

IAN VENABLES

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

I read in a magazine a quote that Ian Venables was the finest British composer of songs of our time. It was such a claim that I decided to investigate it for myself. The musical world is full of exaggerated claims some of which have made great composers out of inferior ones.

Ian Venables is being constantly promoted as a song composer perhaps to the point that his other work is eclipsed. For example, his Piano Quintet, Op 27, has proved to be very successful and deservedly so. It is one of the finest British chamber works of our time. There is also a beautifully crafted String Quartet, Op 32.

His style is of traditional tonality but couched in a highly chromatic language. His harmonies are rich and expressive and he places emphasis on melody. It is refreshing to hear him say that he does not believe that tonal music has been exhausted and that, even today, music can be written in this genre and with expressive power. He rightly adds that all composers must have an individual voice, that is to say that they must be original and yet many famous composers who are revered do not have an original voice. All music must be able to communicate and have a deep and purposeful meaning. Venables eschews all fashion and 'isms' and quotes Samuel Barber: "I just go on doing my own thing and that takes a certain amount of courage."

Ian Venables has said that Brahms is a natural successor to the towering genius of Beethoven and yet Brahms has a more romantic and lyrical style. He has admitted that Brahms' piano and chamber music has inspired his love of music of this genre. On a personal note I have to say that Ian's music has the mellowness and maturity of Brahms but it is not like Brahms. It is incredible to realise that there are people who do not admire Brahms and other who ridicule his music.

In conversations with the composer I was glad to find an honest musician who spoke his mind but in a courteous and pleasant manner. He is clearly a deep thinker and, thankfully, not a blotting paper person absorbing and accepting current trends of thought and fashion which some shallow music lovers tend to do. The fact that a composer is broadcast frequently and has many commercial recordings of his work available does not make him a successful or great composer.

Having interviewed about 300 composers, Venables is the first composer to give any laudatory remarks about Elgar, whose music he calls inspirational and that he has a genius for orchestration and an unparalleled melodic gift. He quotes Gerald Finzi's comments about Britten, "Wonderful iridescent colours then 'puff' it all disappears into thin air... technically, a most brilliant flair, a gift for placing notes and bringing things off but, as a rule, what he brings off is not worth a rat's droppings." By comparison, he refers to Tippett as having a wonderful humanity being technically brilliant in the Beethovenian sense and having the capacity for deep expression and a spiritual dimension not found in his contemporary, Britten.

Ian Venables was born on 25 July 1955 at Mill Hill Hospital, Liverpool. His parents, Norman, born 8 May 1929 and Audrey (nee Moore), born 1 October 1933, lived at 76 Pemberton Road and had been married on 28 March 1953 at St. Catherine's Church, Edgehill. Mr. Venables was a lithographic engraver and, with his wife, enjoyed ballroom dancing. Ian has a sister, Glenda, born 2 January 1960, who has no musical ability and is a medical secretary.

Ian's first piano lessons were with a Mrs. Butterworth from about 1965. He attended Liverpool Collegiate School from 1966 to 1974 where his academic strengths were history and chemistry. He studied the piano with Ronald Settle from 1971 to 1977 and organ with Ian Tracey from 1972 to 1977. He attended Liverpool University from 1974 to 1977 obtaining a BA in Social Studies (economics). From there he went to C.F. Mott College of Higher Education to obtain his PGCE to enable him to teach in state schools. He studied the organ with Professor Michael Fleming at the Royal School of Church Music at Addington Place from 1979 to 1981. He also studied composition with Professor Richard Arnell at the Trinity College of Music in London from 1980 to 1983 and film studies at the London International Film School. During 1987 to 1990 he furthered his studies at the Birmingham Conservatoire with Andrew Downes and John Mayer and, for a year or so afterwards, orchestration with John Joubert.

As a young man, Venables admired the wonderful melodic qualities of Tchaikovsky's ballet scores, the symphonies of Beethoven for their rhythmic drive and excitement, and the orchestral sound of Mahler with its melodic expression and intensity of feeling. He did not like Berlioz whom he found bombastic and melodically trite. He could not make sense of Delius but, in later life, came to enjoy some of his music. In the literary world he responded to the bleak determinism of Thomas Hardy and E.M. Forster's perceptive

understanding of human nature. He did not admire Mozart when he was young but has since developed an appreciation of his genius especially in the piano concerto form. Beethoven could not write effectively for the voice but had other astonishing skills not least the art of contrapuntal writing. Schubert's songs do not appeal to Ian Venables as they lack an emotional range and, like Britten, the piano accompaniments often do not suit the text.

Venables may not regard himself primarily as a performer but, at C.F. Mott College of Higher Education, he played a Schubert sonata and gave an organ recital at the Royal Russell School, Croydon in 1983.

As a young composer he wrote a Prelude in C sharp minor for piano in 1967 when he was 12 which he dismisses as a piece of juvenilia. His Opus 1 is a Piano Sonata dating from 1975 but his Opus 2 was his first success, an Elegy for cello and piano of 1981. He also values his early vocal work *Midnight Lamentation* Op 6 of 1974. His songs are very special to him and he lists *At Midnight* Op 28 no. 2, *Invitation to the Gondola* Op 22 no.3, *Ionian Song* Op 38 no.1 and *The Hippo* Op 33 no. 6 as among his favourites.

As to his working career he has been a teacher of economics at the Royal Russell School (1978–1983) Sherborne School, Dorset (1983–1986) and the Royal Grammar School, Worcester from 1986 where he also teaches politics. He is, at heart, a liberal and believes in the freedom of the individual tempered by civil duty and obligation. He regards himself as an agnostic with a leaning towards mysticism. He does not believe in a transcendent God but believes that there is a spiritual dimension to the universe.

He enjoys swimming, walking and bicycle rides. He also acquires pleasure from reading, the theatre, travelling, Greek and Roman history and collecting historical manuscripts.

And so we address ourselves to the claim that he is the finest British song writer of our time. In doing so we will consider some of his songs. *Midnight Lamentation* Op 6, is a setting of part of a poem by Harold Monro. It is a fine poem in itself and the music is equally fine having a spirituality that is both immediate and durable. *Pain*, Op 10, sets Ivor Gurney's despair at World War 1 and blames God for the carnage. *A Kiss*, Op 15, is a setting of Thomas Hardy where innocent love is described as an eternal concept. It is a beautiful and immediately attractive song.

Easter Song Op 16, is written to a strange and weird text by Edgar Billingham with the line *Jesus and Persephone are one!* It is a text about the pagan and Christian festivals.

Love's Voice op 22, sets four poems by John Addington Symonds. The first song, *Fortunate Isles* is an undisputed gem and, in my opinion, one of Venables's choicest songs. *The Passing Stranger* is also a fine song which sometimes has the quality of a narrative or recitative. It builds up to a wonderfully sublime conclusion. *The Invitation to the Gondola* paints a picture of Venice at dusk. The music successfully captures the rocking of the gondola, the movement of the water and the ending of the day. The final song, *Love's voice* does not seem to belong to this set although the author is the same person. It works as a separate song and is often very beautiful indeed.

This cycle is possibly the composer's most lyrical vocal score.

Someone has opined that Venables' songs are beautiful miniatures with which I must strongly disagree. Some of his songs last almost ten minutes and therefore cannot be called miniatures. One of the many joys about his songs is that he is not in a hurry to achieve the composition of a short song written in a very short space of time. There is thinking and logic behind his songs.

His ability to conjure up beautiful sounds is also shown in *At Malvern* Op 24, to words by John Addington Symonds. This is an outstanding example of the piano part combining so well with the vocal part as to make a contented marriage. When I played this luscious song to a friend who is a well-respected singer she exclaimed, "At last something worthwhile in music has come out of Malvern. We have waited a long time for this."

The two songs that make up Op 28 are *Flying Crooked* to words by Robert Graves and *At Midnight*, a title given by the composer to Edna St. Vincent Millay's outstandingly poignant poem which begins "What lips my lips have kissed..."

Flying Crooked is an enjoyable whimsical song. As for the St. Vincent Millay song, a problem arises which besets any composer putting a text to music. This poem is so perfect in itself that one feels it should stand alone and no music, however good, can enhance the text. It is such a personal poem and open to many interpretations and, when a poem such as this, means so much to an individual, any musical setting may be unnecessary or unsuitable. However, it must not be taken that Venables' setting is poor or inadequate.

Of all the many composers and performers I have interviewed over 40 years one clear consensus comes across with power and conviction and it is this: Schubert and Britten's songs usually had piano parts which

did not suit the vocal line and, in some cases, were a positive hindrance. Schubert's piano accompaniments are often poor and sometimes mere vamping and so anaemic that they consist of a few common chords and nothing else. Ian's songs are richer, better written and each of them is a musical experience and not saccharine or banal.

It has been said that Venables' songs have a strong sense of melancholy whereas the more astute listener will probably say that their qualities are serious, being worthwhile songs. What is clear is that in most cases the music suits the text as in a contented marriage. He has used another analogy in saying that poetry and music are sister arts and together they make up one synergistic effect, the successful union of two art forms.

Colin Scott-Sutherland suggests that Venables has chosen texts that are not intrinsically musical in themselves with the possible exception of "It rains" to a text by Edward Thomas, a notoriously difficult poet to set.

Some have opined that Delius and Herbert Howells are behind Venables' best songs. There may be an influence from Ivor Gurney and it is worth recalling that he is the chairman of the Ivor Gurney Society. Gurney was a poet as well as a composer and many of his songs are pessimistic and dour. While many of Venables' songs are melancholy they do not inhabit the same sound world as Gurney. The melodic lines in Venables' music has a greater sense of direction and are not so dark.

It is to be regretted that song recitals are not really popular today. We live in a musical society where brilliant orchestral works and dazzling violin and piano playing is performed. We want the sensational and stirring not the sublime and intimate music most often found in song. Ian Venables has made his philosophy clear that songs should be moving and affecting and never a chore for the intelligent or even the casual listener.

Comparisons are often odious but it is true, Venables' songs are vastly superior to those by other composers. Not only are his melodic lines more telling, the piano writing is not confined to a few chords and tedious vamping. The songs are art songs and never trivial or banal. They do not suffer from sweetness and prettiness. They have a strength and purpose. Perhaps the songs of Finzi are more immediate but there is a greater emotional depth in the songs of Ian Venables and they must become widely known.

Warning

Copyright David C.F. Wright 2007. This article, or any part of it, however small, must not be used in any way whatsoever without the prior written consent of the author. It must not be copied, downloaded, stored in any retrieval or mechanical system. Failure to comply is illegal being theft and in breach of International Copyright law and will render any offender liable to action at law. However the author may be prepared to grant permission upon written application.

Acknowledgment

Dr. Wright acknowledges the permission of Colin Scott-Sutherland to briefly quote from his article about Ian Venables.

Born in 1955, Ian Venables spent his early childhood in Liverpool. He began formally to learn to play the piano at the age of ten, taking lessons from the distinguished teacher, Ronald Settle, at the Bluecoat Chambers. He later took organ lessons from Professor Ian Tracey, Liverpool Cathedral Organist, and Michael Flemming, at the Royal College of Church Music, Croydon. In 1978, he began his teaching career in London before moving to his current post in Worcester.

During the early 1980's Ian Venables studied composition with Richard Arnell, at Trinity College of Music, London. Since then he has forged a career as a composer, writing music in all genres. However, it is his work in 'Art Song' that has attracted the most attention. Some critics have even suggested that Venables is the 21st centuries answer to Gerald Finzi. He is certainly becoming one of the countries foremost song composers. His style is broadly romantic and largely tonal, coming as it does from the lyrical English tradition.