

CD REVIEW 50

KEMPE AND PEINEMANN

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Concerto for double string orchestra TIPPETT

Violin Concerto BERG

Sinfonietta JANACEK

Edith Pienemann (violin) BBC SO, Rudolph Kempe.



What more could anyone want? A great violin concerto, a truly exceptional soloist and a first class conductor.

The conductor Rudolph Kempe seldom went in for this kind of repertoire. The Tippett is beautifully played without the mawkish slush that some performances give it.

Tippett's music has suffered a great deal of criticism. It has been called amateurism and too derivative. He went through periods of thought from Jung to Freud, Handel to Mozart, heterosexuality to homosexuality, pacifism to communism. He had many male lovers and developed into being an extreme intellectual. He was so intelligent that it was difficult to understand his complicated conversations. His mother was in the Theosophy Society, a spiritualist society that was nihilistic and followed Nietzsche's doctrine to cancel out all mortality so that everyone should live their lives as they wished and not be subject to the law or accepted standards. Some leaders of this society were paedophiles. Scriabin, Cyril Scott and others were adherents.

It is my view that Tippett was a confused soul but, nonetheless a fascinating man. He composed the first gay opera and, in this concerto from 1938 - 1939, he seems to include both the English renaissance and the style of the madrigal. Some has foolishly said that it owes something to Bartok and/or Stravinsky but no informed musician would say such a thing. Other have falsely said it is in the Elgar tradition!

It is a popular work but is still in search of a personal style. A few years later, we had A Child of our Time inspired by Tippett seeing children in poverty which strengthened his humanitarian views.

This performance glows but the music does, occasionally, become self indulgent.

The Janacek Sinfonietta is set in five movement and has often been called a 'racket'. Performances are often very loud and bombastic and noise is popular with many people. This performance is not out to break the sound barrier but is presented as music not as a circus turn or a dangerous roller coaster ride. The brass players are not always up to scratch and, at the end, there is an ugly moment.

But to the Berg Violin Concerto of 1936 recorded in the Royal Festival Hall on 18 February 1976, a few weeks before Pienemann's 39th birthday.

This concerto was written To the memory of an angel... the angel being Manon Gropius, the eighteen year old daughter of Mahler's widow, Alma and the architect Walter Gropius. Manon was born on 5 October 1916 and died of polio on 22 April 1935.

Pienemann's phrasing is superb. She has a choice pianissimo. She controls her dynamics and crescendos perfectly. After the introduction and just before the 2/4 passage her expressive quality is to the fore. She does not have the sickly portmanteau at 18 which many soloists have. The delicato at bar 30 is observed as is the grazioso at 38 and the variety of her staccato is refreshing.

All the way through her intonation is immaculate. There is a glorious beauty at 54 and just be amazed at her very high D sharp so accurate and pure.

She adheres to all of Berg's precise instructions and in the difficult passages she does not play the ossia but the original with all its problems.

Does anyone make the interval of the seventh sound so natural and beautiful?

The Allegretto section is a scherzando and it is playful and innocent in this performance denoting Manon Gropius. Marvel at Peinemann's double stopping and, later, her triple stopping and quadruple stopping. Orchestral details is excellent, for example, the muted trumpets at 140. Often there is a strange beauty as in the gorgeous violin line at 173 and the pathos from 215. After all, this is a work in memory of an angel and played by one as well.

The third section, which is sometimes referred to as the second of the two movements, starts in a shattering fashion... Manon is dead! The soloists's rubato is well judged and the rhythmic vitality could not be better. The tragedy is obvious in 43 and the cadenza will make other violinists jealous with its simultaneous bowing and pizzicato. The mastery is overwhelming.

The final section introduces the Bach chorale It is enough which shows more of Berg's genius combining a tonal aspect with this modern style.

There is feeling in this performance but not so that it becomes too noticeable... the poignancy is truly beautiful especially around 176.

There is an extended passage beginning at 152 where the soloist and first violins play the same material which I think is a composer error. This tends to diminish the solo part and yet it has to be remembered that this is Berg's individual grief at the death of an eighteen year old.

The coda is of a cold but penetrating beauty and listen to that final top violin note, a top G sharp, an octave higher than three ledger lines. No one has reached this with such perfect intonation.

There are people who dislike serial music, 12 tone music, dodecaphonic music... whatever you want to call it. But this music calls for the highest skill and discipline and has produced many outstanding and beautiful works. Of course there are great work in the tonal and tradition styles but to write in the strictest of disciplines such as serial music calls for the greatest composers. Some revel in expressions one of which is 'such a such a composers abandoned serialism' (as if it were an inferior mode of composition) but the truth is that such composers are inadequate to manage this discipline.

This performance is truly great and with the reliable BBC SO and two superb artists, what more do you want?

(See separate articles on [Edith Peinemann](#) and the article Music in [Frankfurt and Mainz](#))

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