English Piano Works

Sterndale Bennett
Sonata in F minor Op. 13

William Thomas Best
Grande Mouvement de Danse: Polka Originale Op. 4
Romanesca Op. 16

C. Hubert H. Parry
Shulbrede Tunes

Simon Callaghan *pf*
De Rode Pomp

Gents Muzikaal Achief Vol. 34 RP/GMA 069/073
Notes in English and Dutch.

This attractive disk provides a snapshot of British piano music in the long nineteenth century, juxtaposing a variety of genres (sonata, polka, romanesca, an extended set of miniatures) composed within a 77-year period. The Piano Sonata op. 13 in F minor by William Sterndale Bennett (1816–1875), written as a wedding present for Mendelssohn and Cécile Jeanrenaud, was completed in 1837 at the end of Bennett's studies in Leipzig. Although not perhaps as well known as his later sonata 'The Maid of Orleans' op. 46 (1873), where the four movements are preceded by brief extracts from Schiller's verse-drama, this is a beautiful work. Whilst some listeners may be conscious of the possible allusions to Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* as suggested by R.Larry Todd,[1] or might even detect a Schumannesque quality in some of the obsessive rhythms, Bennett's major–minor relationships, textural contrasts and variation of contour within his figuration suggest the development of a distinctive style and an early confidence in his writing for piano.

It was Stanford who suggested that, with the exception of Mozart, Bennett's piano music represented the most difficult challenge in performance, and that 'He [Bennett] unconsciously lays traps for the performer at the most unexpected moments, which spell disaster to the unwary'.[2] Callaghan negotiates any such traps with aplomb, providing a very engaging reading. In the first movement, Moderato espressivo, he brings out the local drama of the scalic runs and sequential passages beautifully, and highlights Bennett's frequent use of the minor subdominant chord and the arresting move to C minor at the beginning of the development section with a subtle sense of pacing. Although bass notes might have been brought out a little more in places, the staccato chromatics from the inner texture are well projected, and Callaghan produces a beautiful

[1] R. Larry Todd, 'Mendelssohnian Allusions in the Early Piano Works of William Sterndale Bennett', in *The Piano in Nineteenth-Century British Culture: Instruments, Performers and Repertoire*, ed. Therese Ellsworth and Susan Wollenberg (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007): 106–13.

[2] Charles Villiers Stanford, *Interludes, Records and Reflections* (London: John Lane, 1922): 165.

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singing cantabile and judges the arresting ending of the movement effectively; here, although F minor is re-established after the reprise of the second idea in the tonic major, a final 16-bar ritenuto gradually reasserts an extended *Tierce de Picardie*. Ilona Prunyi's 1993 recording of the sonata on Marco Polo (programmed with Bennett's *Suite de Pieces* op. 24)[3] provides a viable alternative reading of the first movement, but in the second movement scherzo it is the agitato quality of Callaghan's performance that is much more compelling, along with his highlighting of the hemiola at the end of the scherzo section, and the way in which the trio tentatively establishes itself after Bennett's transitional interrupted cadence.

There is no slow movement as such in the sonata; instead, Bennett provides a Serenata, marked Moderato grazioso, and although this is more derivative than the other movements, Callaghan gives an effective lilt and a thoughtful shaping to Bennett's phrases, bringing out the dialogue between the hands. Again, however, it is the agitato quality of the 12/8 finale that Callaghan persuasively highlights with his brisk tempo, creating a real excitement as he moves through the textural contrasts of Bennett's score, with undulating staccato chordal quavers, legato arpeggiations, left-hand octave leaps and hymn-like cadential passages. Whilst the verve of the movement is compelling, it is Callaghan's subtle approach to Bennett's tonal pacing at the end of the work that is particularly striking. Mirroring the major–minor fluctuations of the first movement, Callaghan has to negotiate the return of a second idea in the tonic major (marked by Bennett as a final 'Maggiore' section), followed by a diminished-seventh sequence, and the final harmonic shifts between subdominant minor/diminished chords and the tonic major.

William Thomas Best (1826–1897) is usually associated with editions of Bach's organ music, vocal score piano accompaniments for choral works by Handel, Mozart and Spohr, and several arrangements and original compositions for organ. As a performer, he was considered by James Duff Brown in his 1886 *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* to be 'the greatest master of the organ now living in Britain'. The two works by Best on this disk, both first recordings, therefore create a more representative picture of Best's compositional range. Suitably light-hearted, the *Grande Mouvement de Danse: Polka Originale* op. 4 (1847), represents an attractive response to the genre that had recently taken London by storm, and Callaghan brings out the dance-like character, textural contrasts and cadential nuances effectively. Best's *Romanesca* op. 16, published in 1854, provides further textural and tonal variety; brief references to a wide range of keys, together with the occasional exoticism, suggest Best's harmonic fluency, and Callaghan provides a suitable lightness of touch, particularly in the dialogue material in thirds in the central section.

In 1902, Parry's elder daughter Dorothea (Dolly) and her politician husband Arthur Ponsonby rented Shulbrede Priory, a substantial house with older parts dating from the twelfth century, buying it outright in 1905. Situated half-way between Parry's London address, 17 Kensington Square, and Knight's Croft in Rustington, close to the Sussex coast, it represented a useful stopping-off point for the composer, and a relaxing place to convalesce from his frequent heart trouble. Diary entries also suggest that he played through some of his compositions here, including the *Symphonic Fantasia* (Symphony No. 5, '1912') and various songs.

[3] Bennett, *Suite de Pieces*, Op.24/Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 13. Ilona Prunyi *pf*, Marco Polo 8.223526.

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Parry's *Shulbrede Tunes*, published by Augener in 1914, contains ten delightful pieces based on the house itself ('Shulbrede', 'Prior's Chamber By Firelight', 'In the Garden – with the Dew on the Grass'), light-hearted activities ('Bogies and Sprites that Gambol by Night', 'Children's Pranks') and family portraits – two movements representing Dolly, pieces for Parry's grandchildren 'Elizabeth' and 'Matthew', and the culminating portrait of Arthur Ponsonby: 'Father Playmate'. Typically, the composer spent much time and effort on this set. Drafts of 'Elizabeth' explored the keys of E♭ and D major before settling on F, for example; there were also several structural alterations to 'Children's Pranks', and 'Matthew' originally involved completely different material. Stylistically, although the influence of Schumann can be traced in 'Dolly (No. 1)' in particular, the set is a mature composition, with characteristic examples of Parry's confident diatonicism, and a real awareness of the potential for pianistic characterization.

Again, although this is not the only recording (Peter Jacobs's 1995 disk on Priory Records combines the set with Parry's *Hands across the Centuries* suite and the Theme and Variations in D minor),[4] there are many things to admire in Callaghan's performance: the atmospheric reading of the opening 'Shulbrede', with a stately ebb and flow representing the understated grandeur of the building itself, the attention to pacing and dynamic shading that effectively highlights the mock-horrors of 'Bogies and Sprites that Gambol By Night' (this movement includes the striking musical quotation of 'Three Blind Mice'), the compelling capriccioso quality of the mischievous 'Children's Pranks', and a real sense of structural awareness in the passacaglia, 'Father Playmate'. In terms of personal taste, 'In the Garden – with the Dew on the Grass' might have been more effective at a slightly more sedate tempo, 'Dolly (No. 1)' could perhaps have explored a dreamier tone within the piano dynamic, and the first section of 'Elizabeth' would have benefited from a little more flexibility, but these are thoughtful readings overall, bringing out the contrasting character of each miniature.

Callaghan's choice of instrument throughout is a Bösendorfer, which provides a real depth of sound and an effective range of tone colour with a pleasingly resonant bass, and he manages to create a contrasting soundworld that is entirely appropriate to the relative chronology of these pieces; those interested in the distinctive tones of Parry's own Hagspiel piano, however, may wish to explore Anthony Goldstone's 1994 recording of Parry's piano music.[5] Overall, therefore, a highly recommended disk of British piano music that contains some thoughtful interpretations.

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[4] The Piano Music of Sir Hubert Parry. Peter Jacobs *pf*, Priory PRCD 451.

[5] Hubert Parry: Piano Music. Anthony Goldstone *pf*, Albany Records TROY 132, which includes Parry's two piano sonatas, *Charakterbilder*, the Theme and Nineteen Variations, and *Adagissimo*.

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