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GORDON JACOB: Complete Music for viola and orchestra



Viola Concerto no. 1;
Concert Piece for viola and orchestra;
Three Pieces for viola and orchestra (orch. Graham Parlett);
Viola Concerto no 2; Passacaglia Stereophonica.

Helen Callus, BBC Concert Orchestra, Stephen Bell (DD) (73.36) Dutton Epoch CDLX 7258

Can I deal with the complaints first?

As usual, Lewis Foreman's booklet notes are misleading and often inaccurate. I knew Gordon Jacob and recorded interviews with him and what he said conflicts with what Foreman writes. Foreman's articles in the BMS newsletters are also full of mistakes such as in his obituaries of Alun Hoddinott, Graham Whetham and Richard Arnell.

In this booklet, he says that Jacob's viola works stands midway between Bax's Rhapsody for viola and orchestra and the Walton Concerto, a remark so ridiculous as to be infuriating. I took this up with Britain's leading violist and expert on British viola music who was horrified at such an absurd suggestion. Harry Danks once told me that Jacob's viola music stood alone.

My friend, the late Richard Noble, knew Bax and sent me a list of errors in Foreman's book on Bax with supporting evidence. Aloys Fleischmann confirmed these errors to me.

The booklet notes praises the BBC for their successful Promenade Concerts featuring Doctor Who. These concerts are not good music and is an example of dumbing down. Why does the BBC rant on about this programme and now use it as a flagship for the Proms? Are we heading for an Eastenders night at the Proms?

One expects booklet notes to be accurate and free from wild comparisons, errors and conjecture.

(See my article on [Frank Stiles](#))

Gordon Percival Septimus Jacob was born on 5 July 1895 and died on 8 June 1984. He was one of ten children born to a London family. He served in the Army in World War I, not being a coward like Britten and Pears. Jacob was a prisoner of war in 1917; his brother, Anstey was killed at the Somme.

Gordon Jacob studied journalism for a while, then went to RCM to study music theory and composition. Then he taught there from 1924 to 1966. He studied the piano but a hand injury prevented him being a performer. He also suffered from a cleft palate. He was a fine craftsman understanding the capabilities of all instruments. He wrote four books: *Orchestral Teaching*, *How to read a score*, *The Composer and His Art* and *Elements of Orchestration*, very fine books which students have used for years.



His compositions range from three string quartets, three symphonies including one for band, concertos for flute, horn, trombone, clarinet, bassoon, violin, cello, two for oboe (he was a friend to Leon Goossens) and two for viola (he was fascinated by the playing of Lionel Tertis and Harry Danks) and two for piano. The first of these is quite brilliant and was taken up by David Parkhouse and Peter Wallsfish. There is also a concerto for timpani and wind band.

He also orchestrated Elgar's Organ Sonata at the suggestion of Sir Adrian Boult, although he did not like the piece.

The Viola Concerto no 1 dates from 1925 (and revised in 1976) and, in the original version, premiered by the Tertis student Bernard Shore in December 1925 with Boult conducting.

Harry Danks played the revised version in 1977 with Vernon Handley. The design of the concerto may be questionable; the opening allegro is short lived and succumbs to music of moderate pace but the thematic material is first class. It is poignant and introspective and the soloist's sound is good.

I was not impressed with the conducting of Stephen Bell. With the score before me, I felt he was treating the music as if it were light music and a pop singer would soon appear... or Doctor Who! This proves that the booklet notes are unhelpful and off putting.

Jacob told me that the viola was the Cinderella of the orchestra, the most gentle and beautiful but, when roused, the most virile and tough. And, of course, he is right.

I am not sure that this concerto hangs together.

The Concert Piece is a set of eight variations dating from 1977. It was written for John White who was writing a book about Tertis who had died in 1975. The opening larghetto is sumptuous.

The Three Pieces were written for viola and piano in 1930 but orchestrated by Graham Parlett. These are successful pieces, an Elegy, an Ostinato and a Scherzo. All the qualities of the viola are shown here.

The Viola Concerto no 2 of 1979 has a string orchestra as an accompaniment. It is a virtuosic work and not for the faint hearted. It has elements of tour de force and beautiful tenderness and audiences have loved it.

The Passacaglia Stereophonica was written for the BBC at a time they were experimenting with broadcasting stereophonic sound.

I first encountered the soloist Helen Callus with her recording of the superb Walton Concerto which did not impress me. However, her skill and technique is unquestionable and I prefer her playing to Lawrence Power. Some of her 'tender' playing is ravishing and her 'robust' playing is very exciting. She was born in Kent and is currently professor of viola at the University of California.

This is an important disc although I do not advise you to hear it all the way through at one sitting. Dutton are to be commended on this project. The sound is very good but I suggest that Dutton find another writer for their booklets.