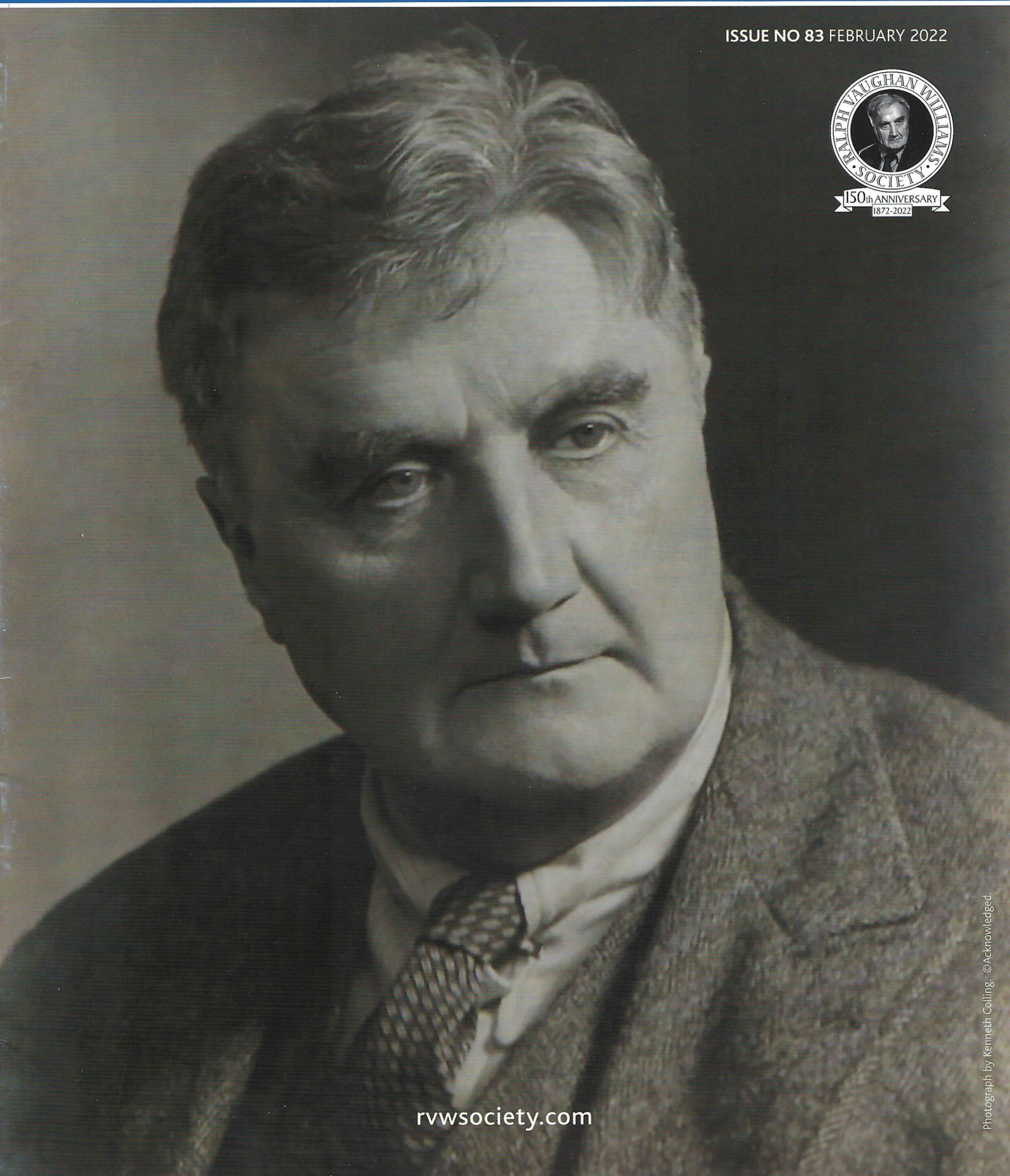
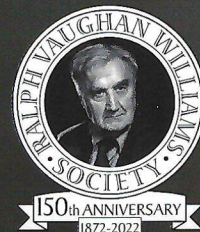


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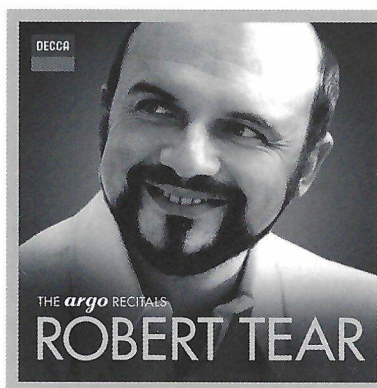
CD Reviews

Ronald E. Grames

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *Songs of Travel; Ten Blake Songs; Linden Lea; The Water Mill; Orpheus with His Lute; Silent Noon* – with songs, cantatas, and opera excerpts by Arne, Boyce, Britten, Chopin, Copland, Handel, Hook, Janáček, Liszt, Mahler, Mendelssohn, Parry, Rachmaninov, Respighi, Schubert, Schumann, Mátyás Seiber, Tchaikovsky, Tippett, Walton, Weber and others

Robert Tear (tenor); **Neil Black** (oboe); **Philip Ledger** (piano) plus other artists in non-Vaughan Williams works

DECCA 485 1544 (14 CDs)



Water Mill, and the later *Orpheus with His Lute* fill out the disc. *Silent Noon* was recorded in 1978. It is part of a recital of parlor songs and period ballads titled *I Dream of Jeanie*. Yes, it includes the Stephen Foster song and a selection of sentimental chestnuts like Enrico Toselli's *Serenata* in English, Harold Fraser-Simson's *Christopher Robin is Saying His Prayers*, and Kennedy Russell's *Vale (Farewell)*. I suppose this will be Nirvana to some listeners – Tear presented programs of such ballads, often with Benjamin Luxon, to great acclaim – but it is not an enthusiasm I share. However well done it may be – and I'll only quibble with the crooned high B in the Russell – the program makes odd company for Vaughan Williams's matchless love song, not to mention the two Christmas songs by Peter Warlock and Michael Head.



Philip Ledger

When tenor Robert Tear died in 2011 at the age of 72 – not 71 as stated in Nicholas Payne's otherwise spot-on appreciation that constitutes the notes for this release – he had made more than 250 recordings over a career spanning more than four decades. These 14 discs of recitals recorded for Argo between 1969 and 1978 – one track, the demanding tenor solo in Schubert's *Nachthelle* D892, was recorded in 1966 with the Elizabethan Singers – were made during the decade that Tear's reputation was being cemented at home with his move to the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and his international career was being launched. They offer such a perfect catalogue of his wide-ranging interests and consummate skills that it is surprising that nine of the recital LPs are being officially released on CD for the first time. 'Better late than never' as is often said of such events. I am supremely happy that it has happened at all, since listening to this set again confirms for me why Tear was so highly regarded for so long. He was an opera star of great distinction with keen musical and textual insights and fine acting skills that were in great demand, but as demonstrated here, he was, as well, a discerning recitalist and a distinguished concert soloist. The list of composers in the head note above give some sense of the breadth of his interests, and the recordings show that his skills were equally wide ranging.

Tear's 1977 Vaughan Williams recital disc includes two song cycles from opposite ends of the composer's professional life: *Songs of Travel* (1901–1904) and *Ten Blake Songs* (1957). *Linden Lea*, *The*

Tear's *Silent Noon* is distinctive: unsentimental, as though deeply contented, moving ahead at the *poco più mosso* ('All round our nest...') where many actually slow down, and finding the natural emotional catch at 'So this wing'd hour is dropt...' He does not milk it, but allows the moment of discovery – the embracing of the magical moment – to occur spontaneously. It is lovely. Equally fine are his *Songs of Travel*, where his gifts of character portrayal bring Robert Louis Stevenson's vagabond traveler vividly to life. With the heavy tread of Philip Ledger's accompaniment, we sense the resoluteness of the journey's beginning and then follow the emotional voyage illuminated by Tear's fine word pointing and carefully shaped phrasing. Perhaps his emphatic consonants are a compensation for the lesser depth of the tenor voice in music usually performed by baritones, but they serve the poet's virile verse well and the story of home abandoned, love won and lost, regrets suffered and then accepted. There are more lyrical readings, but none, to me, more wisely told.

The individual songs are equally well interpreted, but it is the cycle for tenor and oboe, written in the composer's last year for the film *The Vision of William Blake*, that I found most compelling. The oboe part was originally written for Janet Craxton, and she and Ian Partridge (EMI/Warner) recorded it a few years before Tear and oboist Neil Black did. Fine as that earlier recording is, as well

as the more recent one by Mark Padmore with Nicholas Daniel (Harmonia Mundi), I return to this one for its wistful bleakness and for Tear's inward, almost guarded, interpretation. Other teams may be more extrovert – the composer offered little guidance to the tenor – but the nuanced emotional restraint and the unity Tear achieves in the ten songs make this reading a powerful experience. Besides, he avoids any hint of tweeness in 'Infant Joy' and 'The Lamb' – 'that beastly little lamb' as the composer called it – and that counts for something as well.

The other twelve discs in the set offer similar rewards and few disappointments. Conventional wisdom has it that neither Tear's temperament nor his voice – reminiscent of Peter Pears, with whom he worked closely in his early years with the English Opera Group – suited him particularly well for Italian works, but the disc of little-known Respighi with László Heltay – *Deità silvane* and *Lauda per la Natività del Signore* – is a happy exception that does not necessarily prove the rule. The tenor's authoritative Tippett *Songs for Dov* – he created the character in *The Knot Garden* – is again made available on CD, though at the expense of Heltay's luminous *Trittico Botticelliano* from the original Respighi LP. His first recital disc, Baroque cantatas by Handel, Arne, Boyce, and Hook with Neville Marriner, is stylish in the ways of the time and nicely expanded with excerpts from their recording of *Acis and Galatea*. Marriner is also the conductor in a 1973 coupling of Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and Britten's *Nocturne*. These have supposedly been available on CD before, but I've missed them. The release was not all that well received at the time, despite some impressive moments like the explosive 'Ich hab' ein glühend Messer'. Critics at the time noted that a tenor in this usual preserve of lower voices changes the feel of the Mahler and that the interpretations seem a bit forced and underlined, especially compared to Pears in the Britten. I find that the positives outweigh the negatives, especially in the *Nocturne*.

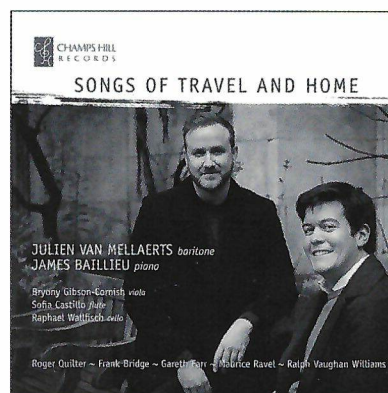
Tear's Copland songs are a mixed blessing for the same reason. The *Old American Songs* are at times overthought (and in *The Dodger*, oddly pronounced), but his nuanced *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson* convinced the composer that the settings of the reclusive poet could be effectively done by a male singer. Tear's Walton *Anon in Love*, performed with guitarist Timothy Walker, need not bow to the classic Pears/Bream recording, and the disc-mate Britten and Seiber folksong settings are well matched to the tenor's detailed approach. This disc is new to CD, as are the three discs of lieder by Schumann, Mendelssohn, Weber, Liszt, and (in Polish) Chopin. How these or the even more treasurable recordings of songs by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov could have languished in the vault for so long is beyond understanding. The appeal of his ardent Janáček *Diary of One Who Disappeared*, with Elizabeth Bainbridge, is tempered by being given in English translation, but the heightened immediacy is its own virtue. In all of these, Philip Ledger's insightful partnership is an incalculable asset.

These are original-cover reissues, with some 'bonus' materials, so times are often short for CD. Sound quality in these masterings is excellent: superior, for instance, to the earlier Vaughan Williams reissue on Decca, now only available on a made-on-demand CD-R. The notes, understandably, focus on the artist rather than the repertoire, but kudos to Decca for making the texts and translations available online for download. Note, however, that the texts for the parlor songs disc follow the LP order and not that used on the CD.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *Songs of Travel* – with songs by Quilter, Bridge, Gareth Farr, Ravel

Julien Van Mellaerts (baritone); **James Baillieu** (piano)

CHAMPS HILL CHRC164



Young New Zealand baritone, Julien Van Mellaerts, garnered many awards upon graduation from the Royal College of Music International Opera program, including first prizes in the prestigious Kathleen Ferrier and Wigmore Hall/Kohn Foundation International Song competitions and the College's own Tagore Gold Medal. He received excellent notices for his lead in the premiere of Stanford's *The Travelling Companion* (recorded by Somm), as well as other onstage appearances. In fact, such acclaim, and especially his recent appointment to the staff of the RCM to teach English song, led me to expect great things of this, his debut solo release. He does indeed offer some fine singing here in his lithe, slightly tenorial voice, and not least among his many technical virtues is his superb diction. But I must register a degree of disappointment.

It is not uncommon to find Vaughan Williams's *Songs of Travel* in young male vocalists' first recorded recitals, but some recent releases make me wonder if it is always the wisest choice. Van Mellaerts, for his part, modestly comments in his introductory note that 'it has been a pleasure to explore it' and that 'I look forward to the development of this song cycle throughout my career.' It is a pleasure to hear him explore these canny settings of Robert Louis Stevenson's verse, but a singer of his undoubted gifts will surely find more truth in them with experience. The breathtaking beauty of 'Youth and Love' shows how much has been found already, just as the end of the second stanza suggests what more needs to come from the heart rather than the head. But insights will deepen with time, and no doubt he will decide that less is more in such perfectly set songs as 'Whither Must I Wander?' and 'I have trod the upward and the downward slope.' These are most touching when the expression is inward and unexaggerated. More attention to a few expressive details provided by the composer will help, too. Meanwhile, this strikes me as a snapshot of a promising work in progress.

The best thing here is his singing of two Quilter songs: *Now sleeps the crimson petal* and *Go, Lovely Rose*, both of which have figured in his competition repertoire. These filigree settings of, respectively, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Edmund Waller can easily become saccharine, but Van Mellaerts and – equally important – his recital partner, James Baillieu, shape these songs with refinement and imagination. Most interesting is a new song cycle by New Zealand composer Gareth Farr and compatriot poet Bill Manhire, *Ornithological Anecdotes*, commissioned by singer

and pianist for a recent Chamber Music NZ tour. The songs initially characterized four indigenous birds, some endangered and one extinct, with wit and humor, with the prize of the set a very clever fifth song for the kiwi added for a 2020 recital. And how delightful that Van Mellaerts has decided to include Frank Bridge's *Three Songs for Medium Voice, Viola, and Piano*. These are not done that often, and are most often recorded by a mezzo, so it is nice to hear a male take them on. There are only two others of which I am aware. Bridge, again, left some instructions that the singer ignores at risk – the differentiation of the word 'perished' in its two appearances in 'Where is it that our soul doth go?', for instance – but here is the introspection that I occasionally missed in the Vaughan Williams cycle. A slight backward placement to the piano, noticeable throughout, becomes more concerning here where the blend of singer, violinist, and pianist is so important. The fine violinist is New Zealander, friend, and fellow Tagore Gold Medal winner Bryony Gibson-Cornish.

Balance is an issue in Ravel's *Chansons madécasses*, as well. This was described as a quartet by the composer: Baillieu, cellist Raphael Wallfisch, and flutist Sofia Castillo deserve greater prominence in the mix. Skilled performances, closer in tempo than most to Ravel's own with Madeleine Grey, they nonetheless need a bit more freedom, more tension and thrust at times, some barely suppressed fury in 'Aoua!' and a greater sense of the exotic. *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée*, Ravel's last composition as he suffered ever greater neurological disability, is more often recorded in the orchestral version. It is good to have another version with piano. It is lovely despite sitting low for Van Mellaerts, but it could use more Spanish flair in the first song, and just a touch of irony in the central prayer.

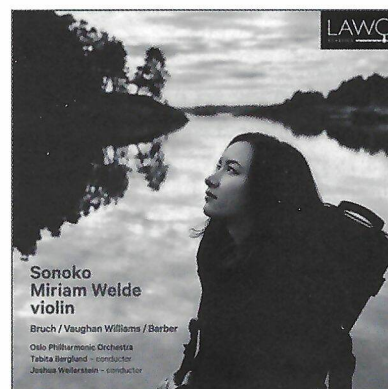
Thoughtful documentation is provided, including the singer's description of the exotic birds honored in the Farr cycle – complete with photographs – though I take some exception to Richard Stokes's over-specific characterization of the Vaughan Williams cycle. Texts for all songs, and, where needed, translations to English, are included. I look forward to hearing more in the future.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *The Lark Ascending* – with Bruch: Violin Concerto No. 1; Barber: Violin Concerto
Sonoko Miriam Welde (violin); Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra/Tabita Berglund (Joshua Weilerstein in the Barber)
 LAWO LWC1222

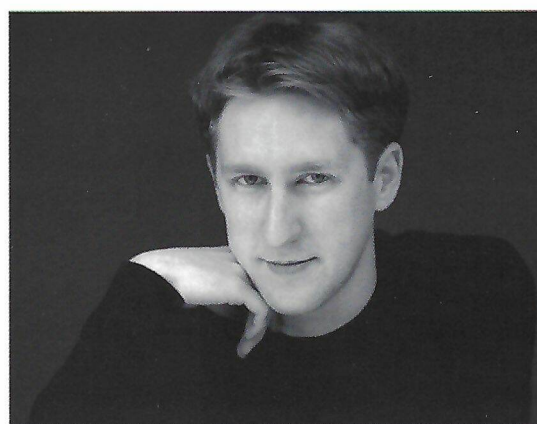
Vaughan Williams's ever-popular pastorate reflection, sitting most beguilingly between these two Romantic concertos, is played by Sonoko Miriam Welde with apparent artless simplicity. It reminds one of the classic Hugh Bean recording with Boult (EMI) in style and even in some details such as the wonderful sparkle of the poised, birdsong-like cadenzas. With so many fulsome star-turns in the catalogue of 'Lark' recordings, it is a delight to hear a performance where the violinist seems more intent on simply honoring the creation than creating a distinctive profile for herself. The result is one of the most enchanting recordings of this masterpiece to come along in some time.

The young Norwegian violinist, a veteran of 15 years before an orchestra though just 24 at the time of the recording, is a mentee of Janine Jansen who offered a fine performance of the rhapsody on her own debut recording. To my ears, the younger violinist

has surpassed her teacher in this work, aided by the sensitive and alert support of another young Norwegian, conductor Tabita Berglund. Tempos are well taken and nicely contrasted, there is graceful phrasing and discreet but telling use of *portamento*, and at every point the music is allowed to breathe and, most importantly, soar.



The much-recorded Bruch is even more of a star vehicle, but again Welde stands up well in comparisons to the giants of the past, not least because of her easy virtuosity, unaffected expressiveness, ability to call up real fire when needed, and lack of interpretive mannerisms. The Barber, which concludes the program, is even better. Both works are heart-on-sleeve creations, and Welde revels in this without overmilking, but particularly in the Barber she perceptively finds the darker clouds of the composer's nature without in any way diminishing the rapture of, say, the glorious second movement. She and the orchestra are impressive in the *Presto* finale as well, which is taken at an exhilarating pace. American Joshua Weilerstein, yet another rising young star, is the galvanizing conductor for this final work.



Joshua Weilerstein

Whoever decided to begin the Barber concerto after a shorter than usual pause was inspired. The transition is breathtaking, almost as if the lark that had disappeared from sight has once more appeared. But not all is beyond reproach. Recorded rather closely, though not unreasonably balanced with the orchestra, Welde's highest notes in *The Lark Ascending* turn a bit scratchy. In addition, the orchestra in the Bruch and Vaughan Williams appears in a slightly different acoustic. But these are minor cavils in the face of a debut recording that delivers much pleasure and promises so much for the future.

A survey of new releases

In addition to the recordings receiving full reviews here, there have been several releases and rereleases with music of Vaughan Williams in the waning months of 2021, most aimed at the lucrative holiday market. It is, alas, too late for the 2021 holiday season when you read this, but one can always prepare for next Christmas early.

Christmas CDs

Likely already found under the Christmas tree was a copy of *Ralph Vaughan Williams: An Oxford Christmas* from our own Albion Records, reviewed earlier in these pages and enthusiastically received elsewhere. It includes the 20 carols written or arranged by Vaughan Williams from the *Oxford Book of Carols* that were not found in Albion's 2016 *A Vaughan Williams Christmas*. William Vann leads the Chapel Choir of the Royal Hospital Chelsea. A delightful performance of 'The Blessed Son of God', performed by Bill Ives and the Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford, has been bundled into a potpourri download release entitled *Christmas Carols through the Ages*. Note that this is the carol's second appearance since it was first released in 2009 on a Harmonia Mundi CD, *Carols by Candlelight*, which is entirely by this choir and includes 'The truth from above' as well. Another download reissue, this one from Decca, beguiles with bass-baritone Hervey Alan's classic *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*. Titled *Christmas Carols from King's*, it is a collection of Christmas fare recorded primarily with David Willcocks in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is an expansion of the earlier 2 CD *Noel: Christmas at King's College*. Note that these fine Argo recordings have been much recycled, and this performance can be found on at least four additional releases in addition to the CD reissue of the original *On Christmas Night* LP. You also have it if you bought the complete King's College Argo Recordings box a few years ago. (Presto Music credits an 'immersive remix engineer' for the new release, but there is no audible difference between this and the Argo box disc. Differences between it and a 1991 release are subtle and not all to the advantage of the newer release.)

New recordings include a nicely polished outing for 'Wither's Rocking Hymn' on Signum's *Christmas Carols with the King's Singers*, featuring a wide-ranging selection of Christmas music by the famed all-male vocal sextet. Blend is at its usual perfection, but I am still scratching my head over some of the vowel sounds, and I am not referring to the Latin, French, German, or Norwegian selections. Vaughan Williams's arrangement of the 'Sussex Carol' ('On Christmas Night') with the familiar first tune was included in the King's College, Cambridge 2020 Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, sung, because of Covid-19 restrictions, to an empty chapel. It is now released on the choir's own label in an album titled *In the Bleak Midwinter: Christmas Carols from King's*. The choir and organist Matthew Martin are performing at the usual exalted level under new director Daniel Hyde, and most of the repertoire is pleasantly familiar, but it isn't only the hollow echo that creates a slightly dispirited ambience. Finally, one can hear 'The Oxen' from *Hodie*, sung by bass-baritone Timothy Dickinson with pianist Duncan Honeybourne in an album called *The Holy Boy: Christmastide in Albion*. They have put together for the Prima Facie label a program of seasonal works, some

rarely heard, by Bax (three from *Five Fantasies on Polish Carols*), Gurney, Warlock, and others. Honeybourne gets several solo tracks, as well. Dickinson has a likeable, somewhat grainy voice, but strains a bit and can grow unsteady. Overall, it is a pleasant 65 minutes, but a purchase decision may be repertoire driven.

Non-Seasonal Repertoire

Aeolus boasts a premiere recording of the unpublished *Suite for Two Pipes*, written in 1933 for the British Pipers' Guild of which Vaughan Williams had recently been elected president. This is not the same work as the *Suite for Pipes* written a few years later for the Pipers' Guild Quartet, though Michael Kennedy notes it, barely, in his Catalogue listing for the later work. It is a delightful five movements of varied character, including a small fugue, and is especially charming played on homemade bamboo pipes by the Flanders Recorder Duo. The rest of the *FR2* program, from *Medieval to modern* – two commissions – played on a wide variety of recorders, is delightful. *Six Studies in English Folk Song* is a suite of miniatures as well: barely eight minutes in length in this recording on Chandos by the ever golden-toned Nicholas Daniel on cor anglais. Originally for cello and piano, it was arranged by the composer for violin and clarinet and has been played on all sorts of string and wind instruments and even with orchestral accompaniment. That last was perhaps a bit much, but Robert Stanton's string quartet arrangement is exquisite, especially when played by the Doric String Quartet. The pastoral beauty is a feature of the other works for oboe quintet by Bax, Finzi, Bliss, and, in a Fenby arrangement, Delius. Sheer heaven!

And finally: *Household Music: Three Preludes on Welsh Hymn Tunes* in the original scoring for string quartet has only been recorded once before, so a new release by Little Venice Ensemble on Stone Records is most welcome. The performance is impeccable, affectionate, and somewhat leisurely, but that suits the music and fits well in the remainder of the program titled *A Summer's Day*. This includes lighter British and Swedish art songs heartwarmingly sung by soprano Susanna Andersson and other summer concert fare by the Swedish ensemble. (The Malcolm Arnold *Serenade for Guitar and Strings* is especially nice.) The Nash Ensemble (Hyperion) found a bit more intensity in the preludes, especially in the variations of the third movement 'Aberystwyth,' but that recording must now be obtained used or from Hyperion as a download or made-to-order CD-R. This one does very nicely if you fancy the amiable surroundings.

