



CD Review of 'The Moon Sails Out' by John France

I have been an enthusiast of Cyril Scott's music ever since buying a copy of the Lyrita album (SRCS 81, 1977) including his Piano Concerto No.1 and Early One Morning (Poem for piano) back in the mid 'seventies. Since then, listeners have been extremely lucky in having many of Scott's works made available on CD. This includes a huge swathe of the piano music, a major portion of his orchestral works as well as a good selection of chamber music. It is a situation I would once never have imagined in my wildest dreams.

It is hard to believe that the present Cello Sonata (1958) has never been recorded. It is even more unbelievable to realise that it was not performed until January of this year. Scott wrote an earlier example in 1950 but, according to the liner notes, the piano part has been lost.

This present Sonata is a huge work that explores a wide range of emotion and musical gestures. Yet the problem of Scott's music is that by the time he came to write what is clearly a masterpiece, his musical language was deemed to be a thing of the past. The same problem beset York Bowen. In our more eclectic times it would be easier to judge a work at face value: in the post-war years it was very much a case of 'in with the new, out with the old.' In the year that this Sonata was composed, innovation in musical language from Europe from Bo Nillson, Luigi Nono and Luciano Berio were beginning to filter into the imagination. Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies were coming to the fore in the United Kingdom. There was still a place for more 'conservative' music, such as Hoddinott's Welsh Dances, Arnold's Sinfonietta No.2 and Malcolm Williamson's Overture: Santiago de Espada. Nonetheless, the avant garde was definitely in the ascendency. There was little appetite for the exotic, post-romantic music of the Victorian/Edwardian Cyril Scott.

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In 2015 we can listen to this wonderful Sonata by Cyril Scott and relish every moment. Its sheer scale and musical competence can amaze us. We no longer care if there are nods to Scriabin, Debussy or the Orient. It can be accepted at face value. This is a work that demands to be absorbed into the repertoire.

Lullaby, op.57, No.2 is a delightfully atmospheric transcription by Ethel Barns (spelt Barnes in liner notes) (1874-1948) of Cyril Scott's 1908 setting of Christina Rossetti's unnamed poem from her collection Sing-Song: a Nursery Rhyme Book. Venables quotes the line 'Flowers are closed and lambs are sleeping' as epitomising the mood of the song. The following verse 'The Stars are up, the moon is peeping' is equally appropriate.

Glancing at Ian Venables's catalogue of chamber compositions on his excellent website, shows that the present disc contains his 'complete' works for cello and piano, along with two arrangements from his songs.

The earliest work is the haunting Elegy, Op.2 which was composed in 1980 for the cellist Anthony Gammage. The 'matter' of the elegy is not connected with death, but the 'death of love'. I have written elsewhere that this moving work lies in the trajectory from Gerald Finzi's stunning, but sometimes mordant, Cello Concerto. Coupled to this is the composer's (Venables) love of landscape and the suggestion of English Pastoral that is hinted at in this piece. The main mood is clearly one of loss. I noted in my essay on this work that 'there are no easy answers to be found in this Elegy: it ends in 'an unresolved and questioning mood.'" Yet it is also heart easing. It is difficult to listen to this work without engaging in the composer's pain – for who has not loved and lost?'

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'At Malvern' and 'It Rains' are two transcriptions of songs by Venables. The first was commissioned by the present artists for a performance at the 44th Fishguard International Music Festival. It derived from a song written in 1998 to a text by the 19th century poet and writer, and pioneer 'gay rights activist' John Addington Symonds (1840-1893). The poem is based on Symonds' visit to Malvern during the 1860s. This is an impressionistic work in both versions. However, the melancholy nature of the text is ideally suited to reinterpretation by the cello. 'It Rains' was formerly part of Six Songs Op.33 which was composed in 1999. The original text is by Edward Thomas. Venables has noted that this work has two discrete ideas – 'one that is sensual and voluptuous, the other radiant and joyful'. It is another example of the composer's ability to musically describe nature in all its facets and more importantly, the human response to this natural world. This transcription was made for John Talbot-Cooper (not Copper as in the liner notes) who is himself a cellist.

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The Moon Sails Out is not exactly another transcription of a song. It is based on a poem by the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and makes use of some musical material derived from Venables setting of this text. The original source of this piece was part of the song-cycle On the Wings of Love dating from 2006. The commission from the cellist Bernard Gregor-Smith was for a work that would reflect his love of Spain. It is an attractive, if a little unbalanced, work: the piano does not enter until the piece is at its halfway point – the previous three and half minutes being an extended cadenza. There is a definite Spanish flavour to this music that is far removed from much of Venables oeuvre.

The final contribution from Ian Venables is his Poem for cello and piano, Op.29. This work was composed in 1997 as a commission from Thomas and Doreen Somerville to celebrate the 40th birthday of their son, Bryce. Inspired by words from the poet T.S. Eliot – 'words move, music moves/only in time; but that which is only living/can only die,' this is a finely wrought and largely introverted piece that is evacuated of any sense of celebration on reaching the time in one's life when 'it begins.' I feel that 'the music moves from depression to being valedictory. It is saying goodbye to the world, to relationships and beauty, perhaps, but it is positive'.

Any fears I had that Ivor Gurney's Sonata for cello and piano in E minor may have been revived unadvisedly came to naught from the very first bars onward. The general mood of the work is lyrical and wistful without ever descending into a display of angst or despair. There may be a touch of melancholy here and there, but this is a positive work.

Biographically, at this time Gurney had abandoned the London literary scene and severed his connection with the Royal College of Music. He lived for a space with his aunt at Longford, Gloucester and then at the Five Alls, Stokenchurch. During September of 1921 he had a short spell working in a cold food store in Southwark, employed on his aunt's farm as well as a post of cinema pianist in Bude. It was a relatively 'settled existence' that could have given him the peace of mind to compose this largely untroubled Cello Sonata.

For many years it was assumed that Gurney's musical contribution was largely vocal, however following Dr. Philip Lancaster's compilation of the complete catalogue of the composer's music it has become clear that Gurney wrote widely for chamber ensembles.

The present sonata is judged to have been composed in 1921. Venables has wisely implied that the work's structure suggests a rhapsody rather than a sonata – this is in spite of the three definable sections. The formality of 'sonata form' does not appear to be present. Yet this is a satisfying work that deserves to take its place with the sonatas by Moeran, Bax and Scott.

The playing of all these works is superb and the sound is ideal. The liner notes by Ian Venables are excellent and deserve study before and after listening to each of these works.

Once again EM Records have delivered a perfectly balanced programme of music. With the exception of Venables' Elogy and Poem these are all first recordings. It never ceases to amaze me what treasures lie buried in the archives (and possibly lofts) of our nation. This is essential listening for all British Music enthusiasts.

John France June 2015