CD Reviews

Bairstow

Three Introits or Short Anthems

Jesu, the very thought of thee
Blessed city, heavenly Salem
Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in D (1906)
Lord, thou hast been our refuge
If the Lord had not helped me
Let all mortal flesh keep silence
Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in G (1940)
Five Poems of the Spirit
Save us, O Lord

Roderick Williams *bar,* Paul Provost *org*
Choir of St John's College, Cambridge
Britten Sinfonia
David Hill *cond*

Hyperion CDA67497 (61 minutes: DDD)
Notes and texts in English only.

A standard history of English Cathedral Music[1] describes Sir Edward Bairstow as standing head and shoulders above the other organist-composers of the Stanford school whose works used to (continue to?) dominate the daily repertory of our cathedral choirs. As Organist of York Minster from 1913 until his death in 1946, Professor of Music at Durham University and a noted teacher and adjudicator, Bairstow was a figure of national significance; and it is a kind of confirmation of his importance that such a well-respected firm as Hyperion should have felt it worthwhile to commission a complete CD of his choral music from David Hill and the distinguished choir of St John's College, Cambridge. It contains as good a selection of Bairstow's church music as one could reasonably expect, including the Evening Services in D and G, the large-scale anthems 'If the Lord had not helped me' and 'Lord, thou hast been our refuge', and such favourites as 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence' and 'Save us, O Lord, waking'. It would have been good to have in addition 'Our Father in the heavens', a splendid but rarely performed unaccompanied eight-part setting of a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer for, as it stands, the CD is somewhat short by current standards, being little more than 62 minutes in length.

Exceptionally welcome is the inclusion of *Five Poems of the Spirit*, in which the choir is joined by Roderick Williams (baritone) and the Britten Sinfonia.

[1] Kenneth Long, *The Music of the English Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972): 414.

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This lovely work, 'the result of a lifetime's experience and the full flowering of his composing genius',[2] dates from 1944, the texts (Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, Walter Raleigh and Mary Sidney) having been suggested by Eric Milner-White (Dean of York 1941–63); it was published some ten years later with the orchestration completed by Bairstow's pupil Ernest Bullock. The recording would be worth buying for this work alone, for it is unquestionably the highlight of the programme and is given a committed and captivating performance. One could, however, wish that the music had not been driven so relentlessly – the otherwise admirable Roderick Williams has to work very hard to be heard at times, and both first and last movements are just a little too brisk for comfort. Sadly these twin faults, of excessive speed and over-loud climaxes, also detract from most of the other performances on the disc.

One wonders what Bairstow himself would have to say about it all; or, to put it another way, how 'authentic' are these performances? He would surely rejoice at the sheer quality of the singing, especially that of the men, for it was a constant complaint that 'by a legitimate process of gentle bribery'[3] other cathedrals poached York's best singers; on the other hand, the co-author of 'Singing learned from speech' might take exception to such distortions of the English language as 'with sweetness fills my brust', 'of pure gold are fahshionèd', 'ahnd hahth exalted', 'und to the Son' and so on. He would commend the singers' close attention to his numerous performance directions in the Evening Service in D, but he might find the performance of the more subtle Evening Service in G rather matter-of-fact. There are aspects of Bairstow's performances that one could not now easily reproduce, and indeed would not wish to; boy choristers were trained differently in his day, and sang treble until they were great strapping youths in their mid to late teens, as may be seen from any choir photograph of the period. It was interesting and significant that at a recent conference at Durham University a speaker could assert confidently, but erroneously, that in a 1927 recording of York Minster's choir the top line was being sung by (male) altos! That notwithstanding, there is an established tradition in the performance of much of the cathedral repertory; the author was at one time assistant to a cathedral organist who claimed to know precisely how the recitatives in S.S. Wesley's anthems should be performed, having been let into the secret by Dr Douglas Hopkins, who had learnt it on good authority from someone else, and so on right back to the composer. If this is rather an extreme example, nevertheless a conductor should surely make it his business to study such traditions as exist before committing his interpretations to disc.

If the would-be interpreter of Bairstow lacks the corpus of recordings by composer and dedicatee that can, to take the most obvious example, either inhibit or inspire performers of Britten's music, he has a priceless treasure not only in the biography of Bairstow[4] by his chorister, pupil, assistant and eventual successor Dr Francis Jackson, but also in the living tradition of the music's performance, which has been preserved at York Minster to this day. There are even a couple of instances noted by Dr Jackson, at the end of the Gloria of the D major Nunc dimittis and in the accelerando on p. 7 of 'If the Lord had not helped me', where

[2] Francis Jackson, *Blessed City: The Life and Works of Edward C. Bairstow* (York: William Sessions, 1996), 296.

[3] Ibid., 104.

[4] Ibid.

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the composer habitually departed from his own printed score.[5] The reader is directed to a very good recording by the Choir of York Minster directed by Philip Moore which, though not as technically accomplished as the disc under review, conveys the spirit of the music much better and contains as a considerable bonus the glorious sounds of the Minster organ, played with due authority by Dr Jackson's last assistant organist.[6]

Even more happily, one can still consult Bairstow's successor in person, and Dr Jackson has been kind enough to send some quite detailed comments on the David Hill/St John's College recording. He professes himself very unhappy with 'Lord, thou hast been our refuge':

> The unwarranted accelerando in the first section is a great pity, robbing it of dignity and dispatching it unceremoniously . And they do it again. 'Thou shalt arise' is too quick, picked at. They haven't got the measure of the piece. Bairstow kept to the initial tempo throughout.[7]

He reminds us of the existence of Bairstow's orchestration of 'Lord, thou hast been our refuge'; and it does indeed seem strange, given the presence of the orchestra for *Five Poems of the Spirit*, that this version was not recorded.

In a sermon on the day after Bairstow's funeral it was said that 'Sir Edward always taught his pupils that, whatever medium they used, their efforts would be of no avail unless they had a message and tried to deliver it. … With all this went a reverence that was as sincere as it was deep.'[8] It is perhaps this quality that Dr Jackson finds lacking. In 'If the Lord had not helped me', 'the men's "It had not failed but my soul had been put to silence"'[9] is a bit too operatic, lacking a bit of humility. The repeat (solo) at the end is even more so, and quite the wrong emphasis.' In 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence', 'They don't get the right scary feel at "The cherubim with many eyes"', and the Magnificat in G is 'rather too hearty – again humility, restraint would have improved it'. These are serious reservations, which suggest that despite the slickness and precision of the performances, and some moments of striking beauty ('Save us, O Lord' is exceptionally well sung), both singers and conductor have failed really to 'get inside' the music; it may well be that much of it was learnt in something of a hurry especially for this recording.

It would be a pity if our great choirs were to fail to take this sort of music seriously. Much of it is on a grand scale, designed for a more spacious age, apt for leisurely performance in great buildings and requiring the singers to 'put their hearts into it', as Walford Davies was wont to say. The current tendency to take this and much other church music too fast results in edgy, exaggerated performances that can make the listener curiously uncomfortable. 'Authentic performance' has quite rightly now begun to inform the interpretation of nineteenth-century music; it surely makes sense to discover and preserve the performance practice of the following generation of composers while the tradition and many of its practitioners are still very much with us. Even if the recording under discussion is in many respects far from ideal, it is still worth collecting just for *Five Poems of the Spirit*; and perhaps some enterprising violinist in Hyperion's stable will

5 Ibid., 267, 258.
6 Choral Music of Sir Edward Bairstow, Priory PRCD 365, still available.
7 Dr Francis Jackson, letter to the author.
8 Jackson, *Blessed City*, 229, 230.
9 Dr Francis Jackson, letter to the author.

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follow it up by giving us Bairstow's *Six Variations on an Original Theme*, a work that 'even Elgar could have taken pride in acknowledging'.[10]

Timothy Storey

Grieg

Violin Sonata No. 1 in F major Op. 8
Violin Sonata No. 2 in G major Op. 13
Violin Sonata No. 3 in C minor Op. 45

Solo piano miniatures arranged for violin and piano by Joseph Acron:
At Home Op. 43 No. 3; Puck Op. 71 No. 3; Lonely Wanderer
Op. 43 No. 2; Scherzo-Impromptu Op. 73 No. 2; Grandmother's
Minuet Op. 68 No. 2; Dance from Jölster Op. 17 No. 3

Hagai Shaham *vn*, Arnon Erez *pf*

Hyperion CDA 67504 (76 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

This recording offers a fine opportunity: the review and study of a major composer's complete output of one genre, played beautifully and idiomatically without being excessively mannered, which enables the listener to focus on the pieces themselves. Shaham and Erez have an absolutely natural, organic kind of ensemble between them, and neither player is drawn toward excesses of interpretation or execution; one never senses an overly athletic bow-arm, overly liberal doses of thunder coming from the piano or excessive sentimentality. Rather, the duo avoids the lure of concert-hall expression and strikes a balance between the expanded emotional and dynamic range of the later nineteenth century and the chamber aesthetic. This is truly fine playing, playing that sustains repeated listenings, and because it does not call a lot of attention to itself, it enables the listener to move directly through it to Grieg.

At risk of calling down the wrath of the Muses: I am not sure the sonatas themselves sustain similar attention. As a Norwegian, Grieg was long considered to be a composer of peripheral European nationality (like, say, Chopin or Dvořak). Also like Chopin, the musical miniature was long considered to be more natural to him than were larger-scale musical structures. With Chopin, the work of the last few decades has buried this canard once and for all. With Grieg, it may not be a canard. Put differently, it may be that his approach to the balance between the structurally and thematically familiar and unfamiliar that informs all new works may have stood up less well in the intervening years. The six Grieg miniatures included at the end of this recording, originally for piano but arranged for piano and violin by Joseph Achron, seem almost to dare the listener to draw this conclusion; several of them are familiar to the general listener, yet they still seem fresh, unforced and not overly ambitious.

[10] Ibid., 301.

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