

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1202

The Composer Conducts

This collection of recordings gives us at once two musical snapshots, of the orchestral life of London in the mid to late 1920s, and of the work of British composers a decade earlier. It is an odd coincidence that, with the exception of *Conversations*, all the works on this disc were recorded ten years or so after their première. This can of course in part be explained by the great advances in technology during the 1920s, and also by the fact that some of these composers only achieved a public profile in that decade. But would a newly famous composer, let loose in a recording studio, not want to show off his latest, freshest creation? Rather, the six represented here seem to have been compelled to preserve their most characteristic, most personal, earlier works, those works from which their newer pieces had sprung and without which those pieces would have been impossible.

Holst's *Beni Mora* is a case in point. This "Oriental Suite" was written in 1909, when the "First Dance" was originally commissioned, and 1910, fully 14 years before Holst's performance was recorded. Looking back from 1924, after the triumphs of *The Planets* and *The Hymn of Jesus*, he would have recognised it as a crucial work in his development, one in which many of their most characteristic features were first fully developed. The "First Dance", which some critics have seen simply as secondhand orientalism à la Borodin, while using self-consciously "Eastern" intervals and elaborate decorations, has the rhythmic drive of the later works and, in the plangent succession of solo lines with which it begins, their way of giving emotional depth to the pictorial. The "Second Dance" takes this further. It is less a dance than a very concentrated tone picture in which the spirit of a dance is conjured by the layering of instrumental lines: timpani, bassoons and flutes at the bottom of their range; with higher strings, each placed successively one on top of the other. Holst would return to this rearrangement of traditional orchestration in later years. Harmonically, too, it is richer and more forward-looking, partly through this layering, as the independent lines rub against one another, and occasionally through genuinely experimental chord-writing - one passage sounds as though it has been transplanted from "Venus". It is the third dance, "In the Street of the Ouled Naïls" which gives the greatest sense of what Holst was to become. It describes a real place, a street in the Algerian town of Biskra famed for its dance halls and Bedouin dancing girls (the Ouled Naïls themselves). When Holst had been in Algeria in 1909, he had witnessed a nocturnal ceremony accompanied by a flautist who played the same short melody over and over for two and a half hours (or, as Holst wearily put it in his notebook, "5 a.m. They had been at it all night"). He builds "In the Street of the Ouled Naïls" around this

tune, repeating it 163 times and weaving other melodic fragments around it. We are asked to imagine a procession, led by the flute, approaching, passing through and leaving, a village by an oasis, where it is momentarily joined by the eponymous dancing girls. The effect it produces, of many different musics mixing and sounding together, is curiously reminiscent of Holst's exact contemporary, Charles Ives. More strikingly, as an obsessively repetitious processional, it anticipates the most powerful driven moments of "Mars", "Saturn" and "Uranus". On the evidence of the present recording, that would seem to be Holst's view; his very fast speeds (which make this performance a whole three minutes shorter than the most recent recording) tend to render these dances less danceable, but more purely rhythmic. But, however hard he pushes them, he constantly encourages his players to shape their phrases and even, in the long wind phrases of the opening, allows them a modicum of elegant rubato, while never letting them forget that the procession must always move on.

Holst's processions have been important to many much later English composers, even a modernist as hard-edged as Sir Harrison Birtwistle. The influence of Frank Bridge might be thought rather less pervasive, particularly given the obscurity in which his work has languished for so many years. If it were not for his suite *The Sea*, however, the course of English music might have been very different. Not long after Bridge made the recording on this disc, he conducted a concert performance which was heard by the ten year-old Benjamin Britten. "Knocked sideways" by it according to his diary, the young Britten would later (after the première of Bridge's *Enter Spring*) approach the older man for composition lessons, lessons which undoubtedly shaped his entire mature output. What did Britten gain from Bridge's teaching? According to an interview he gave to *The Sunday Telegraph* many years later, there were "cardinal principles. One was that you should try to find yourself and be true to what you found. The other - obviously connected with it - was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one's mind". These principles clearly left a great impression, with Britten, just as *The Sea* had many years before; and he repaid Bridges kindness by coaching him intensively at tennis. The piece stayed in his mind a long time, until eventually he conducted it at Aldeburgh. It is clearly no coincidence that two of the *Sea Interludes* from Peter Grimes, "Moonlight" and "Storm", share their titles with movements from *The Sea*. Perhaps Britten learnt to locate emotional states in the moods of the sea as much from Bridge's music as from his own observations of the Suffolk coast.

The Sea, written in 1911, immediately after Holst's *Beni Mora*, opens with a limpid "Seascape", Debussyan in some of its harmony, but less so in its impassioned development of the two themes, in the viola (Bridge's own instrument as well as Britten's) and oboe, which meander to the surface of the opening chords like so many bubbles. Here, as so often,

Bridge's emphasis on technique is evident: everything is derived from these two themes and not a note or an effect is wasted as the movement moves quickly and seamlessly between many varied states of feeling. "Sea-Foam", which follows, is a swift chattering scherzo, full of brilliant woodwind solos, and containing a long-breathed string melody by way of trio. The slow movement, "Moonlight", is less static than Britten's and more songlike, but still captures the same sense of deep and abiding melancholy. In some ways this is the most old-fashioned movement, sounding at times like the Delius of *Paris* or *Koanga*. "The Storm" which follows takes us much closer to Britten's world, as the meandering theme of the first movement is tossed about broken up and transformed into anguished, angular lines which seem to look forward to the "Dies Irae" of Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem*. Quiet is restored before the movement ends with a final triumphant restatement of the first movement theme. Bridge's performance is less forceful than his pupil's, even at the height of the storm, more intent on the sensuous and lyrical sides of his score, reminding us that in 1923, he was still a well-known and influential figure. By the time Britten conducted it in 1971, Bridge had been almost entirely forgotten: Britten's is the urgency that goes with rediscovery.

Even allowing for Debussy or Vaughan Williams, seascapes were not the most conventional subjects for composers in the early part of the century, still less Algerian villages (Imogen Holst recalled one critic spluttering about *Beni Mora* that "we do not ask for Biskra dancing girls in Langham Place"). These seem positively everyday, though, in comparison with *Conversations*, or rather, we might say that the Bliss seems all too everyday. For in this strange work, scored for a mixed ensemble of flute, oboe and string trio, Bliss attempts to represent, as its title suggests, dialogues and group encounters in a number of contemporary (for 1920) situations. Some seem reasonably traditional: the meeting in a wood, for example, had been a staple of the romantic tradition since well before Schumann's *Waldesgespräch*, and the ballroom, with its helpful musical associations, had become an essential location for lovers' conversations long before Berlioz. Bliss modernises these situations in ways gently suggesting that the tradition has become a little stale: the forest seems so impenetrably full of mist (or perhaps smog) that the lovers seem unable to find each other, and the ball dragoons its dancers through so many dance forms in its tiny span that the repose they need for their conversation is never possible. The soliloquy (here a rather broken solo for the cor anglais) takes us back even further, to the Elizabethan theatre, and to the music generations of English composers have written for it. The first and last pieces describe places more contemporary, and much more mundane, than any of these. *Conversations* ends "In the Tube at Oxford Circus", a jolted, fractious series of encounters which captures perfectly the way public transport throws groups of ill-assorted people together and forces them to maintain a reluctant false politeness. The first, as Bliss explained in his bluff autobiography

As I Remember, seems to have been his personal favourite, "'The Committee Meeting' with its ineffectual but stubborn chairman vainly trying to get to get his motion carried amid the frequent interruptions of his colleagues, can still raise a smile". It certainly does in the composer's own recording, made when the piece was barely three years old, a recording with refinement and perfection of ensemble suggesting thorough rehearsal relived by the original players; a recording which, especially in the wonderfully witty and smiling playing of the violinist, gives the happy sense of a group of friends gently mocking the genre they most love - for what is chamber music always held to be, in that great commonplace, but the most cultured form of conversation?

Vaughan Williams' incidental music to *The Wasps* was written for another deeply cultured, slightly precious institution, the Cambridge Greek Play. He was commissioned to write for the production of the Aristophanes comedy in 1909, a commission which gave him enormous personal satisfaction, enabling him, as it did, to follow in the footsteps of his mentors and teachers, Stanford, Parry and Charles Wood. A year earlier he had returned from three months of intensive study with a teacher whose influence had been much more pervasive, Maurice Ravel, an example of one-to-one tuition to rank, perhaps, only with Schoenberg going through Bach Cantatas with Klemperer. However, as Michael Kennedy has noted in his fine book on Vaughan Williams, the influences on *The Wasps* Overture seem to be, more those of Debussy, in the use of the whole-tone scale (or "Debussy's septave", as the first review in *The Times* rather showily put it) and the quasi-impressionistic use of the woodwind and strings; and also, perhaps surprisingly, Borodin. Ravel introduced Vaughan Williams to much late nineteenth century Russian music - one letter from Paris says bluntly "I have got at Antar [Rimsky-Korsakov's programmatic symphony] and have set to work on him" - and it seems he had shown him how these composers had been able to combine melodic generosity with forward momentum and tight organisation. The great central tune, for example, which is used in the play for the reconciliation of Bdelycleon with his father Philocleon, and as singable as anything in Holst's "Jupiter" or Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, is skilfully and unobtrusively developed from the hushed solo horn call much earlier on. It also, of course, reflects the other great influence on Vaughan Williams, vernacular song, both the secular folk song and the hymn. It is surely no coincidence that this first work of his to incorporate such naturally easy melodic writing should come a year after the first publication of his folksong arrangements and three years after the completion of *The English Hymnal* which he had edited, and for which he had supplied several original tunes and many harmonisations. It, also, receives a tremendously quick and exciting performance - the Aeolian Orchestra must have been quite an ensemble - and as before it

demonstrates how much tradition changes interpretation. Under the composer's baton, there is no attempt to make it sound like Vaughan Williams, or perhaps our idea of a contemplative, pastoral Vaughan Williams. So, rather than *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *Job*, which a modern performance might strive to make it resemble (neither of which had been written in 1923) the more innocent composer, with an ear for dynamic contrasts and rhythmic attack, makes it sound oddly like Stravinsky.

As Vaughan Williams was becoming England's national composer (and would remain so until the arrival of Britten), Hamilton Harty was taking on the like mantle for Ireland. Prompted perhaps by his need to pursue a musical career elsewhere, and the homesickness that gave rise to, his output is dominated by a long series of works, spanning more than thirty years and most musical genres, which attempt to express and recall in music, his deep sense of what it meant to be Irish. Some, notably the *Irish Symphony* of 1904, are consciously built from Irish folksongs, some like the *Variations on a Dublin Air* from 1912, develop something Irish into an overtly European form, and some, most notably the *John Field Suite* from 1939, near the end of his life, attempt, through arrangement and re-orchestration, to reclaim other Irish music into the mainstream. *With the Wild Geese*, first performed in Cardiff in 1910, stands slightly apart from these (but rather resembles *The Wasps*) in that, coming from Harty's mature period, it uses themes which bear a strong resemblance to Irish folksong, but which are actually entirely Harty's own. It derives from two poems from a volume of 1902 by the Hon. Emily Lawless, which describe one of the more poignant moments in Irish military history, the 1745 Battle of Fontenoy, part of the War of the Austrian Succession, to which some Irish regiments (the Wild Geese of the title) travelled to assist the French, with whom they had been allies in previous campaigns. The first poem describes the night before the battle; the second, subtitled "After the Battle; Early Dawn, Clare Coast", shows the aftermath, as the ghosts of the dead soldiers return across the sea to Ireland and are interrogated by a living observer on the coast. Harty in his own programme notes identified three themes of principal importance. The first, in the violins *lento con passione*, to a throbbing accompaniment, represented the soldiers' farewell to Ireland; the second, in the woodwind in octaves, *allegro deciso*, suggests the life of the Irish Brigade in France; and the third, *meno mosso tranquillo* for oboe above strings and harp, depicts the exiles' dreams of home. These are combined with fanfares to struggles of the battle scenes, later transformed in more mysterious ways as the men become ghosts and return through the night to Ireland. The underlying message of the piece seems to be that one's Irishness can be fully expressed only on foreign soil, waging other men's wars (which perhaps helps explain the extra degree of passion in Harty's playing.) But the price for finding fulfilment abroad is that one can never return to Ireland alive. Is it too much to see this as a conscious metaphor

for Harty's own life, pursuing his career in Manchester, while writing profoundly Irish music. With a profound irony, his life ended, not in his homeland, but, because of wartime travel restrictions, in that most English of towns, Brighton.

In some ways, Ethel Smyth was another great exile. Her student years were spent in Leipzig and most of her greatest successes took place on the continent, whereas in Britain she suffered from the national suspicion of creative, energetic women and, especially, of the suffragettes. Her largest score, *The Wreckers*, typically, began life in French as *Les Naufrageurs*. It was first performed to great applause (albeit cut to pieces) in 1906 in Leipzig, in German, as *Strandrecht*. It reached London as a concert performance in 1908, and had its first English stage performance in 1909, under Sir Thomas Beecham. Despite the efforts of modern recording companies, Smyth, a composer admired by Bruno Walter, is still underestimated in this country. Indeed, if she is remembered at all, it is for conducting the women of Holloway Prison with a toothbrush. *The Wreckers* is a tale of thwarted love in an isolated seaside community dominated by the church, and, as such, in company with Bridge's *The Sea*, strikingly anticipates Britten's *Peter Grimes*, although the location, even more desolate and backward, is eighteenth century Cornwall, rather than Suffolk. The lover's difficulty is not the man's cruelty, but the woman's marriage, to the local preacher a vicious man, whose notion of Christian virtue allows him to disable the local lighthouse on stormy nights so that cargo ships will be lured onto the rocks. In one of the great romantic death scenes, the opera ends with the lovers, Mark and Thirza, trapped in a sea cave as the rising tide slowly drowns them. Two orchestral passages have been employed as concert pieces: the opening of Act 2, sometimes known as *On the Cliffs of Cornwall*, and the overture which we hear Smyth conduct briskly but lyrically, the opening, strongly reminiscent of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, declaring forcefully Smyth's allegiance to Germanic culture.

Stephen Follows

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