

Elgar: Ecce sacerdos magnus (1888)
Te Deum and Benedictus (op 34) (1897)
O hearken Thou (op 64) (1911)
Psalm 48: Great is the Lord (op 67) (1912)
Psalm 29: Give unto the Lord (op 74) (1914)
Spanish Serenade (op 23) (1892)
Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands (op27) (1895)

SOMM CD 267

Brighton Festival Chorus
BBC Concert Orchestra / Barry Wordsworth

Well, here is a real treat! Seven works, hardly known in their orchestral dress and one world premiere, performed with a passion and commitment that is truly uplifting. *Ecce sacerdos magnus* is Elgar's last work for St George's Catholic Church in Worcester, and was written to celebrate the visit of the Bishop of Birmingham. It has had a few recordings, all with organ, but this is its first recording with the composer's orchestration, and what a difference it makes. Suddenly, what was a pleasant enough church anthem is transformed into a mini- masterpiece, the stately rhythmic tread, sudden blossomings of sonority and the depth of orchestral sound point very obviously to what was to come.

The splendid *Te Deum and Benedictus* was written for Hereford Cathedral in 1897. G R Sinclair, the organist there who had commissioned it, proclaimed 'it is very, very modern, but I think it will do'. With hindsight this seems rather an odd judgement. 'Very modern' it is not, but it bursts into life with a vigour and exuberance that must have startled the sedate Hereford audience. The *Te Deum* ends with music of quiet contemplation which is carried on in the *Benedictus*, although the music of the *Te Deum* returns to end the work with jubilation. Throughout the Brighton Festival Chorus is excellent, with impeccably clear diction and complete assurance, whether in the contemplative sections or the richly scored dramatic ones. And although in no way overlooking the fine singing of the sopranos and altos, it is a real pleasure to hear such full-hearted singing from tenors and basses as here. As so often in Elgar's choral works the ear is constantly caught and arrested by the orchestral detail. Was anybody writing music of such rich detail at that time in this country, or, I'm tempted to add, anywhere else? The trombone section has a field day in this work, and there is some lovely solo oboe playing.

O Harken Thou, along with the *Coronation March (op 65)* was composed for King George V's coronation in 1911. Heaven knows what the notoriously cloth-eared King made of it, if indeed he ever heard it. The intensely dark colouring of the March and the mystical, richly chromatic depth of the Anthem, seem curiously out of keeping with Coronation festivities. Never rising above *mf*, and often *ppp*, it receives a beautifully still, rapt performance here.

It is perhaps surprising that the Catholic Elgar's big religious works were written for the Anglican Church. The two Psalm Settings, numbers 29 and 48, show Elgar at the height of his powers. Again they have been recorded several times with organ, but only twice with orchestra. Although Winchester Cathedral Choir with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra recorded them on the old Argo label, the obvious point of comparison (and with the *Te Deum and Benedictus*) is with versions by the late Richard Hickox and the London Symphony Chorus. Fine though they are, they were recorded almost thirty years ago, and it is Elgar Society sponsorship that is responsible for these modern recordings. The ample acoustic of Watford Colosseum is shown at its best in these festive works, and Neil Varley and his BBC recording team are to be congratulated in the cleanness and richness of the sound. Both chorus and orchestra are vividly recorded with no loss of clarity in Elgar's often complex writing. Again the men are splendid in the opening expansively rolling phrases of *Psalm 48*. The middle section 'for lo, the kings assembled themselves' is nervy and anxious, but in the short baritone solo the singer is, inexplicably, uncredited in the booklet and on the CD case. In fact it is the Dutch baritone Henk Neven, who went on to record some of Elgar's orchestral songs, to

be released by SOMM in the summer. I would have thought the Chorus Master also warranted a mention. The ending of this Psalm is Elgar at his grandest and most *nobilmente*, and this same mood opens *Psalm 29*. Here the orchestra comes into its own at the most descriptive passages – ‘the God of Glory thundereth’ certainly does here, as does the dramatic passage describing ‘the voice of God breaketh the Cedars’ but it all dies down to a peaceful and reflective ending, ‘the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace’.

The CD is completed by two non-religious works dating from the 1890s. In fact the four pre-Enigma (1899) works on this disc convince me yet again that Elgar’s genius was flaring well before the Enigma Variations arrived on the scene. The gentle *Spanish Serenade (Stars of the summer night)* does not sound particularly Spanish, apart from the tinklings of a tambourine, but did Elgar ever write a more beautifully melting phrase as ‘She sleeps, my lady sleeps!’? Incidentally, has anyone ever written a thesis on the strange Spanish influences in his music that cropped up throughout his life, especially as it was a country he never visited? Might it account for the recent revival of interest in his music in that country?

The CD ends with one of Elgar’s happiest and most buoyant works, *Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands*, a momento of his and his wife’s happy holidays in Bavaria in the 1890s. Alice’s words and Elgar’s music echo the vigorous dance rhythms of the region as well as capturing the atmosphere of high mountain pastures. Barry Wordsworth, no stranger to Elgar’s music, captures an ideal tempo for the first movement, a buoyant swing instead of the usual scramble. The tempo marking is *Allegretto*, which allows the words to come through clearly (although all texts are included in the booklet). The second movement’s description of False Love brings the only darker moments of the work, but it is a wistful remembrance rather than a deep passion. It is nicely contrasted with the well-known *Lullaby*, with gently floating violins over the beautifully sung alto line. ‘On the Alm’ brings out the best in the men’s chorus again, with distant horn echoing across the valleys, and in the Finale Wordsworth sets a cracking pace for this tale of a shooting match which the Elgars witnessed. I had generally thought this the weakest of the six movements, but the exuberance and joyfulness of the performance has made me change my mind. The big tune, rolled out in grandeur at the end, completely convinced me! Throughout this work there is an open-air freshness, gaiety and charm that is unique in Elgar’s larger works. Some of it was recaptured three years later in the more pastoral sections of *Caractacus*, but that mood largely disappeared as his fame grew and demands on his time took him away from the countryside he loved.

A surprising bonus track on the CD includes the opening of a 1949 issue of the *Benedictus* from Haydn’s *Harmoniemesse*, the main theme of which is echoed in Elgar’s *Ecce sacerdos magnus*. It may have been performed on the same occasion, but certainly Elgar knew it. This old Munich recording takes it at a speed which points very closely the Elgar connection. The tempo marking is an unlikely *Allegro molto*, which the great Haydn scholar H C Robbins Landon points out could be a misreading of *Allegro moderato*, which in Haydn’s day would not have been the breathless scramble that is usual today.

To sum up, a CD full of music that is too little known, but showing the composer at his best, with superb and committed choral singing from the Brighton Festival Chorus, an excellent and full-bodied contribution from the BBC Concert Orchestra, and directed by Barry Wordsworth with complete assurance and attention to Elgarian detail. Recommended with the greatest enthusiasm – a CD which ought to be on every Elgar lovers’ shelves.

Barry Collett