CD Reviews

Bridge

String Sextet in E♭ major† (1906–12)

Lament for two violas (1901)

String Quintet in E minor (1901)
(first recording)

The Raphael Ensemble
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Andrea Hess, Tim Gill† *vc*
Hyperion CDA67426 (66 minutes: DDD), £13.99
Notes and translations included.

In 1984 Anthony Payne published a revised version of his pioneering book *The Music of Frank Bridge*, which originally appeared in 1976. The title now read *Frank Bridge: Radical and Conservative*.[1] He does not say in his later preface why he felt the need to change the title; neither does he give an explanation in the 1999 reprint that has made this excellent handbook available again after being out of print for several years.[2] Perhaps he had decided that the original title was a little bland – that it needed to indicate what was characteristic about the composer. But what is really interesting is why 'radical' is placed before 'conservative'. Bridge's stylistic trajectory is usually seen as arcing away from Stanford-imposed conservatism towards the Scriabin/Schoenberg/Berg/Bartók-inspired radicalism (at least, radicalism in British terms) of the late 1920s and 1930s. There doesn't seem to be any rhythmic reasons for the order ('conservative and radical' works just as well), so it might be thought that the prioritization reflected the domination of modernism in the world-view of the British musical intelligentsia (even if, by the mid-1980s, this was beginning to crumble). Payne is not, however, one who allows himself to be railroaded by agendas of any sort, as his own compositions show, and he notes in his 1984 preface (or 'prelude', as he calls it) that 'Interestingly it is the early Edwardian and "English" late-romantic, middle-period works that have yielded increasingly rewarding experiences, while certain of the radical late works have come to seem at least in part flawed'.[3] It emerges during the course of the book that the (largely implicit) guiding thread is not so much a chronological shift from one to the other, but the way in which the mix of radical and conservative has informed

1 Anthony Payne, *The Music of Frank Bridge* (London, 1976); Anthony Payne, *Frank Bridge: Radical and Conservative* (London, 1984).
2 Anthony Payne, *Frank Bridge: Radical and Conservative* (London, 1999)
3 Ibid., 7.

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Bridge's stylistic progress and compositional decision-making. In the early works, including those on this CD, the general approach might be on the conservative side (Payne refers to Bridge's 'oddly discreet vision'[4]), but the radical impulse is not entirely absent, if we recognize that radical is always a relative term.

It might well be a more rewarding experience, however, to view the early works simply in terms of what Bridge could make of his inheritance, and what individual traits emerge, whether these happen to be radical or not. (This also seems a good way of approaching later Bridge: too much can be made of the influences – of the fact that he was one of the few composers to take on board the new expressive possibilities opened up by Schoenberg, Berg *et al*. – to the detriment of his individual voice.) For Bridge that inheritance was essentially Germanic. As Payne says: 'From the outset of his career Bridge had possessed an exceptionally fluent and logically ordered technique stemming from 19th-century German methods and tempered by a Gallic clarity and lightness. Unlike his many British contemporaries who had received a similar German-based grounding in composition, he does not seem to have questioned it'.[5] Whether 'clarity and lightness' does indeed stem from French models might be a moot point, but there is no doubting the Germanic approach to form-building, which, as Paul Hindmarsh observes in his liner notes (p. 3), shows even at this early stage a proto-Schoenbergian attitude in the tendency to avoid exact repetition, writ large in both the varied recapitulation of the first movement of the Quintet and the reverse recapitulation of the Sextet. Thematically, too, Germanic organicism reigns supreme: Hindmarsh notes that minor thirds provide the motivic 'engine room' for the Quintet (p. 4), and thematic cross-references abound in the Sextet, too.

The Quintet receives its first recording on this disc, and very welcome it is. Written while Bridge was still at the RCM, it is at times a little self-conscious in its working out, and some of the harmonic parentheses (or deflections) in the first and fourth movements court bathos when they are folded back into their point of departure. But in the main the work displays a level of technical skill and general surefootedness that few English contemporaries could rival. The third movement – a rhythmically buoyant scherzo (incorporating some dazzingly 'thrown' chromatic runs on Violin I) followed by a wistful trio – is particularly impressive. The second theme of the fourth movement is reminiscent of Elgar in salon mode, but it is the ending that forms the most interesting parallel with the foremost British composer of the day: a reflective transformation of the main theme of the first movement (its original appearance is described by Hindmarsh as a 'call to attention' (p. 3)) is followed by a harmonic side-slip to an energetic coda that is rather forced in its jollity. Rueful glances back to more confident or untroubled states of mind were, of course, already becoming central to Elgar's expressive world, as was the shift that is implied here from private rumination to public ceremonial.

The Raphael Ensemble revel in this kind of rhetoric, and are particularly fine in the third movement; the first is less convincingly played, with more dynamic contrast needed at times, and more tone required from the violas at the beginning of the second subject, in which they lead. One wonders whether this was

4 Ibid., 9.
5 Ibid., 12.

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the first work recorded in the two-day session; certainly the players had hit their stride when the Sextet's turn arrived. This is superbly controlled, particularly in the second of the three movements. The latter again incorporates a scherzo, this time as the central contrast to the *Andante con moto*; the movement's closing passage effects a synthesis by reworking the end of the scherzo at the *Andante* tempo – another wistful backward glance, beautifully played. The third is the most conventional, backward-looking movement – apart, that is, from the episode at 4'44"–5'47", which at times invokes contemporary Schoenberg (especially in the whole-tone-based ascent in Cello I from 5'00" to 5'06") before it slips into English heartiness. The Lament for two violas is characteristically English in a more positive way. As Hindmarsh points out (p. 6), 'some of [Bridge's] most personal music is to be found in his nocturnes and laments', and the work (in an edition made by Hindmarsh from the sketch) does more than hint at the rich vein of melancholy to come in late masterpieces such as *There is a Willow Grows Aslant a Brook*.

Observing the motivic working, the Cobbett-inspired fusing of formal archetypes, and the rearranging of sonata-form events, it is tempting to draw parallels with the early music of Bridge's famous pupil, Benjamin Britten. But perhaps the time has come to allow this association to take a breather on the sidelines, and for Bridge's individuality to command centre stage: as Payne says, Britten's revival of his teacher's work had the effect 'merely to remind us who Britten's teacher was'.[6] With the recent release of other CDs, including Richard Hickox's series of orchestral works for Chandos (four volumes to date), we can at least say that the opportunity exists for the central works to be better known, even if the recording presence has not yet translated onto the concert platform. With the sound of the music in our ears, the spur is there for increased scholarly and critical engagement. Aside from Payne (and discounting resource books such as those by Hindmarsh and Little[7]) there is surprisingly little of this: the only substantial works of which I am aware, both unpublished Ph.D. theses, are Angela Edwards's study of the quartets and Christian Kennett's pitch-class set genera techno-fest.[8] In the latter, Bridge's music serves as fodder for theoretical speculations, while the author's 'transitional' label suggests the music is not fully achieved. Certainly the works on this disc do not have the emotional range of later Bridge, but they do not deserve simply to be confined in the 'student work' basket, and we should be grateful to the Raphael Ensemble for bringing them into the light.

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6 Ibid., 7.

7 Paul Hindmarsh, *Frank Bridge: A Thematic Catalogue 1900-1941* (London, 1983); Karen R. Little, *Frank Bridge: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York, 1991).

8 Angela M. Edwards, 'Frank Bridge: The String Quartets' (unpublished Ph.D.dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1992); Christian Kennett, 'The Harmonic Species of Frank Bridge: An Experimental Assessment of the Applicability of Pitch-Class Generic Theory to Analysis of a Corpus of Works by a Transitional Composer' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Reading, 1995).

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