals and chorus preparing for the production shown on screen during the overture. Sadly there are no bonus videos of interviews with the principals and Stein's creative team.

This captivating Peter Stein production of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)* from La Scala, Milan is magical entertainment on C Major.

Michael Cookson

Previous review: [Dave Billinge](#) (Recording of the Month)

Other recording details

Set Design – Ferdinand Wögerbauer

Costume Design – Anna Maria Heinrich

Lighting Design – Joachim Barth

Video director – Roberto Maria Grassi

Alberto Malazzi – (Academy chorus master)

Wiltener Sängerknaben chorus master Johannes Stecher

Resolution 1080i – 16.9 Filmed in High Definition. Mastered from an HD source

Sound formats:

a) Stereo LPCM 2.0ch 48kHz/24 bit

b) DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1ch 48kHz

Subtitle Languages: French (original language), English, German, Spanish, Korean, Japanese

Rarities of Piano Music at Schloss vor Husum 2016

rec. live, Husum Castle, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, 19-27 August 2016

DANACORD DACOCD789 [78:31]

It is always a great pleasure to review the annual Danacord CD “Rarities of Piano Music at Schloss vor Husum”. Listeners must remember that this disc is a judicious and eclectic (but necessarily small) selection of pieces and performers from a wide range of recitals, presented over the eight-day festival period in the beautiful Schleswig-Holstein region of Germany.

The 2016 Recital Opens with Cécile Chaminade’s *Les Sylvains*, an elegant evocation of the Fauns of Greek mythology. Two themes balance each other: a wistful, romantic tune and a livelier passage depicting the vivacious manoeuvres of woodland sprites. I understand that Johann Blanchard plays the “difficult” version, as opposed to a simplified arrangement for tyros.

The pianist with most “hits” on the present disc is Severin von Eckardstein. He opens his selection with the vibrant, but occasionally melancholy, *Barcarolle*, no. 8, op. 96 by Gabriel Fauré. This is followed by a *Prelude* by Robert Casadesus: this music is sultry and quite introverted. Anatoly Alexandrov managed to create a synthesis of romantic Russian composers such as Scriabin and Medtner. The complex *Vision*, op. 21 no. 2 (c. 1923), written in six flats, weaves its magic spell with flexible time signatures and imaginative pianistic figurations. Organ enthusiasts will know of Julius Reubke’s massive Sonata on the 94th Psalm in C minor, one of the repertoire’s master works. Less well-known is the Piano Sonata in B flat and the present *Scherzo* in D minor. The latter is a technically demanding piece that does not quite live up to the complexities of the organ sonata. Severin von Eckardstein’s final selection is an arrangement by Louis Brassin of the *Magic Fire Music* from Richard Wagner’s *The Valkyrie*. This is an effective, if somewhat brash, transcription. It deserves an occasional outing.

I loved Zlata Chochieva’s performance of Franz Liszt’s *Hymne de la nuit*, the second of his *Harmonies poétiques* (1847). This is a multifaceted, technically challenging number that creates its magic by musically nodding to (but never parodying) Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata and Chopin’s nocturnes. It is a beautiful, romantically charged piece that deserves to be better known. Chochieva’s second piece is Nikolai Medtner’s equally beautiful *Canzona serenata*, op. 38 no. 6 dating from just after the Great War. It is hard to understand the “serenity” of this piece conceived in the aftermath of such horrific and tragic events. On the other hand, the middle section is a little more animated, but never troubled.

Martin Jones plays Sergei Rachmaninov’s two lovely “early” songs, transcribed by the legendary American pianist Earl Wild. Wild takes these pieces and quite deliberately goes over the top. He out-Rachmaninovs Rachmaninov in every way, although the music never loses sight of the original setting.

I have never heard (consciously) either Stanislaw Moniuszko’s *Printemps*, op. 28, no. 1 as arranged by Ignaz Friedman, or Ignaz Paderewski’s *Nocturne*, op. 16, no. 4. The first piece is a creative transcription of a song, whereas the charming *Nocturne* is less profound than the genre may imply. Hubert Rutkowski plays both works with imagination and intuition.

A surprise for me were the *Nachtbilder* (Night Scenes), op. 26, nos. 2 and 6 by the German composer Theodor Kirchner. I guess that I associate him with relatively easy music contained in various albums of “teaching” pieces. It was great to hear these highly charged romantic works by a composer who was friendly with Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms. Florian Noack gave an inspired performance that should encourage listeners to seek out more of Kirchner’s music.

Max Reger is often seen as dry as dust: a composer of monolithic works for organ which are longwinded, overly chromatic and often downright boring. The present little piece for piano, *Träume am Kamin*, op. 143 no. 12 *Larghetto* (*Studie*) blows away this image in less than three minutes. Here is a well-judged “lullaby”, easy on the ear and evoking “Dreams by the Fireside”. What could be more

childlike and simple than that? Joseph Moog brings innocence and charm to this diminutive study. Moog's other piece here is Domenico Scarlatti's *Pastorale* arranged by Carl Tausig.

The liner notes point out that duo Andreas Grau and Götz Schumacher concentrated (in their recital) on Ferruccio Busoni's arrangements and compositions inspired by Bach and Mozart. Their big number was the 40-minute *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, played from memory. As an encore, they gave the present fine performance of Busoni's arrangement of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* overture.

Johannes Brahms is represented on this CD with his restrained Hungarian Dance No. 11 (four hands) played by Cyprien Katsaris and Hélène Mercier.

Although an accomplished pianist, Benjamin Britten was not noted for writing piano solo music. There are a few pieces, the best known of which is probably the present *Holiday Diary*. Artem Yasynskyy plays the second and third movements here: the meditative *Sailing* and the vibrant, toccata-like *Funfair*. These pieces were clearly inspired by the composer's youthful visits to the East Anglian seaside resorts.

Roger Sacheverell Coke's *Prelude* op. 33, no. 7 was composed just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Coke's then-unpopular, late-romantic style meant that his work never gained traction. Something similar happened to the music of York Bowen. In our more diverse days, we can enjoy a composer's achievements without getting too hung up about labels. Simon Callaghan, who has issued a CD of Coke's music on the Somm Label ([SOMMCD 0147](#)), includes the sets of Preludes op. 33 and op. 34. The programme on this disc closed with Callaghan's rendition of *My Favourite Things* from the *Sound of Music*, in Stephen Hough's stimulating arrangement. This is exactly the sort of number I would expect to hear on Classic FM. It appeals to the classicist *and* the music show enthusiast. It is an absolute delight.

There is so much of interest on this CD that it is impossible to pick out highlights: in fact, it is a continual highlight from end to end. Not only is the programme presented on this disc imaginative and inspiring, but the playing by the galaxy of soloists is masterful. Add to this Danacord's usual high quality of recording (live performances) and the informative liner notes. The result is a CD quite simply to luxuriate in.

John France

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Simon Callaghan (piano)

Sir William WALTON (1902-83)

Troilus and Cressida (1954) [138.27]

Richard Lewis (tenor) – Troilus: Magda Laszlo (soprano) – Cressida: Peter Pears (tenor) – Pandarus: Frederick Dahlberg (bass) – Calchas: Geraint Evans (baritone) – Antenor: Forbes Robinson (bass) – Horaste: Otakar Kraus (baritone) – Diomedes: Barbara Howitt (contralto) – Evadne: Gordon Farrell (baritone) – Priest: Clifford Starr and Stanley Cooper (tenor and baritone) – Watchmen
Covent Garden Chorus and Orchestra/Sir Malcolm Sargent
rec. Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 21 December 1954

Texts not provided

PRISTINE AUDIO PACO138 [61.16 + 77.11]

Walton was an incorrigible and inveterate reviser of his own scores, to an extent that might be described as tinkering, or niggling at details. This may have been in part because he rarely or never conducted his own first performances (although he made quite a number of recordings of them) and therefore failed to make revisions during the process of rehearsal, instead he returned to the music after the event and made alterations both major and minor in scale. Nowhere was this tendency more evident than in his treatment of his one large-scale opera *Troilus and Cressida*. Within weeks of its Covent Garden première on 3 December 1954 he was making small cuts, and for a later revival in 1963 he made yet more. Then in the 1970s he reworked the score even more substantially, altering the soprano role of Cressida to a mezzo-soprano for a series of stage performances with Dame Janet Baker; at the same time he took still more swingeing shears to whole sections of the score, deleting passages that did not even feature Cressida and even removing the climax of the love duet. These live performances formed the basis for a complete EMI recording, but when Richard Hickox came to record the opera in the studio for Chandos's 'Walton Edition' he restored the soprano register for Cressida and returned the love duet to its original form, while leaving the remainder of Walton's cuts intact. There is no doubt that this Hickox recording is the best way in which the listener can come to know the score – the EMI set is generally fine, but the sound of the live acoustic is dry and Richard Cassilly, a Covent Garden stalwart in the early Colin Davis years, lacks the warmth of Arthur Davies for Opera North and Hickox. Even better is Richard Lewis, who took the part in an LP of excerpts conducted by Walton himself and subsequently released by EMI together with a patch from a Decca recording of a scene featuring Peter Pears.

Now we have this new set, taken from a live Covent Garden performance given some three weeks after the première, which enables us to hear Lewis and Pears in complete renditions of the roles they created. It also, and even more valuably, enables us to hear the opera in the form that Walton originally envisaged; and the results are quite revelatory, giving the action a dramatic shape and musical flow that the composer's later excisions distorted badly, particularly in the exposition of Act One. We are also given the opportunity to hear the concerted passage for female voices that precedes Cressida's aria in Act Two, which Walton subsequently extracted for separate performance (CD 1 track 13, 5.50), and from which only an isolated phrase remains as a forlorn remnant in the revised version. The result in the original flows far more smoothly. Similarly, it is good to have the more extended version of the scene where Pandarus reports on Troilus's jealousy (CD 1 track 16, 2.00) which gives Troilus's interruption more point as he seeks to reassure Cassandra's fears.

There has been an earlier release taken from a BBC recording of a different performance from the first series of performances, which I have not heard; but the set here draws from unbroadcast 33rpm acetate discs, which are not free from surface noise which has presumably resulted from wear over the years. The recording is provisionally dated to 21 December 1954 on the basis that the role of Evadne is taken by Barbara Howitt, standing in for Monica Sinclair (although quite a lot of the latter's assumption of the role in Act Three can be heard on the EMI disc of excerpts); Sinclair is credited as singing on the alternative recording from December 1954.

While it is extremely interesting to hear the score in the form which Walton originally intended, the quality of the performance and the recorded sound are not always sufficient to let us hear all the detail

we might ideally like. Frederick Dahlberg's black-voiced Calchas early displays evidence of strain on the higher notes. Geraint Evans as Antenor makes his mark, as one would expect, in his dispute with the priest which Walton later largely excised; but Richard Lewis's entry into the scene lacks the sense of authority one would ideally welcome, and the sound of his voice is much better captured in the EMI excerpts than here, where the richness of his tone is minimised in such lyrical passages as "Is Cressida a slave?" (track 4).

Magda Laszlo actually sounds more substantial in tone as Cressida, but her command of English and her engagement with the text is less involved than was Schwarzkopf in the EMI excerpts; Judith Howarth and Janet Baker in the later sets are both far better in terms of giving us the capricious and temperamental heroine that Walton clearly envisioned. Clearly far from comfortable with the language, which is sometimes grossly mispronounced, Laszlo tends to compensate by singing too loudly; delicacy is a commodity in short supply. On the other hand, Peter Pears is more engaging as Pandarus than either of his successors, and he gives us the passages notated by Walton in falsetto in the manner indicated.

Otakar Kraus, as Cressida's new lover, sounds decidedly villainous (Alan Opie for Hickox is far more credibly seductive) and his command of English comes and goes; Forbes Robinson is luxury casting in the minor role of Horaste. Barbara Howitt lacks the depth of tone which Monica Sinclair brought to the part of the treacherous maid, and her spoken delivery of the words of the Oracle of Delphi (another of Walton's cuts) lacks the gravity that is surely required. The watchman whose offstage calls open Act Three is not credited either on the CD cover or in the BBC announcements (the details above are taken from the Pristine website) but sounds properly distant, unlike the over-insistent trumpet fanfares which accompany the calls are far too closely balanced.

Oddly enough the conducting of Sir Malcolm Sargent, which was widely blamed for shortcomings in the performance, sounds convincing enough although he is better in the more extended lyrical passages than in the delicate scherzo-like accompaniment to Pandarus, where he was reportedly unwilling to beat time in bars where the orchestra was silent. In the sinister accompaniment to "No answering sign" (CD2, track 11) Sargent actually achieves a more intense atmosphere than Walton himself on the disc of EMI excerpts, and he even manages to persuade Laszlo to attempt to sing softly for a change.

The recorded balance of the BBC broadcast also gives us plenty of body in the orchestral sound, which grows more convincing as the performance proceeds (perhaps I was simply becoming more accustomed to the limitations of the recording). The BBC's announcements at the beginning of each Act and at the end are retained, but are separately tracked and so can easily be skipped. The notes with the issue are limited, but Pristine's website gives further information (although not a text). These online notes also give specific details of Walton's alterations to the score.

Those who appreciate Walton's opera in one or another of its revisions will welcome the chance to hear the composer's original thoughts; and even others, although Hickox's set will remain the primary recommendation, may well conclude that the Walton's reconsiderations were not always improvements. Apparently Walton's executors are unwilling to allow the deleted passages to be exhumed from the manuscript (the parts have been destroyed). They are wrong. Even were the excisions of little or no merit (which is not true) hearing the music could only enhance the listener's admiration for the composer's work, as we have discovered in the case of the first inspirations for Vaughan Williams's *London Symphony*, Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Britten's *Billy Budd*, practically any Bruckner symphony you care to name, and a whole host of other examples.

Paul Corfield Godfrey

Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Serenade No. 1 in D major, Op. 11 [43:41]

Serenade No. 2 in A major, Op. 16 [28:52]

Gävle Symphony Orchestra/Jaime Martín

rec. 2015, Gävle Concert Hall, Sweden

Booklet notes in English & German

ONDINE ODE 1291-2 [72:33]

The Brahms serenades seem a perfect fit to that compliment “what’s not to like?”. On first hearing them many moons ago, they became firm favourites and I wondered why they weren’t programmed more often. Then finally sitting through the first of them in concert, decently enough played, I found myself mostly studying the auditorium ceiling and wondering what possessed me to think they would make good concert fare. The obvious then dawned on me that my enjoyment of these works was associated with other stimuli – good food, good company, a good book perhaps – and they were, indeed, serenades as billed – maybe more sophisticated and symphonic than their predecessors from Mozart and Haydn, but still essentially “a musical greeting, usually performed out of doors in the evening, to a beloved or person of rank” (*New Grove*). A better class of background music, perhaps. Also for the young Brahms, the serenades were key compositional steps in his growth as a symphonist.

If the ambience of this new disc by the Gävle Symphony Orchestra isn’t quite of the open air, the spirit of the playing certainly is. Spaciously recorded in the Gävle Concert Hall, the First Serenade’s opening *Allegro molto* has a rustic good humour which reminds one that this orchestra would have like-minded music of the Scandinavian composers in its blood. With a nominal strength of 52 players, the Gävle orchestra at times sounds a little light-on for strings, most notably in the cellos, but with excellent winds and a buoyant togetherness, they bring an uplifting freshness and renewed pleasure to this music. The *Scherzo* begins as intriguingly as ever, that theme with all its latent possibilities never seeming to reach its full potential. If the enigmatic smile of conductor Jaime Martín on the CD cover suggests he has something special up his sleeve, don’t be misled, but be prepared as he and his players keep pouring on the charm; the *Adagio* flowing so naturally and serenely, onto the poise and grace of the *Minuetto* interludes, before the high spirits of the two final movements bring the work to a joyous close.

If anything, the second serenade seems even better suited to the Gävle orchestra’s size and strengths, with its complement of double woodwinds, two horns, and a string ensemble without violins. While this appears to signal a darker sound and atmosphere, it’s nothing of the sort from the Swedish players, with rich and radiant winds, in beautifully pointed, sunny expression. Brahms, it is said, in later years held this serenade in particular regard, both as a nod to the past and a precursor of his symphonic works. Martín ensures the full value and foresight of Brahms’ scoring is realised, at tempos that seem just right.

With tempos in mind, it’s as well to consider the alternative recordings, a natural choice being the Decca versions of 1967 with István Kertész and the London Symphony Orchestra ([review](#)), and of 2014 with Riccardo Chailly and the Gewandhausorchester, Leipzig ([review](#) ~ [review](#) ~ [review](#)). While I usually hesitate to make timings central to such comparisons, in this case they are quite instructive, and align with my impressions. Looking at both works, Martín (43:41 + 28:52) sits between Kertész (46:27 + 29:16) and Chailly (39:09 + 26:09), but biased more towards Kertész for each serenade. And indeed, Martín and his Gävle players have the freshness and unforced spontaneity that also mark the Kertész, but without quite the heft of the LSO. Decca’s sound for Kertész, though, is starting to show its age. That of course is no problem for Chailly, and one also has to marvel at the playing of his Leipzig orchestra, but I find his train-to-catch tempos do rob these delectable works of some of their appeal, and the repose you expect a serenade to provide. Then again, this approach may work well for live performance, and had I heard playing like this at the concert mentioned above, I might well have been more engaged.

In sum, the Gävle Symphony Orchestra under Jaime Martín give refreshing and well recorded accounts of the Brahms serenades. The competition can't be ignored, and for some these performances, especially of the First Serenade, may seem a little scaled-down. But if nothing else, they win on sheer charm.

Des Hutchinson

The Flood

The Lyre Ensemble (Andy Lowings, Stef Conner, Mark Harmer)
LYRE-OF-UR 002 [49.19]

With the strapline “Ancient strings, old words, new music...”, this disc purports not so much to recreate the music of ancient Mesopotamia, but perhaps more to invoke the spirit of that age. It uses actual Sumerian and Babylonian texts – from Sumerian poetry dating back to 3000BCE, through to Akkadian literature from the 6th century BCE. The poems, hymns, lullabies, songs and proverbs which form the song texts were written in cuneiform on clay tablets and translations come mainly from Oxford University sources. The texts chosen all relate to women and the role of women within Mesopotamian society – songs of love, motherhood, gods, jealousy – and other such subjects that remain pertinent throughout the passage of time. The songs are sung in their original Sumerian or Babylonian, which is interesting. Not all texts are provided, however – the proverbs (which are sung in English) aren’t produced in the texts, and there appears to be an English song at the very start of the disc, setting a poem by Chris Green, for which we have neither words nor an explanation as to why this has been included on a disc of Mesopotamian settings.

The lyres used are reproductions of ancient lyres – the “gold lyre”, the “silver lyre” and the “Pharaonic lyre”. There are, pleasingly, notes on these instruments in the booklet, along with inadequate (far too small, and too low resolution) photographs. The booklet notes comment that “the music is contemporary and original, but imbued with tiny glimmers of a style that may well have sounds in common with the music that was originally sung in Mesopotamia”. Many of the works are quite atmospheric and interesting, although I did rather dislike the eponymous *The Flood* – Stef Conner’s singing style is just too “popular” sounding – rather like a drippy new-age popular song. As a general rule the songs *are* a bit new-agey – an air which is enhanced by “goblet percussion” – but this can also be fairly effective at times, as in the *Hymn to Istar*. Performances from the artists are fine – nothing spectacularly outstanding, but they are not at all bad, either.

The booklet is pretty poorly produced. The setting of the notes is very amateurish, and the photographs are small, badly chosen and of appalling resolution. The notes are brief – a page on the entire project, with no actual notes for the pieces of music themselves. We do, thankfully, get the notes on the instruments, a brief note on the texts, the texts themselves, and artist biographies. The most scholarly we get is in the notes on the instruments; and I was pleased to see that the sources for the texts are listed.

Some people would probably love this disc; others loathe it. I find myself somewhere in between – it’s an interesting idea and some of the music is appealing and attractive, but it’s all a little too “fluffy” and lacking in rigour for me – both the concept and the execution thereof.

Em Marshall-Luck

Contents

Come sit closer [3.14]; Balbale to Nanse [3.41]; I Looked into the Water [0.36]; The Flood [5.46]; Hymn to Istar [3.18]; Marrying is Human [0.39]; My Mother [5.44]; Chickpea Flour [0.31]; Lullaby [5.35]; Don’t Chose a wife during a Festival [0.25]; Love Song [5.32]; Large Garments [0.25]; Enkidu curses the harlot [4.27]; Dumuzid’s Dream [4.11]; A Malicious Husband [0.38]; Istar’s Descent [4.35]

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Owain PARK (b. 1993)

Footsteps (2016) [16:56]

Joby TALBOT (b.1971)

Path of Miracles (2003) [62:25]

Fellows of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain (Footsteps)

Tenebrae/Nigel Short

rec. All Hallows Church, Gospel Oak, London, 2005 (Talbot); 2016 (Park). DDD

Texts included

SIGNUM CLASSICS SIGCD471 [79:22]

This recording of Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles* is not new to the catalogue. It was first issued back in 2006 when it was [reviewed](#) appreciatively by Rob Barnett. For this reissue, timed to celebrate Tenebrae's 15th anniversary, it is coupled with a new piece by Owain Park, which was written specifically to complement it.

In a booklet note Nigel Short explains that he invited Park to write the piece as something that would be inspired by the Talbot piece and "...would be totally new and offered the chance for any singer to take part in a performance of a new work alongside Tenebrae." And so, for example, when Tenebrae came to Tewkesbury Abbey in July for as part of the 2017 Cheltenham Music Festival - their programme corresponded with the contents of this CD - they were joined for the Owain Park piece by the Cheltenham Youth Chamber Choir. I was unable to attend that event so I was especially glad to catch up with the disc.

Path of Miracles is all about the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Wisely, Owain Park has steered clear of using that subject explicitly. Instead, he has written a work which, as he puts it, "structure[s] a narrative that cycles the seasons through the view of a lonely traveller who is constantly being moved on before being allowed to settle, finding comfort in the sky and stars above." I presume that Park has constructed his own libretto. The text represents a considerable achievement in that words by no less than eight writers have been woven together pretty seamlessly in a work that takes less than 17 minutes to perform. Furthermore, the selection of writers ranges from an early 12th century Buddhist scholar through to Emily Dickinson. There are four main sections, each corresponding to a season of the year starting with Summer; in addition, there's a prologue, which is revisited at the end. The work plays continuously. Two choirs are used: a main SATB choir (Tenebrae) and a semi-chorus (here the 8 excellent voices of the Fellows of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain).

I've heard one or two pieces by Owain Park before but nothing on this scale. I must say I'm mightily impressed by *Footprints*. Though I haven't seen a score and can only judge by what I hear, the music seems to be most imaginatively and skilfully written for voices. The semi-chorus parts, whilst within the compass of good amateurs, I'm sure, offer such singers a satisfying degree of challenge. Park's music fits with and enhances the words very well indeed. The piece seems to me to dovetail nicely with the Talbot piece yet it is suitably differentiated from it as well. I would certainly advise that whenever you listen to this CD you should allow an interval of at least several minutes between the two works. I'd also say that despite its complementary origins *Footprints* also works very well as an independent piece. It's very good to have the piece on CD and the performance is superb. Incidentally, by a nice piece of symmetry the producer of the recording of *Footprints* is Adrian Peacock. He was also involved in the recording of *Path of Miracles* but as a singer; indeed, he's the excellent bass soloist in the first movement.

I'm embarrassed to say that until now I'd not heard *Path of Miracles*. I now realise that this was a serious omission on my part because it's an astonishing piece. It traces the pilgrim journey along the Camino from the small Spanish town of Roncesvalles at the foot of the Pyrenees, via the cities of Burgos and León to Santiago and the names of those four places are the titles of the four movements of

Talbot's work. In fact, many pilgrims carry on from Santiago to the Spanish coast at Finisterre and that's where Talbot also concludes his journey. The libretto is by Robert Dickinson and he has included within his original text a number of excerpts from other relevant sources. I think the libretto is entirely successful.

I mean no disrespect whatsoever to Robert Dickinson when I say that Joby Talbot takes his very fine libretto and, through his music, brings it to life. That's not to say that Dickinson's text does not have life of its own but, rather, that Talbot brings it to life in a new way. The music is brilliantly imagined for unaccompanied voices and one thing for which I was profoundly grateful is that Talbot gets all the effects he wants just through *singing*. In other words, the choir is not asked to make any outlandish sounds such as one often hears in contemporary vocal works. The one exception, if such it be, comes right at the start where Talbot gets his singers to vocalise wordlessly using a technique used in Taiwan whereby "low voices rise in volume and pitch over an extended period, creating random overtones as the voices move into different pitches at fluctuating rates." The quotation is from the outstanding booklet note by Gabriel Crouch, which provides a comprehensive introduction to the work. The effect of this opening is arresting I wonder if the intention is to suggest what Crouch calls the "veritable Babel" in Roncesvalles as pilgrims from all over the world assemble at the start of their odyssey – it certainly suggests powerfully a sense of expectation.

The first movement concerns the martyrdom of St James and how he came to be venerated. The second movement, 'Burgos' concerns what is the most difficult part of the journey as pilgrims begin to realise what they've taken on – and how much lies ahead of them. Here the text includes apprehensive prayers and details of miracles worked by St James. Talbot's music is tense and nervous, most effectively portraying the tribulations of pilgrims. By the time the travellers reach León they know they are more than halfway to Santiago. It may not be downhill all the way – literally or figuratively – but the back of the trek has been broken. The sense of greater optimism is illustrated by luminous writing for the higher voices while the narrative is principally entrusted to the lower voices. As the movement reaches its close the harmonic writing becomes ever richer and more fervent but the movement ends in contented, luminous tranquillity, the harmonies radiant.

As the last movement begins journey's end is in sight and, in fact, the moment at which the pilgrims get their first distant sight of Santiago is Talbot's cue to provide an explosion of dancingly joyful music – at this point Dickinson includes some words from the *Carmina Burana* but we're a very long way from Carl Orff, both in terms of the nature of the music and the sentiments expressed. A medieval pilgrim hymn has been woven into the music at several points earlier in the work; now it is sung as a great acclamation. As I said earlier, Talbot's pilgrimage does not end at Santiago. Instead he and Dickinson take the listener on to Finisterre. This is the occasion for a contemplative ending over the last six minutes or so of the score. As the work draws to a close we hear the pilgrim hymn one last time, this time sung to English words and bedecked in rich block harmonies. At the very end, the music just fades away suggesting, I think, the sight of the infinite horizon as one looks out to sea from the Spanish coast. This, I believe, serves two purposes. As the name of the Cape suggests, in the middle ages people thought Finisterre was the end of the world. Furthermore, Talbot's device of a fade-out suggests that a pilgrim's journey never really comes to an end.

Path of Miracles is a truly astonishing composition. I would go so far as to say it's inspired. The music is both stimulating and satisfying and the listener is constantly being led on by the compelling combination of words and music. I should imagine it's prodigiously difficult to sing but Nigel Short and his highly skilled singers give a virtuoso performance. Anyone who cares about contemporary choral music should hasten to hear this wonderful score.

The recordings of both pieces are first class, presenting the voices in an ideal fashion. I see that when Rob Barnett reviewed the original release of *Path of Miracles* it was issued as an SACD with surround sound: the reissue is as a conventional CD. Notwithstanding that, the sound remains excellent and in fact Signum's overall presentation of this disc, including a very comprehensive booklet, is first rate.

[John Quinn](#)