# CD Reviews

**York Bowen***
**Cecil Forsyth**

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Viola Concerto in C minor* op. 25

Viola Concerto in G minor

Lawrence Power *va*,
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra
Martyn Brabbins *cond*

Hyperion CDA67546 (62 minutes: DDD), £13.99
Notes and translations included.

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Hyperion is yet again to be praised for an exceptional recording of largely unknown repertoire. Lawrence Powers' inspired performances of the viola concertos of York Bowen and Cecil Forsyth with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra conducted by Martyn Brabbins prove that lush expansive Romanticism was flourishing in Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century. Both concertos are milestones in the rich history of British viola music, and it is gratifying to have them together on a single disc. Forsyth's Viola Concerto in G minor (1903) is the earliest known example of the genre by a British composer, while Bowen's Viola Concerto in C minor (1908) was written for the eminent viola virtuoso Lionel Tertis (1876–1975), who was an ardent champion of the work. Bowen and Forsyth were both violists, and hence both concertos are extremely idiomatic and showcase the particular timbral possibilities of the solo instrument.

York Bowen (1884–1961) is a composer whose music is enjoying a much-deserved renaissance. He was extremely prolific, and his output includes, in addition to his Viola Concerto, three symphonies, three piano concertos, a violin concerto, several symphonic poems and other orchestral pieces, miniatures for solo piano, and chamber music. Bowen was a fine pianist and taught piano at the Royal Academy of Music for fifty years (1909–59). He also played viola, horn and organ and was especially familiar with the viola, for he was Tertis's pianist for many years. Viola music forms a major part of his overall *œuvre*, among which are two sonatas (No. 1 in C minor op. 18 [1905], No. 2 in F op. 22 [1906]), a Fantasia for Viola and Organ (1906), a Fantasie for Four Violas (1907), and a Rhapsody for Viola and Piano (1955).

Bowen's Viola Concerto had its first performance on 26 March 1908 with Tertis as soloist. Its long phrases, late Romantic harmonies, and vibrant orchestration (including harp) suggest the strong influence of Richard Strauss. The three movements of the 35-minute work are roughly the same length, and the return of the first movement's opening theme in the third movement's cadenza provides

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cyclic unity, recalling Brahms's use of a similar technique in his Third Symphony. It was not until 1999, in an edition by John White, professor emeritus of viola at the Royal Academy of Music and author of *An Anthology of British Viola Players*, that the work was first published.[1]

The first movement is filled with sweeping rhapsodic gestures. The opening theme, which begins on the wonderfully resonant open C string, immediately establishes the expansive lyricism that characterizes the movement. Bowen writes masterfully for the viola, exploring its entire range with idiomatic material ranging from lyrical and sonorous passages in the lower registers to bravura writings in the higher registers. The movement is filled with supple gestural details in terms of pacing and dynamics, which are exquisitely captured by Power and Brabbins.

Unlike the first movement, in which the viola enters almost immediately, the second movement has an extended orchestral introduction. When the solo viola enters, it is with a broad cantabile theme against colouristic harp arpeggios. Here, as throughout the Concerto, Bowen shows himself to be a master at evocative orchestration. The middle section of the movement is more playful, and even approaches the character of a scherzo. The genuine *pianissimo* immediately after the reprise of the opening material is one of the Concerto's outstanding moments (and one of the most memorable on the recording), as is the musical exchange between the viola and solo winds in the coda.

The third movement is brighter in character, with hints of the sleigh bells of the opening of Mahler's Fourth Symphony (1901) in the orchestral part. It includes several special effects for the soloist, including *sul ponticello* (playing near the bridge), harmonics, and multi-stop chords. The Concerto's only cadenza occurs in this movement. More likely the creation of Tertis than of Bowen, this *tour-de-force* virtuoso bravura passage includes the afore-mentioned reminiscent reprise of the Concerto's opening theme. A fiery coda brings the work to a satisfying end.

While the Concerto certainly has allusions to Strauss, Brahms and Mahler, it is at its heart extremely original and resides firmly in the tonal tradition of British music in the Edwardian era. Violists do not possess a large number of large-scale Romantic concertos and Bowen's Viola Concerto will hopefully find a well-deserved place on concert programmes.

Cecil Forsyth (1870–1941), known more as a writer about music than as a composer, studied with Parry and Stanford at the Royal College of Music. His major books, all of which were popular during his lifetime, include *Orchestration* (1914), *Music and Nationalism* (1911, co-authored with Stanford), and *A History of Music* (1916).[2] Like Bowen, Forsyth was a violist. He was a member of the viola section of the Queen's Hall Orchestra and was also connected with the Savoy Theatre.

Forsyth's Viola Concerto, first performed on 12 September 1903, is the earliest known major viola concerto by a British composer. Emile Férir was the soloist on the Queen's Hall Promenade Concert where the work was first heard, and Tertis was the orchestra's principal violist. Tertis seems not to have particularly cared for the work, for he never mentions it in his autobiography, *My Viola and I*, nor

[1] John White, *An Anthrology of British Viola Players* (Colne: Comus Edition, 1997).

[2] Cecil Forsyth, *Orchestration* (London: Macmillan, 1914; reprint of 1935 edition, New York: Dover, 1982); *A History of Music*, with Charles Villiers Stanford (New York: Macmillan, 1916; updated edition, ed. Carl Fuchs, Piscatawe, NJ: Research & Education Association, 2003).

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does he include it in the book's massive list of viola concertos by British composers.[3]

Although Forsyth's Viola Concerto does not contain the richness and innate sense of musical line and form that Bowen's exudes, it nonetheless is an intriguing work. The Concerto lasts 25 minutes, and each succeeding movement is shorter than its predecessor. The greatest weight and sense of musical process lies in the first movement, though the second movement is the most distinctive. Some passages seem compositionally laboured and mechanical, especially in the outer movements. The first movement opens with the solo viola playing a dramatic motif that immediately gives way to a quasi-cadenza and subsequently to a plaintive melody. The second theme, a gently arpeggiated tune, is the most memorable of the movement. The cadenza, which occurs just before the recapitulation, is filled with etude-like technical demands. The haunting second movement with its opening brass chorale-fanfare is the strongest of the concerto. Here, Forsyth shows his mastery at creating lyrical lines that display the sonorous quality of the solo viola. The composer's adeptness at orchestration is especially evident in the cor anglais solo in the middle part of the movement. While formal construction may at times seem contrived, the orchestration is expertly conceived.

The third movement begins with a thickly scored orchestral introduction, concluding with an idiomatic timpani roll, after which the solo viola enters with a tumultuous passage filled with double stops and dotted rhythms. The viola opening is reminiscent of Robert Schumann's *Märchenbilder* (1851) for viola and piano, a standard work in the viola repertory. The orchestra features prominently throughout the movement, for, after a furious interlude, it introduces the lyrical second theme, which is derived from the second theme of the first movement. In a clear example of the 'academic' aspects of the concerto, the soloist then plays the melody nearly verbatim. The coda is filled with double-stop octaves for the violist and, as in the first movement, etude-like figures.

Of the two concertos, Bowen's is definitely stronger. There is a natural quality to the ebb and flow of musical ideas that seems intuitive rather than forced. The Forsyth Concerto, on the other hand, gives the impression of being the product of a competent craftsman. It does not hold up as well as the Bowen Concerto on repeated hearings. The liner notes by Lewis Foreman offer keen insight into the lives of both composers and their work, and appear in English, French and German. The performances are consistently strong and convincing. In short, this is an exceptionally fine recording of two important viola concertos from the end of the Romantic era.

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[3] Lionel Tertis, *My Viola and I* (London: Elek, 1974; reprinted London: Kahn & Averill, 1991).

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