

Classical Music Daily



The Birth of Chords – Issue 164, December 2022

The major triad is considered the foundation of tonal music, its privileged position owed to its presence in the harmonic series of acoustics. The minor triad lacks this acoustic foundation, which led to it being treated as less stable, and even pieces in a minor key usually ended on the major form of the same triad. From the late eighteenth century onwards, major was paired with joy and minor with sorrow, and composers could play with these associations.

In a fascinating lecture that discusses the 'musical system that has dominated Western Music since the seventeenth century', Marina Frolova-Walker, professor of music at Gresham College, talks of the history of tonality, and contrasts the emergence of scales - known to prehistoric man and to Neanderthals - with that of chords, 'a very modern concept, and their emergence seems to have occurred in just one region of the world, namely, Western Europe'. She will go on to ask how the major triad came to be associated with joy, and minor with sorrow.

Frolova-Walker will ask: 'How did chords emerge, then? The story is a complicated mixture of trial-and-error processes of musicians, the systematic thinking of music theorists, the mathematics and physics of strings and pipes used in musical instruments, the notation and printing of music, and even some theological and philosophical ideas ... Was there a particular year when a musician invented the chord, in the same way that we can assign a date to the invention of the steam engine or the aeroplane?'

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Music for String Quartet by American composer Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) will receive its first studio recording and release, including a newly discovered second movement, as yet unheard publicly.

The piece, composed by Bernstein in 1936, aged eighteen, while a student at Harvard University, will be performed by Lucia Lin, Natalie Rose Kress, Danny Kim and Ronald Feldman, produced by Parma Recordings, and released on Navona Records.

'It's a rare event indeed to present a premiere of any type by a great master of Bernstein's stature, much less to have something completely unheard as part of it', says Bob Lord, Parma Recordings' CEO. 'We're honored to be the stewards of this historic project.'



Leonard Bernstein

Music for String Quartet received its debut public performance at Tanglewood's Linde Center on 6 November 2021 by the same group of performers who will record the piece, but it was never truly lost. The manuscript, given by Bernstein to Stanley Benson of the New England String Quartet following a rehearsal reading, was stored in the family music cabinet by Benson's widow Clara.

Clara, who had performed the piece at home with her own quartet from time to time over the years, mentioned it in passing to her daughter Lisa Benson Pickett.

They told their friend, former Boston Symphony Orchestra Music Librarian John Perkel, about the manuscript. The librarian was shocked to learn that a string quartet, a compositional genre long believed to have been unexplored by Bernstein, existed at all in Bernstein's catalog.

'I had a hard time believing what I was hearing', says Perkel, who has shepherded the piece from its re-discovery to the forthcoming production. 'In the world of music and art, there is so much which is forgotten, so much which is unknown, that to be able to shed even just a small beam of new light on a genius of Bernstein's caliber is incredibly special.'

To Perkel's delight, shortly after the piece's first public performance, a second movement of the string quartet was discovered at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

'There was a "1" at the top of the original manuscript', says Perkel, 'so I thought that there might be "2" out there somewhere, and sure enough there was.'

'We are so pleased to record this piece which we've grown to love dearly', says violinist Lucia Lin. 'It has been exciting to peek into Bernstein's creative process through the lens of this piece written during his formative years.'

The recording, set to take place in 2023, will also contain the seldom-recorded duo piece *Elegies for Violin and Viola* by Aaron Copland, Bernstein's musical mentor, collaborator and dear friend. [READ MORE](#)

Internationally recognized as one of the world's leading conducting competitions, the Donatella Flick LSO Conducting Competition has announced the twenty finalists who will compete in the first round on 21 March 2023 at LSO St Luke's in London, UK.

As always, finalists will conduct the London Symphony Orchestra and are drawn from the best conductors aged thirty or under who are citizens of countries having full membership of the European Union, or Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Switzerland and the UK.

The twenty finalists come from ten countries: Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland and the UK. They are Félix Benati from France, David Bui and Nicolò Umberto Foron from Germany, Jiří Habart from Czechia, Nathanaël Iselin from France, Nicolas Kierdorf from Luxembourg, Zofia Kiniorska from Poland, Kingsley Lin from the United Kingdom, Aleksandra Melaniuk from Poland, Artūrs Oskars Mitrevics from Latvia, Jakub Montewka from Poland, Kent Moussault from the Netherlands, Jacob Niemann from Germany, Clément Nonciaux from France, Jakub Przybycień from Poland, Samy Rachid from France, Matthew Rhodes from the United Kingdom, Konstantinos Terzakis from Greece, Agata Zając from Poland, and Laurent Zufferey from Switzerland.

The winner of the Donatella Flick LSO Conducting Competition is awarded £15,000 and the opportunity to become Assistant Conductor with the London Symphony Orchestra for up to one year. During this time with the LSO the successful conductor will work with the LSO's principal and guest conductors on the preparation of concerts, often on the assessment of new scores; take part in the LSO's education and outreach programme, *LSO Discovery*; accompany the orchestra on tour and, should the opportunity arise, conduct the LSO in concert.



A scene from the 2021 Donatella Flick LSO Conducting Competition at LSO St Luke's in London, UK.
Photo © 2021 Matt Crossick

One of the finalists will also become a Welsh National Opera associate conductor for a season, where they will have the opportunity to work with WNO's Music Director, Tomas Hanus, as well as on a range of productions, concerts and engagement activity in Cardiff and at some of the Company's touring venues in Wales and England. [READ MORE](#)

OBITUARIES



Ned Rorem (1923-2022)

American composer and diarist Ned Rorem was born in Richmond, Indiana on 23 October 1923. His family moved to Chicago when he was young, and he studied at the American Conservatory of Music and later at the Curtis Institute and at Juilliard.

His chromatic tonal output consists of much vocal and choral music, including operas, and he also produced symphonic music, much of it combined with voices.

His notorious *Paris Diary of Ned Rorem* describes his relationships with various other male composers, including Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Noel Coward and Virgil Thomson. He also wrote extensively about music and musicians, with his essays, collected into three anthologies, sometimes featuring prickly comments about his fellow musicians and attacks on the *avant-garde*.

Ned Rorem died at his home in Manhattan, New York, on 18 November 2022, aged ninety-nine.

We also mark the recent deaths of Italian composer, musicologist and teacher Azio Corghi, Chinese singer and vocal coach Jin Tielin, Ukrainian composer and teacher Oleksandr Kostin, Italian tenor Daniele Barioni, Japanese composer and record producer Tsuneo Fukuhara and British ballerina, ballet mistress, director, repetiteur and teacher Patricia Ruanne. [MORE ...](#)

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ENSEMBLE — SPIRITUALITY AND REVOLUTION



Ewa Vesin as Madame Lidoine in Opera di Roma's production of Poulenc's 'Dialogues des Carmelites'.
Photo © 2022 Fabrizio Sansoni

Giuseppe Pennisi: On 27 November, Michele Mariotti was an excellent conductor of the superb Rome Teatro dell'Opera orchestra. With this opera, he debuts in his new role as musical director of the Rome Teatro dell'Opera. He is best known as a Rossini and Verdi conductor, but I remember, about ten years ago, in Modena his masterful conducting of *Il Prigioniero* by Luigi Dallapiccola, one of the summits of twentieth-century musical theater. Mariotti captures the nuances of *Dialogues*, the inner dramas of the individual protagonists and the climate of terror in the last months of the French Revolution. He gives 'the attacks' to the numerous singers. He received ovations before the start of the second part and as curtains fell.

The stage direction by Emma Dante refers to the Carmelites before taking vows: 'Those who, like the Carmelites, decided to devote their lives to sacrifice, renouncing material goods, practicing penance and abstinence from earthly pleasures, at the beginning of everything - she says - were women, sensual, curious, lovers of beauty and lightheartedness.' I do not agree fully with this reading because it misses the strong spirituality and I found it preposterous to see the Carmelites leaving the convent, bicycle riding. However, the audience applauded Emma Dante warmly at the end of the performance. The effective scene sets are by Carmine Maringola, the costumes by Vanessa Sannino, the lighting by Cristian Zucaro and the choreographic movements by Sandro Campagna.

Let's go to the voices. The protagonist in the role of Blanche de la Force is the American soprano Corinne Winters, who in Rome was an unforgettable interpreter of *Madama Butterfly* and *Kát'a Kabanová*, fresh from a resounding personal success at the last Salzburg Festival in Janáček's masterpiece. She is a true absolute soprano (and a great actress) who perfectly expresses the torments and uncertainties of Blanche until the decision to be 'the last to the gallows'. [MORE ...](#)



A scene from the Ravenna Autumn Trilogy 'Le nozze di Figaro'. Photo © 2022 Fabrizio Zani

Giuseppe Pennisi: The most interesting opera performance, or rather the cycle of performances, of these months is the Mozart/Da Ponte 'trilogy', staged in Ravenna to celebrate ten years since the beginning of the autumn festival in the Adriatic city that has become the Italian Salzburg: *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. They are alternating on the stage of the Teatro Alighieri, evening after evening, from 31 October until 6 November 2022 in two cycles.

The cycle, the 'trilogy par excellence' of theatre in music, is produced in collaboration with two of the oldest theatres in Europe: the Swedish Drottningholms Slottsteater and the Opéra Royal de Versailles. In Italy it will be repeated at the Teatro Verdi in Salerno; one of the three operas, *Don Giovanni*, will also be staged at the Teatro Galli in Rimini. It is also revived in various prestigious European theaters (such as the Liceu in Barcelona and the Opéra Nationale de Bordeaux). To indicate the interest in this staging of the cycle, it suffices to say that in Ravenna, 25% of the seats were sold to foreign audience members weeks before the start of the performances - people came from all over Europe to enjoy it.

The director is Ivan Alexandre; sets and costumes were designed by Antoine Fontaine, who also took care of the lighting with Alexandre. 'They are different titles, but we bring them to the stage with aesthetic coherence', underlines Ivan Alexandre, who has signed works for the Vienna Staatsoper, the Palais Garnier and the Mozartwoche in Salzburg, 'telling the story of the same character: a libertine. We call him Cherubino in his youth, Don Giovanni in adulthood and finally Don Alfonso in old age. So the young man in love with all women - as he himself states in the first act of *Le nozze di Figaro* - becomes a heartthrob who, once aged, will push young people to replicate his vices of the past. It is as if a single heart beats in three different breasts, a "cycle of desire" in which each title can also exist in its own right but presenting the entire sequence, in addition to creating a coherent whole, gives a particular meaning to each of the three works. They are three moments of love life made with the same material, family dramas in which everyday life becomes an amazing adventure. We wanted to somehow return to the spontaneity of the traveling theaters of the past: make-up tables, silent servants and screens are scattered on stage. There are no wings, nothing is hanging in the air (except for some light), there are no trapdoors, only a few wooden structures and some sketches on mobile canvases.' [MORE ...](#) [MORE ARTICLES BY GIUSEPPE PENNISI ...](#)



Viv McLean

Lucas Ball: Hearing Viv McLean playing Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto* is hard-to forget. He forever looked up at conductor Keith Slade as if verifying that the ensemble between piano and orchestra was as tight as it needed to be. This pursuit worked wonders, the solo playing itself was pretty much flawless (if indeed flawlessness is possible) and McLean was aptly called 'a genius' by Keith Slade.

Any questionable moments during Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture were redeemed by some stirring passages as time went on. The famous theme had plenty of aesthetic appeal and shape in phrasing. Rhythmic verve was there in aggressive passages.



Keith Slade

Right from the outset of Brahms' Symphony No 3, all sections of Worcestershire Symphony Orchestra demonstrated the composer's maturity, Keith Slade unleashing this, whilst also divulging the curious 'classical' structural elements of the symphony as well. [MORE ...](#)

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Alice Coote as Orpheus in Opera North's production of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Photo © 2022 Justin Slee

Mike Wheeler: Opera North's autumn season included not one but two operas on the Orpheus myth, Gluck's and Monteverdi's.

Some have disparaged Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* for its plain-speaking musical style, but that's the point. This and other works formed a manifesto for a new approach to opera, emphasising the importance of narrative over unnecessarily extravagant vocalism. Its directness is part of its strength.

But as Opera North's stripped-back staging demonstrated, directness doesn't have to mean austerity. What we saw in Nottingham - Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 9 November 2022 - had more in the way of staging than the 'concert version' that started the tour in Huddersfield and Leeds. With no director as such - Sophie Gilpin

was credited with 'Concert placing' - it complemented the music perfectly. After a sprightly account of the overture, the chorus appeared in plain, modern black outfits, behind a small central platform (which had also done duty in *La Traviata*), and in front of a starry black backdrop. And there was plenty of movement, from both principals and chorus, as the opera went along.

The role of Orpheus has attracted some starry mezzos and contraltos (and, increasingly, counter-tenors) over the years, and Alice Coote stepped effortlessly in that succession, with just enough of an edge to her tone to fend off any hint of matronly plumminess. Her cries of 'Euridice!' during the sombre opening chorus were all the more effective for their restraint. The deeply-felt lament of 'Chiamo il mio ben così', with an off-stage band providing an effective echo, was followed by fiery resolve in 'Numi! barbari Numi' as Orpheus turns on the gods for their cruelty.

Daisy Brown's Amore was bright-toned and warmly sympathetic as she offered support, and in her later appearances. [MORE ...](#)



Antony Hermus conducting the Chorus and Orchestra of Opera North in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Photo © 2022 Justin Slee



Daisy Brown as Amore in Opera North's production of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Photo © 2022 Justin Slee



Alison Langer as Violetta Valéry with the Chorus of Opera North in Verdi's *La traviata*. Photo © 2022 Richard H Smith

Mike Wheeler: Director Alessandro Talevi has revised his 2014 production of Verdi's *La traviata*, but the essentials remained - Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 8 November 2022. Set in the 1890s, it had more than a whiff of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, Act I particularly, with Gavan Ring's Gastone cutting an Oscar Wildean figure as he introduced Nico Darmanin's ill at ease, callow Alfredo into Violetta's circle. It also, incidentally, allowed the entertainers in Flora's Act II party to present their gypsies-and-matadors show as a potted version of *Carmen* - an amusing anachronism, given the respective dates of the two operas' composition.

As Violetta, Alison Langer commanded the stage from the beginning, visually - rising from the sea of crashed-out guests around her at the end of the Prelude - and vocally, with a tone indicating a world of experience, not all of it welcome, and in command of the role's full range. Thinking over her meeting with Alfredo, she addressed 'E strano' to the other girls, while 'A fors'e lui' was an inward meditation, and a moment of remarkable stillness. Alfredo's voice in the street outside really did sound distant, for once - or did Violetta imagine it?

Act II's country retreat was simply established, by a blue sky backdrop, which gradually clouded over - so subtly you hardly noticed it happening. Nico Darmanin's voice now gave Alfredo a degree of greater maturity, even bravado.

Damiano Salerno made Giorgio Germont's sententiousness believable, suggesting an element of ambiguity. In 'Non sapete quale affetto', Alison Langer conveyed Violetta's underlying panic. Giorgio's silhouette against the backdrop after he leaves the immediate scene was ominous without being melodramatic. The latter part of the party scene crackled with growing tension, and Giorgio's intervention as Alfredo turned on Violetta was compelling. [MORE ...](#)

Mike also listens to Colin Stone's piano recital of J S Bach, Chopin, Schubert and Debussy for Derby Chamber Music and to music by Valentin Silvestrov and Karl Jenkins from Derby Choral Union, Central England Camerata and conductor Paul Provost. [MORE ARTICLES BY MIKE WHEELER ...](#)



Maria Katzarava as Catrina in *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*. Photo © Karli Cadel

Ron Bierman: The San Diego Opera, reveling in modern fantasies, has followed its successful production of *Aging Magician* with *El último sueño de Frida y Diego* (The Last Dream of Frida and Diego). The former featured a mysterious chorus commenting cryptically on the everyday actions of its maybe dying main character who, maybe while dying, ascends to join the chorus in a brilliantly staged finale. The more recent production is less ambiguous, but even more phantasmagoric. Semi-reality shares the stage with an underworld of the dead as Frida (mezzo-soprano Guadalupe Paz) decides whether to accept a one-day pass back to life, and Diego (baritone Alfredo Daza) laments his lost love.

Written by Gabriella Lena Frank and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright-librettist Nilo Cruz, the opera is based on the wildly passionate love affair of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Selma Hayek and Antonio Banderas recreate the couple's stormy relationship in the 2002 film *Frida*. How stormy? In 1925, Frida was in a traumatic accident that resulted in painful injuries she suffered with for the rest of her life. She was once quoted as saying: 'There have been two great accidents in my life. One was the trolley, and the other was Diego. Diego was by far the worst.'

Librettist Cruz concentrates on the couple's tenuously enduring love for each other, their fights and frequent extra-marital affairs touched upon only lightly to explain Frida's reluctance for another day with Diego. (Even Frida's notorious fling with Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky goes unmentioned.)

Cruz sets the opera on Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) shortly before Diego's death and a few years after Frida's. The curtain rises on a cemetery. As graveside visitors, the versatile and effective San Diego Opera Chorus sets a somber mood with dirge-like melodies, Diego wanders among the singers while Frank's ominous score competes with the eeriest of horror-film soundtracks. Soprano Maria Katzarava as Catrina, keeper of souls in the underworld, is disguised as a flower seller when she observes Diego's emotional turmoil. [MORE ...](#)

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Gerald Fenech: Although most of Saint-Saëns' operas have remained neglected, [Ronald] Crichton rates them as important in the history of French opera as 'a bridge between Meyerbeer and the serious operas of the early 1890s. In his view these operatic scores have, in general, the strengths and weaknesses of the rest of his music - 'lucid Mozartian transparency, greater care for form than for content ... There is a certain emotional dryness, invention is sometimes thin, but the workmanship is impeccable'. Maybe the most apt comment is that of Alan Blyth: 'Saint-Saëns certainly learned much from Handel, Gluck, Berlioz, Wagner and the Verdi of *Aida*, but from these excellent models he forged his own personal style.'

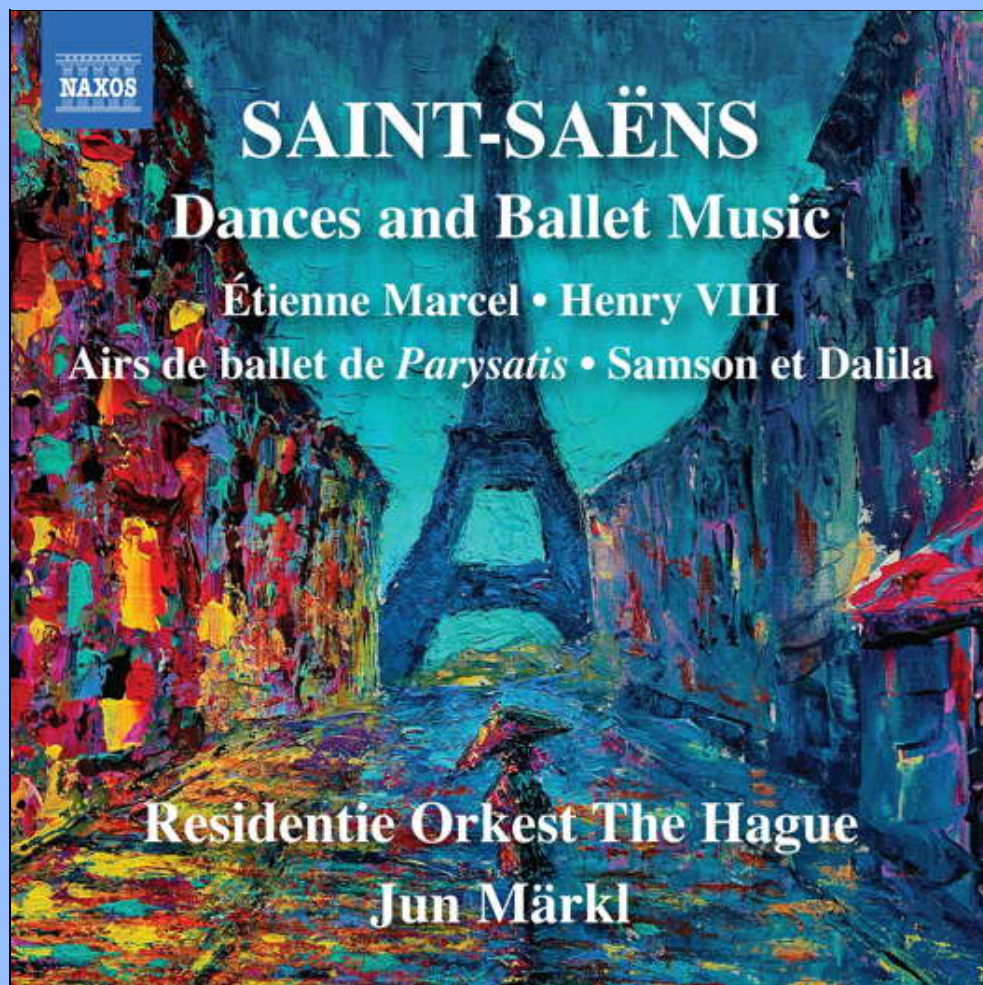
Well, this album presents a selection of ballet and incidental music from three of his operas and a play. From *Samson et Dalila* (1877) we hear the famous and exotic 'Bacchanale' and 'Dance of the Priests'.

Henry VIII (1883) drew from Saint-Saëns music of regal solemnity, with plenty of the colourful scoring that was praised by Gounod. In the Ballet Divertissement the composer even gives us echoes of Tudor music. *Henry VIII* also regales us with five other orchestral pieces full of descriptive music that keeps the listener totally engrossed in the story of Anne Boleyn and her King.

The lukewarm reception to *Étienne Marcel* (1879) came as a bitter blow to the composer, but the customary ballet includes a strong element of delightful fourteenth century pastiche.

The incidental music to *Parysatis* (1902) received tumultuous acclaim, and with its use of crotales (antique finger-cymbals) it immediately captured the imagination of the audience. Indeed, this is Saint-Saëns' most Far Eastern creation, and the luscious soundworld of the music fits this Persian Queen to perfection. (Parysatis was the mother of Artaxerxes.)

Jun Märkl's baton is as magical as Saint-Saëns' pen, and his wholehearted advocacy for these scores draws some sparkling performances brimming with beguiling melodies and exquisite harmonies. This is not the Saint-Saëns we know (apart from *Samson's* 'Bacchanale'), but certainly just as enticing. Sound and annotations are first-rate. [MORE ...](#)



'... sparkling performances brimming with beguiling melodies and exquisite harmonies.'



Gerald Fenech: Ian Venables was born in Liverpool in 1955 and was educated at Liverpool Collegiate Grammar School. He studied music with, among others, Richard Arnell and John Joubert at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. His compositions encompass many genres, but in particular, he has been instrumental in making people conscious of the importance of the English art song. Described as 'one of the finest song composers of his generation', he has written over eighty works in this genre, which includes eight song cycles. Venables also wrote songs for solo voice and piano, and this repertoire has been performed by national and internationally acclaimed artists.

His many chamber works include the Piano Quintet, Op 24 (1995) and the String Quartet, Op 32 (1998), as well as smaller pieces for solo instruments and piano.

Venables also embraced the

'... a highly attractive choral disc, refreshingly performed and sumptuously recorded ...'

choral genre, of which two pieces are on this recording: the renowned Requiem, Op 48 and *O God be merciful*, Op 51. The composer is also an expert on the nineteenth century poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds, setting five of his poems for voice and piano, and also writing an essay for the book *John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon Desire*. Venables is also President of the Arthur Bliss Society, a Vice-President of the Gloucester Music Society and chairman of the Ivor Gurney Society.

Commissioned by Bryce and Cynthia Somerville in memory of their parents, the Requiem was started in 2017 and completed in 2018. Premiered on 2 July 2019, the piece remains one of Venables' most important compositions, and was conceived mainly for liturgical use. Sung in the traditional Latin, the score does not really break new ground. Indeed, there are echoes of Durufié, but the music is generally moving and serenely consoling, and there is a deeply felt invitation to contemplation. Being a composer of song, Venables certainly knows how to etch out a melody that goes straight to the heart. The original version was written for organ accompaniment, but on this recording a new orchestral version has been specially prepared.

The programme is completed with two other Venables works: the eloquent *Rhapsody in Memoriam Herbert Howells* for organ solo and the soulful anthem *God be Merciful*.

This is a highly attractive choral disc, refreshingly performed and sumptuously recorded by the Choir of Merton College, Oxford conducted by Benjamin Nicholas, which should be cause for closer investigation.

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Gerald also listens to music by Michael Haydn on Brilliant Classics, to Mariss Jansons' Mahler Symphonies on BR Klassik, to Debussy's Early and Late Piano Pieces on Hyperion Records, to music by John Frandsen on Danacord, to Warner Classics' 30 CD Vaughan Williams collection and to Bramwell Tovey's Poulenc recording for Chandos Records. [MORE FROM GERALD FENECH ...](#)

Robert McCarney: My favourite example of Weinberger's natural compositional talent on this CD is a tiny piece called *Mi-La-Do* which he composed on the spot at a Christmas party in 1924. The A minor triad in the right hand is mirrored by a retrograde three note figure in the left hand. It's over before you know it, but I find it a little gem. I also find it very poignant in that both it and the circumstances of its creation paint a vivid portrait of the central European world; a multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-faith world where there was an everyday hunger for high culture and the new, where music was a central part of that culture, a world in which Weinberger was formed and thrived and one that the Nazis ultimately utterly obliterated forever - an empty silent hole that resides where the heart of Europe used to beat.



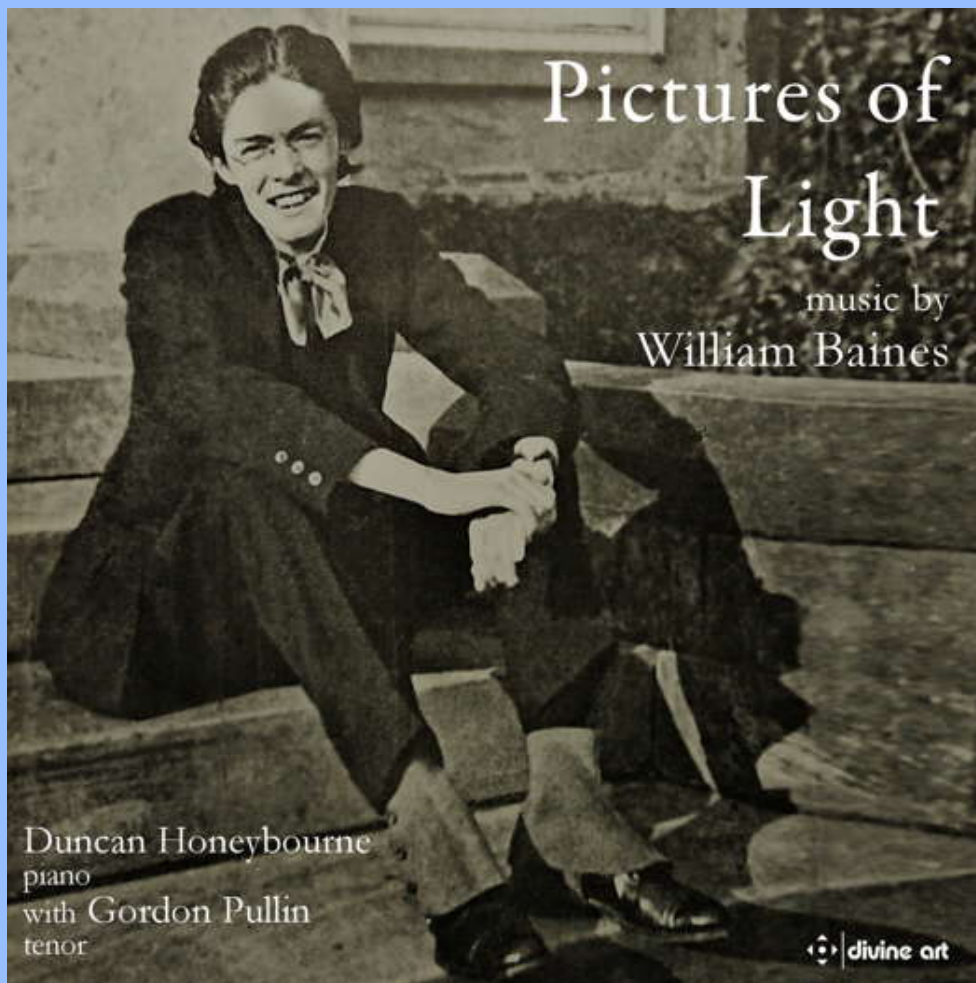
'... the playing by Gottlieb Wallisch and the recorded sound on this CD are excellent throughout ...'

Weinberger being Jewish - or at least Jewish as far as the Nazis were concerned; just

like all bigots the Nazis never cared or cared to find out how the people they labelled degenerates chose or not to define themselves - suffered the all too familiar fate that befell all those who fell foul of Nazi dogma. Familiar as this sorry story may seem, its horror never becomes any more credible or palatable, nor should it. Just before the Anschluss he made his escape from Austria, from where via France, England and Canada he finally made his circuitous route to the safety and security of the USA where he had spent some time previously and where thanks to the success of *Schwanda the Bagpiper* he could expect doors opened to him.

However, whereas many European immigrants made a life for themselves in the USA, indeed in many cases lives much better than the ones they had left behind in the Old World, sadly this was not the case for everyone who went west and crossed the Atlantic. Weinberger, having been ripped out of the world he knew and loved, lived in the USA in a state of, what I have elsewhere read referred to as, *echolessness*. He never really adapted. Indeed it seems nostalgia gnawed away at him emotionally and physically until he was ultimately diagnosed with brain cancer. Rather than wait and succumb to the inevitable, he hastened his own end thanks to an overdose of barbiturates at the age of seventy-one. His wife died less than a year later.

Even the slightest reflection on the world that Weinberger was forced to abandon is enough to make one realise how hard it must have been for him to live and fit in anywhere else. This was the Prague of Franz Kafka. Indeed the man who translated *Švanda Dudák* into German - which precipitated the real start of its enormous success - was none other than Max Brod. Weinberger spoke five languages and was a voracious reader. The range of his interests and knowledge is only hinted at by the five Preludes and Fugues he wrote in 1923 that bear the title *Rytiny*; engravings in Czech. These are all mini-portraits of figures from Czech history. The last contains an unmistakable hint - I have no idea if intentional or not - of Schubert's *Der Leiermann*. [MORE ...](#)



'... a very welcome CD ...'

Robert McCarney: The music of William Baines (1899-1922) is in some ways like his life; fleeting, evanescent, enigmatic, shadowy, suggestive, full of tenderness and longing that vanishes into the brightening air just when it seems to be going somewhere and leaves one wishing there was so much more of it. Listening to these piano pieces one may think at times of Ravel or Debussy or Scriabin or Stanchinsky - another precocious promise extinguished at a despairingly young age - but ultimately it is the uniqueness of Baines' idiom that stands out time after time. The fact that he managed to achieve such individuality in his teens and early twenties just heightens the impression that he was completely *sui generis* and a complete genius. With the possible exception of Cyril Scott or Frank Bridge I can't think of a single English composer that sounded anything like Baines at this time.

This music's individual voice owes much to its very specific muse. Not for Baines the rough and tumble of Greek mythology or Shakespearean stirrings or the good news of Christianity that inspired so many of his peers. Baines found inspiration in his locality and the way in which nature played her song and weaved her wonder in his northern sky and along his North sea coastline. I knew that Baines was a Yorkshireman but it was only when reading the notes that accompany this CD that I was made aware that he was born in Horbury just outside of Wakefield. Learning this I couldn't help but think of another musical son of Wakefield who likewise is woefully unrecognised and underappreciated: Bill Nelson. One of Nelson's greatest numbers was called *Adventures in a Yorkshire Landscape*, a title which encapsulates very well all of Baines' output and could have served perfectly as the title of this CD. The fact that he was born as one century ended and another was beginning may go some way to explaining the liminal character of so much of his sound and soul.

Amongst all the bloated and overblown treatment that his compatriot Ralph Vaughan Williams is receiving this 2022, it is good to see that in the centenary of Baines' passing, somebody has seen fit to commemorate him with a new recording of some of his music. Indeed it was half a century ago to mark another milestone that Eric Parkin first made this music known to the record buying public when he recorded a lot of the same music that appears on this current CD for Lyrita back in 1971 and thus made his name synonymous with Baines'. As an aside I am glad to say that unlike Baines, Parkin lived a long life, passing away just before COVID-19 closed the world, at the age of ninety-five.

So for those of you who still cherish that Lyrita LP or its CD equivalent, is this present CD worth acquiring? In a word, yes, if for no other reason than this music deserves at least two recorded versions to contrast and compare. For those of you who missed that Parkin recording the first time around the positive

recommendation for this CD can only be wholly enthusiastic. I must add though that this Divine Art recording does not surpass or supplant the Lyrita recording, half a century old as it is. Not for any failings in Duncan Honeybourne's playing but mostly for the piano tone or its recording here which has a gratingly brittle feel to it, especially in its highest register. [MORE ...](#)

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Giuseppe Pennisi: As is well known, *Un ballo in maschera* (A Masked Ball) is an 1859 opera in three acts by Giuseppe Verdi. The text, by Antonio Somma, is based on Eugène Scribe's libretto for Daniel Auber's 1833 five act opera, *Gustave III, ou Le bal masqué*.

The plot concerns the assassination in 1792 of King Gustav III of Sweden who was shot, as the result of a political conspiracy, while attending a masked ball, dying of his wounds thirteen days later.

It was to take over two years between the commission from Naples, planned for a production there, and its premiere performance at the Teatro Apollo in Rome on 17 February 1859. In becoming the *Ballo in maschera* which we know today, Verdi's opera (and his libretto) underwent a significant series of transformations and title changes, caused by a combination of censorship

regulations in both Naples and Rome, as well as by the political situation in France in January 1858 - the attempt to kill the Emperor and the Empress on their way to the opera house. Based on the Scribe libretto and begun as *Gustavo III* set in Stockholm, it became *Una vendetta in domino* set in Stettin (Poland), and finally *Un ballo in maschera* set in Boston during the colonial era. It became one of the most frustrating experiences of Verdi's career. The difficulties with the censorship had to do with staging the murder of a King, not with love or sexual affairs.

As a matter of fact, from the mid-twentieth century, it has become more common for the setting to revert to its original eighteenth-century Stockholm location. Scribe's libretto for *Gustave III* includes details that could be understood as signs of the king's homosexuality. Verdi and Somma eliminated many of these coded signals, but new codes take their place, particularly relating to the character of Oscar. David Richards has argued that although the opera was no longer explicitly based on *Gustav III*, Verdi deliberately deviated from his usual practice and set Oscar for a soprano: 'Verdi goes as far as one could go within the repressive conventions of his period to portray Gustavo (based on a widely known flamboyantly homosexual ruler) as either a gay man or, at a minimum, a bisexual man'. Several productions have attempted to draw out this suggestion – most notably the staging by Göran Gentele for the Royal Swedish Opera in 1959 where Gustavo is having an affair with his Oscar even while pining for Amelia, and also the 1993 staging by Götz Friedrich for Berlin and by Calixto Bieito in Barcelona in 2000.



'... a good recording to remember a much expected but somewhat disappointing performance.'

I do not think that Somma and Verdi had any interest in the alleged sexual tendencies of Gustave III, also because at the second act, the opera includes the most sensual and carnal tenor and soprano duet of the Italian melodrama. [MORE ...](#)

[MORE ARTICLES BY GIUSEPPE PENNISI ...](#)



John Dante Prevedini:
Roma Travestita is Warner Classics' recent compilation of eighteenth-century arias for the castrato voice, performed by the Brazilian male soprano Bruno de Sá with the orchestra Il Pomo d'Oro under the direction of Francesco Corti. The release is available in both CD and digital format, and liner notes include libretto texts and historical background remarks by Yannis François in French, English and German. The album runs for seventy-three minutes on one single disk.

Born with a rare instance of a male voice naturally occurring in the soprano range, the young de Sá has dedicated himself to the resurrection of a significant body of repertoire composed for the era in which women were forbidden from the stage by papal decree. The age was, thus, one that also demanded male singers who could plausibly sing female operatic roles - the castrati - as well as a

'... a noble and unique collective effort painstakingly researched and brilliantly executed.'

corresponding body of music designed to capitalize on the unusual qualities of their resulting voices. The present product of de Sá's efforts is a curation of thirteen arias from the castrato era which are rarely heard in modern times; indeed, the liner notes indicate that eight of these arias are presented here in world-premier recordings.

The ten operas excerpted on this disk - and their respective composers - are as follows: *Griselda* by Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725), *Farnace* by Leonardo Vinci (1690-1730), *Giustino* by Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), *Vologeso, re de' Parti* by Rinaldo di Capua (c1705-c1780), *Achille in Sciro* by Giuseppe Arena (1713-1784), *Evergete* by Baldassare Galuppi (1706-1785), *Adelaide* by Gioacchino Cocchi (c1712-1796), *Livia Claudia Vestale* by Nicola Conforto (1718-1793), *Pompeo Magno in Armenia* by Francisco Javier García Fajer (1730-1809) and *La buona figliuola, o La Cecchina* by Niccolò Piccinni (1728-1800).

To put these operas in context, their dates of composition span from 1721 to 1760, and the music correspondingly reflects the audible broader influences of the galant style in the transition between what we now commonly think of as the baroque and classical periods. To the curating team's credit, the track information for each aria also includes the name of the premier singer known to have originally played the castrato role in the eighteenth century. Among these singers is Carlo Broschi ('Farinelli'), who remains easily the best known of the historical castrati today. Yet the list also provides an impressive array of other names who may be less familiar: Giacinto Fontana ('Farfallino'), Girolamo Bartoluzzi, Angelo Maria

Monticelli, Giovanni Tedeschi, Giuseppe Ricciarelli, Filippo Elisi, Giovanni Belardi and Gaspero Savoj. Thus, this compilation is a tribute not only to a neglected body of remarkable repertoire, but also to the extraordinary castrati who had sacrificed so much to bring this art to life in the first place.

Since this album consists mostly of premier recordings, I find it best to judge the listening experience on its own terms, focusing my attention on internal consistency and general presentational flow. These factors being considered, the sonic profile of the recordings strikes me as very well-balanced with a clarity and depth of sound, and the sequencing of the arias in presentation maintains listener interest through continuous textural, stylistic and emotional variety. [MORE ...](#)

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Stephen Francis Vasta:

Classical music listeners are always listening to 'incidental music', like Grieg's for *Peer Gynt* - but do we stop to think about what it actually was? Before this, I certainly hadn't. It was played during stage dramas, to cover scene transitions or, sometimes, to underscore critical bits of dialogue, and was played by a real live orchestra, if a small one. Some modern plays still use incidentals, although it might be on recorded tracks rather than played fresh each performance; the background scores of movies serve a similar function.

The analogy with film music came to mind in Sibelius's *Pelléas* suite, composed for Maeterlinck's play. The music tends to the overtly pictorial, and some of the briefer movements, like film tracks, end in mid-air, unresolved. (Like film tracks, bits of incidental music don't require symphonic development.)

After the rugged chorales of the opening *At the Castle Gate*, the movements alternately suggest a stoic desolation, concealing turbulence.

There's also lighter, more melodic music reflecting the young Melisande.

The suite culminates in an elegiac yet flowing *Death of Mélisande*, with the *maggiore* passage at 3:18 reflecting a typically Sibelian ambivalence: the great melody is a threnody, yet suggests a tentative uplift.

Collon does a wonderful job realizing the character of each movement, and the playing is gorgeous.

The *King Christian II* music sounds more substantial, better able to stand on its own without the accompanying drama. The opening chorale, while pretty, isn't hushed enough; but the violins' broad, serene melody, answered by dancing figures, and its recapitulation with added woodwinds are both quite fetching. The subsequent movements offer a finer hush and greater transparency, as needed. I enjoyed the



'... the playing is gorgeous.'

dusky lower strings in the *Élégie*; the chirpy woodwinds in the *Musette* suggest folk music, even if Collon momentarily bobbles the scansion.

The *Serenade* offers some typically brassy, stoic climaxes, and the conductor's infectious energy helps maintain interest in the final *Ballade* - it reminded me of *Lemminkäinen's Return*.

The one-movement Seventh Symphony, which leads off, gets top billing - it's clearly supposed to be the 'main course' - but it disappoints. To be sure, Collon builds it spaciouly, and again nails many details: secondary syncopations pulse forward without producing actual speed, and the central *Vivacissimo* has a nice dramatic intensity. The waltzlike motifs of the *Allegro moderato* are shapely, but the peak, when it arrives, doesn't really quite land.

Both the climactic *tuttis*, in fact, sound comparatively unorganized and indiscriminate, lacking the sense of purpose with which the conductor had set them up.

There you have it. The *Pelléas* is first-class, the *King Christian* very good; but, against the recorded competition, the symphony stacks up just so-so. Perhaps selective downloading is the answer. Meanwhile, for the symphony I still like Davis/Boston (formerly Philips), though the multimiking doesn't hold up in digital remastering; and a powerful Boult concert performance (BBC Legends), worth tracking down. Other installments of the Gibson cycle (Chandos) are very good, but I've not heard his Seventh. [MORE ...](#)

[MORE ARTICLES BY STEPHEN FRANCIS VASTA ...](#)

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ECHOES OF OBLIVION — THE MOUTH OF HELL

Robert McCarney: Few people, whom I don't know personally, have ever made me laugh as much or as hard as that great Scot Billy Connolly. His quip about 'What star sign are you?', to which his answer was 'Pyrex', just about sums up my attitude to the whole murky world of astrology and horoscopes. Furthermore I am not one of those people who view these phenomena as 'merely a bit of harmless fun'.



Some critics of astrology, from left to right: Cicero, Isidore of Seville, Martin Luther and Billy Connolly.
(Billy Connolly photo by Eva Rinaldi, CC BY-SA 2.0, [creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

I have never come to terms with the hypocrisy of our society whereby in lecturing our children on the

importance of study, in order to prove the point we send them to school for a dozen years or more so that they can learn what is true and what is false, get their bearings in the thornier landscape of what is right and what is wrong and be given the materials, tools and skills that enable them to defend themselves as thinking individuals in the adult world. Yet when we encounter adults who have their brains full of bubblegum and their imaginations inebriated with ideas that frankly amount to a steaming heap of intellectual excrement, we are supposed, indeed expected, to respect such gibberish, thereby showing just how mendacious and disrespectful we can be towards our own children. We do ourselves and society in general no favours by behaving in this hypocritical fashion. I respect most people far too much to have even the slightest respect for a lot of the drivel that drools out of them. [MORE ...](#)

Echoes of Oblivion is Robert McCarney's regular series of features about little-known twentieth century classical composers, which began in August 2022.

As of 1 December 2022, nine of these features have been published here, including, most recently, *Nothing Written in the Stars* (featuring Catalan/British composer Robert(o) Gerhard) and *The Mouth of Hell* (about Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera).

One more of these features will be published in a few days' time, and then *Echoes of Oblivion* will relaunch in the New Year, in a new format.

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