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## CD REVIEWS

ELLIOTT CARTER: *Dialogues*<sup>1</sup>; *Boston Concerto*; Cello Concerto<sup>2</sup>; *ASKO Concerto*<sup>3</sup>. <sup>1</sup>Nicolas Hodges (pno), <sup>2</sup>Fred Sherry (vlc), <sup>1</sup>London Sinfonietta, <sup>2</sup>BBC Symphony Orchestra, <sup>3</sup>ASKO Ensemble, c. Oliver Knussen. Bridge 9184.

In my review of Vol. 6 in Bridge's Carter series (*Tempo* Vol. 60 No. 236, p.75) I complained of the missed opportunity for pairing the Violin Concerto with the Cello Concerto. Yet I have to acknowledge that this latter work fits very well into the chronological scheme adopted for Vol. 7. Nor, this time, can I object to any incongruous juxtapositions of early and later pieces. The four works included here span a mere four years (2000–2003) and, given that Carter was 91 in December 1999, they provide a more powerful record of late creative vitality than any other collection on disc.

Only the earliest piece, the *ASKO Concerto* (2000) has been issued before; it accompanied the 2003 release of Carter's one-act opera *What Next?* (ECM 1817) in a studio recording made in 2001 by the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra under Peter Eötvös. The Bridge recording is actually earlier than that – the Amsterdam world première (26 April 2000) – and launches Carter into the 21st century with a characteristically knotty (but far from grim) play on the contrasts between a 'whole' comprising 16 players and various subgroups. Running just over 10 minutes in this performance (the Eötvös lasts a little longer) it actually makes a more substantial impression than the Cello Concerto (2001), which is twice the length and, perhaps for that reason, can't escape all accusations of a dutiful busy-ness in its faster episodes, as well as of a general tendency to textural opacity.

Most memorable in the Cello Concerto is the stark distinction between the penultimate *Tranquillo*, which seems to enter a state of mesmerised repose, and the concluding *Allegro fantastico*, which reverts to restless open-endedness. But there's an even more potent juxtaposition of disparate states at the end of the *Boston Concerto* (2002), where a short section marked *Maestoso – molto espressivo*, notable for its well-nigh Bergian melodic yearnings, gives way to an even shorter coda restoring the work's predominantly febrile character. The *Boston*

*Concerto* is dedicated to Carter's wife Helen, and has a literary epigraph from William Carlos Williams's poem 'Rain' whose images of the fragility and flow of water have affinities with Richard Crashaw's 'bulla' (bubble), the key image for Carter's monumental yet far from monolithic *Symphonia: Sum Fluxae Pretiam Spei* (1993–7).

The mixture of delicacy and energy in the *Boston Concerto*, set into a finely-balanced structure which runs for almost 17 minutes, makes this a particularly successful example of Carter's late style. *Dialogues* for piano and chamber orchestra, which followed a year later, is no less absorbing, with meditative moments – pauses for thought? – bringing light and air to the music's predominantly abrasive, caustic arguments.

All these performances benefit greatly from the supremely perceptive involvement of Oliver Knussen, and the quality of solo and ensemble playing is outstanding throughout. The recorded balances for *Dialogues* and the Cello Concerto take care not to spotlight the soloists at the expense of intricate orchestral detail: perhaps a little too much so in the case of the Cello Concerto, though the textures here – despite the valiant efforts of Fred Sherry and the Knussen-directed orchestra – are particularly difficult for the ear to unravel. *Dialogues* is less adamant, and hearing it soon after the superb performance of the Piano Concerto by Nicolas Hodges, conducted by Knussen, during the BBC's Carter Weekend creates the fervent hope that Bridge might arrange to issue that – with other orchestral works from the same event – as soon as possible.

Arnold Whittall

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JOHN TAVENER: *Schuon Lieder*. Patricia Rozaro (sop), Gillian McDonagh (temple bowls), The Schubert Ensemble. Black Box BBM1101.

Despite its hour-long duration, John Tavener's *Schuon Lieder* (2003) shows a mastery of the miniature, since none of its 19 songs lasts more than five minutes. The delicately-scored settings of poems by the Sufi mystic Frithjof Schuon

feature solo soprano, piano, string quartet and four Tibetan temple bowls. Many of the texts celebrate divine love and their joy is lovingly mirrored in Tavener's musical response.

The first song features artless, child-like vaulting piano figurations clipping through gauzed string harmonics, providing glorious accompaniment to the soloist's soaring line, punctuated by gently resonating temple bowls. The second song, marked 'Monumental' is recognizably from the same pen as *The Veil of the Temple* (2001), *Schuon Hymnen* (2003) and *Shûnya* (2003): new vistas are opened up with every transcendental harmonic shift. The crystalline clarity of the liquid piano trills in Song III is purely Schubertian; elsewhere, J.S. Bach, Webern and Messiaen are consciously alluded to. There is far more to the cycle than mere eclecticism, however. The twelfth song, the emotional core, is an extended, heartfelt setting of an early poem by Schuon, written in response to an unhappy love-affair which drew him closer to God. Oriental exoticism suffuses Songs VIII and XVI, whilst the last song, 'Ein Lied', is particularly memorable for its child-like tenderness, feminine delicacy and poignant sense of journey's end: 'The heart will melt in ultimate love - For all eternity'.

The settings are interspersed with brief, wispily austere, scuttling canons for string quartet in rippling quintuplets, based on material from the preceding songs, casting new light on them. The omnipresence of the temple bowls lends a ceremonial air, highlighting the sacred nature of many of the poems.

Patricia Rozario exults in the soaring upper reaches of the solo part and the vocal writing is ideally suited to her luminous, otherworldly tones. The Schubert Ensemble offer sensitive support, frequently heightening the emotions of the solo line. They take centre stage in a haunting, purely instrumental Postlude where the piano recalls the melody of the opening song and takes over the quintuplets from the strings in a closing gesture of reconciliation and harmony. *Schuon Lieder* is one of Tavener's most enchantingly alluring works and the recording, as is bright and clear as the performance. The intimacy of chamber forces suits the personal nature of the composer's idiom perfectly and has inspired him to fashion a vibrant spectrum of rich textures.

In contrast to the freshness and palpable sense of artistic renewal and growth in *Schuon Lieder*, a more prosaic feeling of completing unfinished business hung over the world première of Tavener's *Tribute to Cavafy* for speaker, solo soprano, choir and percussion (bells and Tibetan bowl). Featuring Vanessa Redgrave and The Tallis

Scholars, the piece was commissioned by Symphony Hall, Birmingham, completed in 1999 and was to have opened the Hall's 2002–3 concert season. Postponed at the last minute, its belated debut four years later gave the impression that most of the participants had moved on. This is true musically, in Tavener's case: with its simple, stark voice, *Tribute to Cavafy* predates the composer's recent embrace of all world religions and Western musical developments and belongs to his more austere 'Greek Orthodox' phase.

The centrepiece, 'Voices', was the indisputable highlight. In between the narrator's dramatic declamation of Cavafy's literary descendants and the Biblical record of Christ's genealogy, the choir, together with a smaller group of singers placed at a distance, chanted verses with increasingly intensity. The semi-chorus sopranos negotiated notes well above the staff with skill and purity, whilst the basses plumbed equally impressive sepulchral, subterranean depths. Mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly's radiant solo line was distinguished by its ecstatic, swiftly-repeated-note echoes. The gradual paring-down of the multiple lines to leave the basses intoning the one syllable 'God' was an especially imaginative, lucid finishing touch.

Nothing else in the work quite matched this level of invention, though there were many individual effects to admire, including the chorus monolithically intoning the words on an ancient tomb while the narrator tries to decipher them. The outer layers of the piece were identical: a folk-like choral setting of 'Days of 1903' in Cavafy's original Greek. On its first appearance, the choppy, heavily accented, staccato soprano line called to mind a theme from Ennio Morricone's film score for *The Mission*; its smoother restatement rounded off both the section, and the work itself, in a yearning contemplation well suited to words describing a lost love.

The Tallis Scholars, under Peter Phillips, demonstrated phenomenal breath control in extended passages demanding sustained sonorities and Vanessa Redgrave brought a mesmerizing presence to her key role as narrator; but on first hearing, *Tribute to Cavafy* didn't appear to amount to more than the sum of its varied and frequently engaging parts. Perhaps the truth is that Tavener has produced such a wealth of rapturously beautiful and musically interesting work since his newfound ecumenism, exemplified by *Schuon Lieder* and *The Veil of the Temple*, that earlier pieces now suffer by comparison.

Paul Conway

SCHOECK: *Penthesilea*, op. 39. Yvonne Naef (mezzo-sop), Renate Behle (sop), Susanne Reinhard (sop), Ute Trekel-Burkhardt (con), James Johnson (bar), Stuart Kale (ten), Cheyne Davidson (bar), Imke Büchel (speaker). Czech Philharmonic Choir Brno, Basle Symphony Orchestra c. Mario Venzago. Musiques Suisses MGB CD 6232 (2-CD set).

This recording from the 1999 Lucerne Festival was made in conjunction with Swiss Radio and originally appeared on another Swiss CD label. It follows a pioneering LP recording of Othmar Schoeck's long one-acter under Zdenek Macal, also with a Lucerne Festival cast, and the single-CD digital remastering of a performance which Gerd Albrecht conducted at the 1982 Salzburg Festival. Schoeck's *Penthesilea* was first performed at the Dresden State Opera in 1927. In its subject-matter it recalls the dream-states of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and the violence of Richard Strauss's *Salome*. Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is another obvious forerunner, not least in matters of vocal style: the music springs from the verbal rhythms and accents. But Schoeck went his own way by adapting a century-old text in blank verse.

The German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist gave a radically new complexion to an Ancient Greek story. Set against the background of the Trojan Wars, the usual version has it that Achilles kills Penthesilea in battle and then falls in love with her body. Kleist turns the situation virtually on its head. First, his Amazon queen breaches a tribal rule by seeking Achilles out on the battlefield. Having unseated Penthesilea from her horse, Achilles throws down his weapons. The queen is rescued and lapses into unconsciousness. When she comes to, she is told that Achilles is her prisoner, but not that this is true only figuratively. An idyllic love-interlude is fraught with tragedy. The Greek warrior once more challenges Penthesilea to combat. Her love abruptly turns into hatred: as Achilles advances to meet her unarmed she unleashes her dogs, and her suitor is torn from limb to limb. Recovering from a sustained trance, she kisses his maimed body, surrenders her own weapons and dies of a broken heart.

The score of Schoeck's *Penthesilea* is not symphonic; it has been aptly described as musical stagecraft. Schoeck's achievement was to find his own correlates for Kleist's extraordinary polarities and ambiguities, beginning with the harmonic pillars in the opening bars. Essential elements of the work are stated in the martial orchestral prelude. And throughout the piece,

Schoeck's evocative *Klanggründe*, the sonic foundations, have the power to match the most outlandish effects Kleist devised. The unusual orchestration includes two pianos as well as ten clarinets in various registers. The violins are restricted to four solo instruments. The music which accompanies Achilles's loving pronunciation of Penthesilea's name is coloured by tuned glasses stroked with a bow. A stierhorn rings out before Achilles's challenge to the Amazon queen.

One of the most striking aspects of Schoeck's composition is the highly differentiated use of speech. Usually this is punctuated by orchestral chords, although sometimes the accompaniment is more extended. Moreover there's an intermediate stage between *frei gesprochen* and fully notated recitative, a stage where the rhythms but not the pitches are notated. (Conventional time-signatures appear only briefly.) Schoeck's uncertainty about the audibility of his spoken passages is reflected at that point where the Amazons, after rallying their troops, return to the fray. Here the score offers two priestesses alternative deliveries, the notes to be sung 'only if the speaking voice lacks penetration'.

Not surprisingly, one modern German production of Schoeck's *Penthesilea* skirted the technical difficulties by engaging a double cast of speakers and singers. In Lucerne's semi-staged version, the main characters continue to oscillate between speech and song. But in collaboration with Hartmut Becker the conductor Mario Venzago restores to the cast the character of an Amazon *Oberste* or group-captain: one of the Kleistian supporting roles which Schoeck's libretto omits. This speaker has not only some lines that Schoeck gave to other Amazons, but also a few of the many lines of narrative he discarded. (The CD booklet doesn't tell us so; it does, however, include the German libretto in Becker's adaptation.) Also in the avowed interests of verbal clarity are Venzago's rhythmic retouchings to Schoeck's score.

The title role is awesome. 'Half fury, half grace' is Achilles's summing up of Penthesilea. Dramatic power needs to be complemented by lyrical richness, and Yvonne Naef displays all the vocal qualities required. James Johnson's bullish Achilles packs a punch, lacking only that wit which Kleist bestowed on the character (and which, in the opera's first recording, was captured by Roland Hermann). The parts of the Chief Priestess and Prothoe, Penthesilea's principal companion, are sung with eloquence. In the non-Schoeckian part of the *Oberste*, Imke Büchel declaims her lines so raspingly that you want to

hand her a glass of water. But in the epilogue her speech finally acquires a human softness. Mario Venzago draws compelling performances from his Czech choir and Swiss orchestral forces. Evidently much thought had been given to tempo relations, and for me the most outstanding feature of Venzago's reading is the treatment of those passages marked *feierlich*. As suggested by Schoeck's previous opera *Venus*, passion, for this composer, is as solemn as it is tempestuous. Herein lies the crucial difference between Schoeck's *Penthesilea* and Expressionist opera. The contained sorrow which the crazed queen voices in her lucid moments has perhaps no musical equal.

Peter Palmer

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SAYGUN: Symphonies (complete); Violin Concerto<sup>1</sup>; Suite for Orchestra. <sup>1</sup>Mirjam Tschopp (vln), Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz c. Ari Rasilainen. 3 CDs available separately: CPO 999 819-2 (Symphonies 1, 2), 999 968-2 (Symphonies 3, 5), 777 043-2 (Symphony 4, Violin Concerto, Suite).

Turkish music of the 20th century is often spoken of in terms of the 'Turkish Five', a group of composers which included Necil Kazim Akses (1908–99) and Cemal Resid Rey. The most important member of this group by far, and very probably Turkey's finest classical musician ever, is Ahmed Adnan Saygun (1907–91). His musical legacy and international reputation ranks alongside that of Ernst Toch, Honegger, Tcherepnin, Tansman and Wellesz as a major bulwark of the central European modernist tendency. It is gratifying indeed that the music of this fascinating figure, whose cultural roots were delicately suspended between the West and the Near East, should now have been subject to a major exploration by CPO (at the time of writing a double CD of the complete String Quartets is poised for release, also by CPO).

Saygun's early years were spent in his native land and his thorough study of Turkish folk music informed his own compositions, but the three years he spent in Paris (1928–31) brought him into direct contact at a crucial time with the music of Stravinsky, Bartók and of course the French impressionists. His music of the 1930s and 1940s featured several operas on Turkish themes, including a large oratorio, *Yunus Emre*. It wasn't however until the early 1950s that Saygun wrote his First Symphony. It is a wondrous blend of neo-classical structure and embellished tritonic

harmonic patterns: a comparison with the early Toch symphonies of the same period shows some striking similarities, although it isn't clear if they knew one another's music. (Unlikely, as by this time Toch was resident in the USA.) The mysterious chorale figure of the slow movement bears testimony to Saygun's affinity with Gregorian chant, overlaid with beguiling oriental inflections. The Second Symphony (1957) shares many traits of the First, but the larger orchestra, greater use of colour and freer rhythmic structures and dance episodes point the way to his maturing style.

All of Saygun's music is infused with harmonic and tonal ambivalence which gradually evolved from a cool classical style into a highly decorated Byzantine language: this finds full expression in the Third Symphony (1961), at nearly 40 minutes the longest of the five. This work enjoyed some international exposure, culminating in a memorable recording of a live performance at the Leningrad International Music Festival in 1988 conducted by Fyodor Glushenko. Both that recording and the present version capture the electrically-charged, densely-argued orchestral dialogues of the first movement. Cascading ostinati and clarion brass summonses yield to shimmering landscapes of low woodwind and strings, illuminated by celeste and glockenspiel. The mysterious chorale figuration frames the slow movement, another closely-wrought threnody of enriched polymodal fabric. Like other modernists Saygun favours complex metres and irregular intersections of tempi which mirror his often elusive harmonic evolution.

The Violin Concerto (1967) and the Fourth Symphony (1976) share many similarities with the Third Symphony, but the dark-hued Concerto is more in the nature of a symphonic dialogue: rhetorical orchestral versicles are met with responses either by soloist alone or with uneasy promptings from groups of instruments, sometimes in an awkward rhythmical gait. In the slow movement the soloist ploughs a lonely furrow, with little approbation from the instrumental ensemble except for the occasional animated exchange. The large orchestra dominates rather than dwarfs, and it does so too in the Fourth Symphony, a very Gothic work. Indeed the opening movement (which like most other Saygun first movements contains the essence of the whole work) is perhaps Saygun at his most concentrated: the powerfully-built structures and heavily fortified foundations are the components of an imposing and impressive edifice.

By the time he wrote his Fifth Symphony (1984), Saygun was in his late 70s but the neo-



classical architecture, rhetorical demeanour, unresolved ostinati, tritonic dilemmas and rich colour are still very much in evidence. This is an excellent series by CPO to add to their memorable cycles of music by Milhaud, Wellesz, Frankel, Searle, Petterson (and now Sallinen). We are treated yet again to their very high engineering and performance standards. It is hard to think of many other enterprises under way at the moment which have brought so much rare and valuable music to the fore, and very great credit is due all round.

Bret Johnson

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BARRY: *In the Asylum*. CLARKE: Piano Trio; *Etude*; *Independence: Part 1*; *Island*; *Isolation*. FINNISSY: *In stiller Nacht*; *Independence Quadrilles*; *Necessary and More Detailed Thinking*. Trio Fibonacci. NMC D107.

Trio Fibonacci's new disc of Barry, Finnissey and Clarke looks on paper a provocative juxtaposition, and so it proves: listening to these three very different (not to say antithetical) musical personalities placed cheek-by-jowl is as uncomfortable as it is stimulating. It's also rather understated as a programme: trios and solos, no major statements, all three composers indulging the intimacy of the medium in a series of ruminative essays.

Even the normally excitable Gerald Barry is relatively becalmed, though his trio *In The Asylum* has its moments of more characteristically maniacal energy. Unfolding episodically from a sequence of tantalizingly plain (even catechistic) repetitions of a chromatic phrase in the violin, it feels like a very thorough cut-up of something else; its material, rhythmically stiff and proceeding principally by *non sequitur*, is either arrayed palindromically across a section or repeated over and over with ever-changing instrumentation. The overall effect is attractively low-key, as if the music being (dis-)assembled like a jigsaw puzzle in thoughtful calm. Perhaps this is the calm of the asylum (the laconic programme note isn't giving much away): certainly the piece has a fascinating air of eccentric studiousness.

The cutting-up and transforming of tonal materials also inform Michael Finnissey's trios *In stiller Nacht* and *Independence Quadrilles*, though more explicitly so and to quite different effect. *In stiller Nacht* is a 'derangement' of Brahms's folksong arrangement, in which each instrument independently presents 'different views of Brahms's manner or style.' The violin preserves a

certain amount of Brahmsian syntax, while the cello presents a dodecaphonic elaboration, and the piano alternates very dense and very bare sections, quoting opaquely from Brahms's trios. The result is a gorgeous, lyric, half-tonal reverie, and the Fibonacci's create a beautiful clouded texture, but I must admit I wanted more: more definition and differentiation of materials, more characterization and urgency in the playing. It's tempting to turn a piece like this into an evocative soup, but isn't it more interesting to keep the various ingredients *al dente*? *Independence Quadrilles* fares better: it's the same principle of simultaneous independent parts, applied to more sharply differing materials and divided into five distinct sections (the quadrille dances) that alternate chromatic and tonal textures. This is music written in the true chamber spirit of domestic enjoyment, and here the Fibonacci's characterization comes alive with variety and humour.

Finnissey's third contribution, a witty miniature entitled *Necessary and More Detailed Thinking*, sounds like sexed-up serialism (think Boulez under the bedclothes); a rather piquant juxtaposition, perhaps, with the very serious High Modernism of James Clarke. Compared with Barry and Finnissey, Clarke's pieces here seem both traditional and quite conventional, with their Romantic spin on modernist complexity and their predilection for dark, brooding emotional and dramatic situations. This is well-mapped territory, and Clarke only partially avoids the pitfalls of gestural and structural clichés that strew his path. The Piano Trio begins in a fascinating half-world of tonal chimeras and glinting strings, but soon diverts into stock rhetorical manoeuvres that drown the piece in portentousness. The piano piece *Island*, however, sustains an oppressive heaviness that hangs over the whole work until a stunning moment of dawning releases new colours. Other solo pieces, for violin and cello, are perhaps less individual but allow the other Fibonacci's a chance to shine. Overall, this disc does the group proud: serious, complex music played with style, technical excellence and musical empathy that betokens real star quality. Let's hope they continue to explore such challenging repertoire.

James Weeks

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SKALKOTTAS: Ballet Suite: *The Sea*; *Four Images*; Greek Dance in C minor. MITROPOLOS orch. SKALKOTTAS: *Cretan Feast*. Iceland SO c. Byron Fidetzis. BIS-CD-1384.

SKALKOTTAS: Piano Concerto No. 2<sup>1</sup>; *Tema con Variazioni*; Little Suite for strings; *Four Images*. <sup>1</sup>Geoffrey Douglas Madge (pno), BBC SO c. Nikos Christodoulou. BIS-SACD-1484.

It is a curious irony that, having finally displaced Byron Fidetzis' pioneering recording of the *Greek Dances* – played by enthusiastic if unpolished players from the Urals – with their own (BIS-CD-1333/4, reviewed in *Tempo* 199) BIS should draft him in to take charge of their recording of Skalkottas's superb late ballet, *The Sea* (1948–9), and in Iceland, moreover. But the Icelanders have already made a substantial contribution to the series: the quality of ensemble and sheer pizzazz of their playing are undeniably greater. They clearly relish the unusual idiom and the *joie de vivre* that is characteristic of all the pieces on the first of these two latest additions to this enthralling series.

Skalkottas's theatre scores have been a major feature of the orchestral issues in BIS's series, with those for (or extracts from) *The Mayday Spell*, *The Maiden and Death* and *The Gnomes* previously featured.<sup>1</sup> Fidetzis' disc includes two more, one – *The Sea* – intended as a dance score, the other (1948) – originally titled *Little Dance Suite* and *Four Greek Dances for the Ballet* – being perhaps a study for the larger work, although ironically it reached the stage under its final title of *Four Images*. The change of name was well advised as these are not in any way a continuation of the great sequence of *Greek Dances*. Rather they are – as the original titles suggest – structurally simpler pieces meant for choreography while the earlier sets were celebrations of the composer's folk heritage (albeit refracted through his personal aesthetic). Their agricultural subjects, different for the most part to the evocations of place in the larger set, emphasize the difference in expressive purpose, in a not-quite-seasonal cycle (autumn to autumn, perhaps): the 'Hay Harvest' leads via 'The Sowing', 'Wine Harvest' (aka 'The Vintage') to what was originally called 'Dance of the Grapes' but by Fidetzis 'The Grape Stomping'. Curiously, the *Four Images* also appear on BIS's other new release, conducted by Nikos Christodoulou, where the finale is entitled 'The Wine-press'. Christodoulou catches the Bacchic fervour of the third and fourth movements more than Fidetzis, although the minute-long difference in their performances is due mainly to the latter's much slower tempo for 'The Sowing'. Why the *Images* alone should feature twice in the series is not explained in either booklet.

<sup>1</sup> BIS-CDs -954, -1014 and -1364 respectively.

*The Sea* is a much larger and stronger work than the *Images*, cast in 11 numbers which illustrate a succession of scenes as if from a frieze. After a sturdy *Moderato maestoso* prelude, the music moves through a series of episodes depicting naturalistic or supernatural aspects of the sea, whether sailors (as in the second and fourth pieces, 'The Child of the Sea' and 'The Trawl'), a tempest (the third, 'Dance of the Waves'), sea creatures (Nos 6 and 7, 'The Little Fish', 'The Dolphins') and a mermaid, who becomes – along with Alexander the Great – the focus of the final quarter of the ballet. The music is, like the vast majority of Skalkottas's output from 1944, tonal with a broadly nationalist flavour. In the notes, Kostis Demertzis notes the resonances of some mainstream Western musical exemplars in parts of the score; British listeners in particular will pick up hints (entirely subconscious on Skalkottas's part, I am sure) of Arthur Bliss, in best *Things To Come* mode, in the central 'The Dolphins'. What emerges is a work of great charm but rather less intellectual rigour than the composer's more abstract concert works; it is noticeable, how static harmonically the music in *The Sea* is compared to his serial pieces. How *The Sea* would work on the stage as a consequence is an open question.

Fidetzis' couplings included an updated *Greek Dance in C minor* and Skalkottas's student (1923–4) orchestration of Dimitris Mitropoulos' vibrant piano piece *Cretan Feast* of five years before. Although the two men had very different artistic missions, Mitropoulos approved of his compatriot's arrangement sufficiently to conduct its première in 1926 (and of course conducted other scores of his). As Demertzis comments, the C minor *Greek Dance* is a very different proposition to those in the set of 36, almost a throwback to an earlier manner: indeed, to the very type of dance, typical of Brahms or Dvořák, that one imagines Skalkottas particularly wanted to avoid in the 1930s. From the orchestration, the C minor *Greek Dance* is believed to date from 1949, but whether this is another example of Skalkottas attempting a less personal style late on (hard to imagine why, when the other *Greek Dances* had been such – indeed his only – popular success) or a rejected off-cut from somewhat earlier is a mystery.

While the first of these discs is (largely) relaxed and entertaining, then the second is the more challenging and satisfying. The major component is the Second Piano Concerto in a dazzlingly virtuosic account from Geoffrey Douglas Madge, accompanied by the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The work's fearsome technical demands, like those in the First and Third Concertos, seem to

hold no terrors for either soloist or orchestra who, under Christodoulou's sensitive, purposeful direction, provide a well-shaped interpretation that suggests they had been performing the piece for years. Just listen to the opening *Allegro molto vivace* to hear what I mean, but better still is the ensuing *Andantino*. If the marking suggests something trifling or insignificant, what emerges off the page in Madge's hands is far from it: a complex, ambivalent movement (not least the way it plays tag with sonata form, the base structure for the other two movements) full of rapt textures and fantastical landscapes. The concluding *Allegro moderato* is perfectly proportioned to provide the concerto with a fully satisfying, yet energetic finale – bearing out Hans Keller's famous view (after the 1954 première broadcast by the BBC) quoted in the booklet, that the music is 'as romantic as all full-blooded music, and as classical as all great art'.

As if that were not enough, the disc – issued as a Super Audio CD – adds two further works (plus, as already mentioned, the more incisive of the two accounts of the *Four Images*): the delightful Little Suite for strings (1942) and *Tema con Variazioni* (1949), which seems to be the last music Skalkottas penned, intended as the fifth movement of the Second Orchestral Suite (previous sections of which have appeared already in the series<sup>2</sup>). The orchestration of the final 66 bars was left unfinished (the booklet contains a brief note on the straightforward task of completing it.) This was to be no interlude-type structure, however, in the manner of, for example, the variation middle movement of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony (sublime as that is). Rather, Skalkottas's piece is self-contained and compressed, its 11-minute timespan suggesting a composition of much larger dimensions. The *Andante* theme and three variations (*Allegretto*; *Moderato*; *Allegro ritmato*) function more like small movements – not unlike those in Hindemith's *The Four Temperaments* – than variations per se, in the manner of, say, Elgar's *Enigma*: the whole movement has the feel of a suite in itself as much as being the component of one. Indeed, it is longer and weightier than the Little Suite, whose three movements, *Allegro* – *Andante* – *Allegro vivo*, are in an atonal style, but one free of note-rows or formulaic patterns. This is atonality with its most listener-friendly face on. It is splendidly played, as are all the works on the disc, and the sound is spectacular.

Guy Rickards

<sup>2</sup> The opening *Ouverture Concertante* on BIS-CD-954 and the fourth movement, *Largo Sinfonico*, on BIS-CD-1014.

CECILIA MCDOWALL: *Seraphim*; *Dance the dark streets*; *Dancing fish*; *Not Just a Place*; *Dream City*; *The case of the unanswered wire*. Kathryn Thomas (fl), Catriona Scott (cl), Suzanne Willison (hp), Tippett Quartet, Orchestra Nova c. George Vass. DUTTON Epoch CDLX 7159

This highly recommended disc builds on the success of Dutton's superb collection of choral works by Cecilia McDowall (CDLX 7159), distinguished by a strikingly reflective setting of the *Magnificat* and a sumptuously alluring *Ave maris stella*.

Written in memory of Adam Raphael, *Seraphim* (2001) is a brightly-hued concerto for solo trumpet, strings and percussion. In the opening movement, 'Blow your trumpets', airily textured strings chatter in half-Baroque, half-jazz language, supporting the flexible trumpet solo, played with admirable technical security and poetic sensibility by Paul Archibald. The central 'Angells' is hauntingly memorable, with eerie, ethereal whispering bowed crotales and string harmonics hovering above delicately searing semitonal clashes between solo violin and muted trumpet lines. The worldly finale, 'Imagin'd Corners', is predominated by the soloist's arpeggiated figures, punctuated by tom-tom interjections. Increasingly florid solo lines drive the work to a decisive conclusion.

*Dance the Dark Streets*, a concerto grosso for strings and piano obbligato, was inspired by poems about aspects of Scottish weather. In 'Haar', McDowall captures the drifting, looming quality of a chilly sea-mist, whilst the closing movement dispels the mist with a bracing wild wind. Amid the wafting paragraphs of the finale, the music relaxes for a tellingly wistful passage. Just before the final gusty bars blow out the music, there is a brief recollection of the previous movement's mood of ominous calm, a quietly effective gesture.

A Russian fable by Ivan Krylov led to *Dancing fish*, for soprano saxophone and strings. The soloist plays a fragment of Russian folksong in the opening section, and this recurs as the piece gathers momentum, progressing from flowing tranquillity to frenetic dancing. Conceived as a single beautifully-controlled *accelerando*, it ends with a vigorously propulsive jig. Amy Dickson's saxophone solo is alert to every shift in the music's character, supported responsively by George Vass and his players.

Conceived in homage to Astor Piazzolla, *Not Just a Place* is a highly-charged single-movement structure for violin, double bass and strings. The tango opens with an air of repression, desolation

and loneliness with the two soloists, a seemingly odd couple, locked in imitative writing. They gradually untwine as the music marshals itself for a final dance of defiance. Double bass slaps, stabbing accents and riotous glissandi turn up the heat. The grimly stalking ostinato in the lower strings calls to mind the hulking bass line in the finale of Andrzej Panufnik's *Sinfonia Rustica*: something of that great work's earthy passion informs McDowall's torrid, sultry score. Soloists Freya Ritts-Kirby and Benjamin Griffiths capture perfectly the oppressive seductiveness of the music.

*Dream City*, commissioned by the Presteigne Festival, is written for the same forces (flute, clarinet, harp and string quartet) as the Ravel *Introduction and Allegro*, whose elegant spirit illuminates this delicately-traced musical response to the life and works of Paul Klee. In the evocative prelude-like movement, 'Method of measuring time', bright woodwind skirls punctuate the texture, adorning the underlying string chords with pungent, irregular dabs. 'Walking the line' spotlights the first violin's conversational interactions with surrounding instruments. The lyrical slow movement, inspired by Klee's 'Oriental' landscape 'Before the Snow', is characterized by gently rustling strings, whose undulations provide a backdrop to the vibrant solos of flute, clarinet, harp and cello. The scherzo-like Finale, 'I had to dance', begins with angular, jagged dance-like patterns, but after a repeat of the work's initial flourishes, the piece ends magically as the final bars leave the City suspended in the air. *Dream City* successfully pays tribute to Klee's interplay of line and colour; the players bring out the work's narrative strength, without losing sight of its bewitching sonorities and rhythmic diversity.

The Tippett Quartet are commanding and persuasive in *The Case of the Unanswered Wire*, a concise, closely argued one-movement work inspired by Douglas Dunn's verse novel, 'The Donkey's Ears', which describes the life and work of a Russian engineer aboard ship at the time of the 1905 Russo-Japanese war. Menacing mechanical figurations are frozen by the icy stasis of the grieving central section. The remorseless finale resumes the mechanism of the opening section, punctuated by hectoring Morse code signals. The music falters into baleful silence as all communication is severed. Compact and powerful, the quartet is fuelled by more than a hint of Elizabeth Maconchy's gift for terse but telling utterance in this medium. It is subtitled 'String Quartet no 1', fostering keen anticipations of further examples.

This winning release offers finely polished and well-recorded accounts of some of Cecilia McDowall's most compelling pieces. The life-affirming, restorative strength of her direct and unaffected speech is fully communicated in these carefully prepared, joyous performances.

Paul Conway

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BROUWER: *Aurolucent Circles* (Percussion Concerto)<sup>1</sup>; *Mandala*; *Remembrances*; *Sizzle*. <sup>1</sup>Evelyn Glennie (perc), Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra c. Gerard Schwarz. Naxos 8.559250.

BAUER: *Lament on African Themes*; Concertino for oboe clarinet and strings; Trio Sonata No.1; Symphonic Suite for strings; Duo for oboe and clarinet; *American Youth Concerto*. Ambache Chamber Orchestra and Ensemble. Naxos 8.559253.

KIM: Violin Concerto; *Dialogues* for piano and orchestra; *Cornet* for narrator and orchestra. Cecylia Arzewski (vln), William Wolfram (pno), Robert Kim (narr), RTE National Symphony Orchestra c. Scott Yoo. Naxos 8.559226.

LEVY: Symphony No. 3; Cello Concerto No. 2; *Rondo Tarantella*; *A Summer Overture*. Scott Ballantyne (vlc), RTE National Symphony Orchestra c. Takuo Yuasa. Naxos 8.559234.

The Naxos American Classics Series has now been running for over seven years, with over 200 releases so far. It is an impressive achievement: inevitably there is a range of quality but the budget price really does present an open goal to the moderately adventurous collector. Present highlights are ongoing cycles of symphonies by Schuman and Roy Harris and major explorations of Bernstein, Rochberg, Adams and Barber, and the music of William Bolcom. A series of recent 'one-off' releases of works by unfamiliar composers has added another valuable dimension (see also reviews of Joan Tower and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich in the preceding issue of *Tempo*).

Margaret Brouwer (b 1940 – no relation to the Cuban guitarist/composer Leo Brouwer, so far as I am aware) heads this round-up: her works were totally unfamiliar to me except for a brief Clarinet Concerto (1994 – available on MMC 2080 with Richard Stoltzman as soloist), but I was completely hooked after acquiring this new Naxos issue. Her music is immediately appealing: its idiom is direct and yet quite challenging, lying mid-way between Joan Tower and John Harbison, maybe even a little inclined to the minimalist inflections of John Adams. Her Percussion



Concerto (2002), yet another vehicle for the multi-talented Evelyn Glennie (a regular inspiration for new music), sparkles with interest and inventive ideas. Brouwer has a well-developed aesthetic sensibility and the expressive powers of this music and the other works (especially the beautifully elegiac *Remembrances*) put this disc in a class of its own.

Of comparable merit is the record devoted to the music of Marion Bauer (1882–1955) one of the earlier American female composers, who probably hasn't had a recording nor many performances since her death half a century ago. She was not overly prolific; her music has a mid-Western transparency of texture and a delicate and untroubled impressionistic demeanour, with Poulenc and Fauré near to hand. The later *American Youth Concerto* is a pastiche of vernacular styles, and shows off a rare talent which this release has rescued from otherwise certain oblivion.

Earl Kim (1920–88) is perhaps the weakest link in the current chain: his music, whilst well-crafted, doesn't seem to possess the strength of character to give it a distinctive edge. This applied to the rather bland Violin Concerto (commissioned and recorded 25 years ago by Itzak Perlman). For *Cornet* (1984), a setting with orchestra of poems of Rainer Maria Rilke the composer uses a narrator rather than a vocalist: this is a high-risk strategy,<sup>3</sup> which can result in portentousness and tends to blunt the music's impact. On the whole it is best left to Gettysburg addresses and other presentations by the CEO.

I did not hold such reservations about Frank Ezra Levy (b 1930), another composer totally unfamiliar to me until this release and another CD of his Symphony No. 4 (see MMC 2021). The son of the Swiss Composer Ernst Levy, Frank Ezra Levy has his own distinctive style, very dynamic with clearly defined textures and colourful orchestration. This is evident immediately in the 1997 *Summer Overture*. Even more impressive is the Stravinskian *Rondo Tarantella* (2003). The composer speaks of his neo-classical leanings, doublings in fourths and fifths and concern with melodic and rhythmic integrity of individual parts. The Third Symphony (1977) is an imaginative and varied work for quite small forces, yet with an expansive American feel, whilst the Cello Concerto No. 2 (2002) is a welcome addition to a still small corpus

<sup>3</sup> Though it was also adopted – as Kim presumably didn't know – by Viktor Ullmann for his own settings of some of these Rilke poems performed in Theresienstadt and subsequently reconstructed by Henning Brauel – (Ed.).

of such American concertos. These engaging and varied releases are an important paragraph in an ongoing narrative which, hopefully, has many chapters yet to unfold.

Bret Johnson

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'The Tend'rest Breast': settings of women's poetry by QUILTER, BRIDGE, GURNEY, LENNOX BERKELEY, IRELAND, ALASTAIR KING, MADELEINE DRING, MONTAGUE PHILLIPS. Georgina Colwell (sop), Nigel Foster (pno). Dunelm DRD0237.

'Strings in the Earth and Air': settings by MOERAN, WARLOCK, GEOFFREY STERN. Paul Martyn-West (ten), Nigel Foster (pno). Dunelm DRD0249.

The poets featured in 'The Tend'rest Breast' range widely, from Christina Rossetti, Mary Coleridge and Emily Brontë to obscure 20th-century names. Neither Olive Mary Denson nor Quilter's setting of her 'Wild Cherry' will be familiar to many listeners. Madeleine Dring wrote her own text for the cabaret-like 'Don't play your sonata tonight, Mister Humphries'. The title phrase comes from 'Hesperus', one of seven Sappho songs by Ivor Gurney to be included on this CD (William Bliss Carman is not named as the translator). Sappho also figures as primary source of the first of Lennox Berkeley's *Three Greek Songs*.

Musically speaking, some typical shifts and modulations in the Gurney settings are among the most striking things on the disc. Alastair King, about whom the booklet says nothing, brings a literary sensibility and deft structural control to bear on three settings of Kathleen Raine. John Ireland's 'Hymn for a child' (after Sylvia Townsend Warner) and 'Love and friendship' (Emily Brontë) were intended for a medium-range voice, but the soprano Georgina Colwell's feeling for them shines through. Indeed her response to the words reinforces everything she interprets, including the lighter music of Montague Phillips. Nigel Foster's sympathetic skills at the piano are a major plus, not least in Frank Bridge's 'Love went a-riding'.

Unfortunately the singer's flawed vocal technique is put under strain rather too often, and the recording from a public hall in Walton-on-Thames does nothing to compensate. The cover portrait of Sappho (1877) by Charles-Auguste Mengin would trouble the publishers of a family newspaper.

The atmosphere Paul Martyn-West conjures up in *Seven Poems of James Joyce* largely justifies

Trevor Hold's description of the sequence as Moeran's *Curlew*. Martyn-West's performances also make a case for Moeran as arranger with his *Six Folksongs from Norfolk* completed in 1923. The singer's lightish tenor voice is equally suited to Warlock's *Candlelight* cycle of nursery ditties from the same year. Martyn-West's remaining Warlock songs ('Along the Stream' after Li-Po, the Shakespearean 'Take, O take those lips away', 'Heracleitus' after Callimachus and the Bruce Blunt collaboration 'The Fox') are recorded in the manuscript versions. 'Adulterated' is probably not too strong a term for the first printed edition of 'The Fox', which may have been modified by Bernard van Dieren.

Born on Merseyside in 1935, Geoffrey Stern spent most of his life in London, although he died while visiting Canada last year. Until his retirement he lectured at the London School of Economics. Neither his *Three Wordsworth Songs* of 1953, a setting of Henry Treece's 'Legend' (1960) nor the *Four Songs of James Joyce* composed between 2001–05 and dedicated to Martyn-West have appeared in print.

Stern was a brilliant *pasticheur* with interests which spanned Tudor composers and jazz. 'Legend' reflects his extrovert side; a setting of Wordsworth's 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways' plumbs spiritual depths. The personal note is most in evidence in 'Strings in the Earth and Air', one of the CD's two James Joyce songs in which Stern invites a direct comparison with Moeran. The other song, 'Now, O Now in this Brown Land', has been recorded by the Solaris Quartet in a transcription entitled *Love Remembered*. Here Moeran's setting of the text is undoubtedly the greater, but Geoffrey Stern's evocative 'Strings in the Earth and Air' has imaginative breadth. Again Nigel Foster partners the voice with style and sensitivity throughout.

Peter Palmer

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TARIK O'REGAN: 'Voices'. *Dorchester Canticles; Bring rest, sweet dreaming Child; Colimaçon; Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis; Care Charming Sleepe*; 3 Motets from *Sequence for St Wulfstan*. Choir of Clare College Cambridge with James McVinnie (org), Rafal Jezierski (vlc), Adrian Spillett (perc), Helen Tunstall (hp). Collegium COLCD 130.

When reviewing the 'New French Song' concert at the Purcell Room in July 2004 (see *Tempo* Vol. 59 No.231, January 2005) which showcased a swift succession of impressive contributions from no

less than 20 noteworthy current British composers, space did not allow for individual mention of each, but as a 'follow-up' I've been endeavouring to watch out for interesting developments among their ranks.

The youngest composer to have a première in 'New French Song' was Tarik O'Regan (born 1978) with his piece *Sainte* (setting words by the symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé) which, I've just learnt, went on to win the British Composers Awards vocal category in December 2005. Following a rather formal opening, this song develops more expressively with 'sympathique' spread chords in the piano accompaniment.

This young composer, still in his 20s, currently on a Fullbright Chester-Schirmer Fellowship in composition in New York after distinguishing himself as a postgraduate in both Oxford and Cambridge, has many prizes and commissions to his name and has now capped it all with a most evocative new album: *Voices*, released in April this year. This was previewed on BBC Radio 3's 'In Tune' on 7 March. Listening in to the excerpts played, one was struck by the sheer immediacy of the music and its sound that came across from O'Regan's singers the Choir of Clare College, Cambridge, with whom he had worked previously in connexion with his time at the University.

The full CD, predominantly recorded in the perfect acoustics of Watford Colosseum, with chorus director Timothy Brown and James McVinnie (previously scholar at St Albans cathedral) at the organ, is quite remarkable in its impact, combining a masterly clarity of vocal line, often within innovative structures, combined with virtuoso percussion effects and imaginative interweaving of harp and organ.

Highlights include Three motets from *Sequence for St Wulfstan*, and *Two Upper Voice Settings*, with one for Midnight Mass 2003, which O'Regan himself describes in his CD notes as: 'ecumenical sentiment of stillness ... sparsely accompanied'. It is precisely this very economy and simplicity of line which marks his work out as distinctive and compelling to the ear. His *Dorchester Canticles* also impress, with an added touch of Manhattan rhythms in the heady, percussive, toccata-finale that closes *Deus Misereator*. O'Regan also includes his *Care Charming Sleepe*, for double choir, which remarkably retains superb clarity of line within textural complexity, including a central quasi-fugal passage, after which the preceding opening section returns again in a higher, more urgent, *tessitura* to denote death throes.

Jill Barlow

'Contours': New and Recent Music for Clarinet by DONATONI, SMITH, UDUMAN, CAUSTON, ROMANO, SCIARRINO, ERBER and FOX. Kate Romano (cl). Metier MSV CD 2074.

With Andrew Sparling's recent recital disc on NMC and now Kate Romano's new solo collection, 'Contours', on Metier, fans of contemporary clarinet repertoire will be feeling particularly well served at present. If Romano's tastes are less catholic than Sparling's, that at least makes for a more coherent programme, and her playing is comparably brilliant: her focused tone and athletic clarity of technique serve her chosen music excellently, and her mastery of the many extended techniques required allows her to create some aural magic even where the musical material is on the thin side. William O Smith's feeble *Variants*, for instance – a sort of musical swatch book – is only the most obvious proof on offer that unusual noises are no substitute for an original compositional premise.

Of the stronger pieces, Donatoni's *Clair* is refreshingly lacking in special effects, kept airborne instead by wonderful notes and an unabashed rhythmic and gestural exuberance. Equally interesting is Dillon's early *Crossing Over*, which integrates microtonal tunings to plangent effect and sustains a compelling dramatic line. Sciarrino conjures five minutes of rapture in his *Let Me Die Before I Wake*, a fragile melodic line fluttering like dreaming eyelids over multiphonic whisperings below. Romano unerringly captures Sciarrino's unique atmosphere here, and creates an enigmatic *envoi* from Christopher Fox's indeterminate *Generic Composition #7*.

James Erber's substantial *Strange Moments of Intimacy* proves harder to fathom, a determinedly extended monologue of punchy *détaché* notes, key clicks and breath noises whose ultimate purpose remains inscrutable. Unfortunately there are no programme notes to explain what is going on, nor what *Strange Moments* these are, since Romano has instead provided us with a long essay on performance practice issues. Fair enough, perhaps, but what use is any performance practice without a consideration of the poetic and aesthetic contexts for the music? Such negligence, happily, is not apparent in her playing: all the composers represented must feel fortunate to have so thoughtful and impressive an interpreter.

James Weeks

MAXWELL DAVIES: *De Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*<sup>1</sup>; *Brass Quintet*<sup>2</sup>; *Beacons of Hope*<sup>3</sup>; *Commemoration Sixty*<sup>4</sup>; *Blind Man's Bluff*<sup>1,5</sup>; *Prayer of Thanksgiving in Times of Terror*<sup>6</sup>; *A Sad Pavan for These Distracted Times*<sup>7</sup>. <sup>1</sup>London Sinfonietta c. Oliver Knussen; <sup>2</sup>The Wallace Collection; <sup>3</sup>Central Band of the Royal British Legion c. Ted Whealing; <sup>4</sup>Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Central Band of the Royal British Legion, Trumpets of the Royal Military School of Music – Kneller Hall, London Symphony Chorus c. Peter Maxwell Davies; <sup>5</sup>Lucy Shelton, Clare Booth; <sup>6</sup>Choir of Her Majesty's Chapel Royal, St. James' Palace c. Andrew Gant; <sup>7</sup>Pavel Haas Quartet. MaxOpus Custom Compilation CDs.

MAXWELL DAVIES: *Naxos Quartets Nos. 5 and 6*. Maggini Quartet. Naxos 8.557398

After the demise of Collins Classics, Peter Maxwell Davies bought the rights to the recordings of his music. These are available, along with some new recordings, through Davies's MaxOpus Music website.<sup>4</sup> Though composers such as Stockhausen and Michael Torke have similarly purchased their back catalogue, Davies has embraced more fully the potential of the Internet as a means of disseminating his music. Whereas Stockhausen and Torke's websites sell pre-existent CDs,<sup>5</sup> MaxOpus Music offers customers the chance to choose exactly which tracks they wish to purchase. Customers can either buy individual works (MP3, WMA and AAC formats), sensibly priced by length, or, for a fixed fee, create their own CD of up to 74 minutes in duration.

The two custom-made CDs sent to *Tempo* are all of previously unavailable works; all but one of these recordings are from live concerts. The choice of pieces hints at the scope of Davies's compositional output, from music theatre to occasional pieces; they are also indicative, presumably, of the standard of performances we are to expect from future additions to the MaxOpus stable.

Two of the most substantial works on these discs are recordings from the 2005 festival 'Max: A musician of our time'. The masque *Blind Man's Bluff* (1972), blends nursery rhyme, dance, mime and ritual in a enjoyably bathetic reworking of the final scene of Georg Büchner's *Leonce and Lena*. *De Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis* (2001) is a 30-minute single-movement reflection, for large chamber ensemble, on the notion of the Virgin Mary physically ascending to heaven. The

<sup>4</sup> <http://music.maxopus.com>

<sup>5</sup> [www.stockhausen.org](http://www.stockhausen.org) and [www.michaeltorke.com](http://www.michaeltorke.com)

trumpet and piano in particular supply intricate surface glitter, though the faster passages do not reach the same heights of inspiration as the expressive and intense Adagios that punctuate the work. Both pieces were given committed readings by the London Sinfonietta under Oliver Knussen's baton; Lucy Shelton and Claire Booth's performance as Jester and King respectively in *Blind's Man Bluff* are equally assured.

An even more virtuosic performance can be found in the Wallace Collection's studio recording of the Brass Quintet (1981). Here, Maxwell Davies treats the genre with the same seriousness and sense of purpose as one finds in his string quartets; similar, too, is the detailed exploration of colour and contrapuntal play. These demands also inform *A Sad Pavan for These Distracted Tymes* (2004), written for, and recorded at, an International String Quartet competition. The *Pavan*, as well as the occasional *Prayer of Thanksgiving in Times of Terror* (2005), returns eloquently to one of the central themes of Davies's opera *Taverner*, religious intolerance.

The remaining works on the disc belong to the more functional side of Davies's output. Written for, and recorded at, a concert commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the ending of World War II, *Commemoration Sixty* and *Beacons of Hope* (both 2005) are examples of Davies's lighter, more populist style. The former work is the lengthier, draws on vast massed forces and is straightforwardly pictorial. Three invented national anthems battle it out, Ives-like, between the assembled ensembles; after a hymn for peace and a medieval carol, the three are transposed to the same key and demonstrated to be able to work together musically. Though the political metaphor is somewhat obvious, the second half in particular has a peculiar charm. Though Davies has often been criticized for this sort of superficial music, such criticisms are not always fair: occasional music such as *Commemoration Sixty* has a different purpose to, say, *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and must be judged by somewhat different criteria. In this light, I'm sure it did its required job on the day, though I doubt the somewhat ambivalent ending, which suggests that peace is both relative and remains something to be striven for, was lost on Tony Blair and the other assembled dignitaries in the audience.

My real reservation about *Commemoration Sixty* and *Beacons of Hope* lies in the quality of their performances, particularly with the latter. The

military bands have neither the rhythmic precision nor accuracy of intonation to be found in the other offerings on the CDs. MaxOpus does allow one to hear a sample of music before purchasing it; recordings such as these seem to be thankfully the exception rather than the rule.

Davies's ongoing *Naxos* project continues apace with the release of recordings of the middle works of the set, the Fifth and Sixth Quartets. Where the Fourth Quartet explored 'Children's games', the Fifth takes its lead from the play of light from 'The Lighthouses of Orkney and Shetland' on the sea and shore at night. This is realized musically by another of Davies's seascapes; here, themes announced by the cello at the outset are led through a variety of moods, textures and tonal regions. The restriction of the number of themes results in a better balance between the creation of aurally striking ideas and unfolding structure than can be found in, say, the more diffuse Fourth Quartet. The second and final movement is a slow 'double' of the first, finding in the material and form new expressive potential.

The compression of the Fifth Quartet stands in contrast to the more expansive six movements of the Sixth. The study of Beethoven's late quartets makes its mark in this multi-movement design that balances the profound (the *adagio* fourth movement) with the naive (the second and fifth movements, both wearing plainsong influence lightly). The lyrical *adagio* is the heart of the work, and though it is no *Cavatina* (sc. Beethoven's op. 130), Davies does not come out too bruised from such a comparison. The outer movements are more forceful, the first in a pleasingly blustery manner; the *Presto* third movement is a busy scherzo with calm trio. Compared to the first five quartets, the Sixth makes greater use of tonal associations, which serve to throw the more astringent passages into sharp relief.

The Fifth and Sixth Quartets both contain numerous passages that bristle with the imagination and fecundity of the opening instalments of the cycle. Nevertheless, increased familiarity with the previous quartets diminishes their overall freshness and vitality: one gets the feeling of treading old ground, albeit it new and interesting ways. Whether this proves sufficient to sustain the impetus of the cycle all the way through to the Tenth Quartet remains to be seen; I for one sincerely hope so.


Edward Venn



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