



Liquid Gold — Newsletter Issue 188, December 2024

Jeffrey Neil: Six months after Bizet's premiere of *Carmen* in Paris, Ernest Guiraud tinkered with the orchestration of the *Arlésienne suite* for a Vienna Court Opera production to accommodate a ballet in the second act and transform the piece into a 'grand opera' filled with dance, lavish sets, and exotic costumes. In contrast, San Francisco Opera's sold-out *Carmen* this season, conducted by Benjamin Manis, fell in line with recent productions at the War Memorial Opera House, such as *Tristan und Isolde*, prosecuting a case for austerity that squelched the possibility of grandeur. The production was saved by the strong performances of its talented vocalists, in particular Eve-Maud Hubeaux (Carmen) and Jonathan Tetelman (Don José).

Before the *mise-en-scène* was revealed, a burnt umber Braille curtain introduced an unrelenting visual color theme of tobacco that dominated Francesca Zambello's production for San Francisco Opera and Washington National Opera. Act I begins with a pinpoint of light at the foot of the stage that expands to reveal the blurred silhouettes of the singers behind a black scrim, a staging similar to what has been seen in Covent Garden and Oslo. Behind me, the outrage of a curmudgeon in the audience exclaiming, 'This is stupid' sums up what I think has been a persistent problem this season: the foreshortening of the possibility for transcendence and - dare I say - escapism in the 'deconstructed' staging. The sets were monotone and claustrophobic, the costumes drab, and the lighting so dim as to make it hard at times to see what was happening on stage.

Carmen is an opera of cultural and erotic voyeurism: sung in French, but set in Andalucía shortly after the Napoleonic Wars, the theme of occupation by a ruthless foreign force has to always be in the background. The production moves the time period to 1875 (something that only a diehard fashionista would have discerned from Carmen's bustle in the fourth act), and it is not clear what the dramaturgical pay-off was of this transposition out of the revolutionary part of the nineteenth century and into the actual year that *Carmen* premiered in Paris. [READ MORE](#)



Annika Schlicht as Brangäne and Simon O'Neill as Tristan in San Francisco Opera's production of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Photo © 2024 Cory Weaver

Jeffrey Neil: Richard Wagner's adaptation of the medieval *Tristan und Isolde* tale was considered unperformable after he completed it, not just because of the exceptional vocal endurance that it requires, but because very little happens. Wagner stripped Gottfried von Strassburg's colorful adventures and distilled it into a Gnostic elixir of love through death, inner light through darkness. As Paul Curran admits in his Director's Note to the San Francisco Opera's production, the opera requires 'ways to keep the audience engaged ... using lighting, set design, and thoughtful movement to create visual interest while staying true to the work's meditative quality'. Curran's production responds to these stringent demands with a brutalist monochromatic set, static blocking, and perplexing choices of costumes; and conductor Eun Sun Kim tamped down the volume and the energy behind the orchestration.

Staging *Tristan* is, admittedly, not for the faint of heart. Part of this is, ironically, because the music is so engulfing, the Tristan chord with which the opera begins, so mesmerizing and obsessive in its various iterations, that it insulates the listener from dramatic action. But there is also something inherently unpalatable about Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy, which inspired Wagner: in the 'daytime world', suffering is the norm, because the will of the individual must 'strive against itself' endlessly, tortured and pushed along by insatiable desire and yearning. In death there is a solution because, for example, lovers like Tristan and Isolde, no longer have to battle all the things that separate them in the 'phenomenal world'. When they die, they are 'awakening from the dream of life', according to Schopenhauer. *Carmen* premiered in Paris.



Anja Kampe as Isolde and Simon O'Neill as Tristan in San Francisco Opera's production of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Photo © 2024 Cory Weaver

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COMMENTS ON JEFFREY NEIL'S WAGNER REVIEW

26 November 2024

Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde' is a notoriously difficult work to stage. Many of the stagings that I've seen were dismal failures; good ones have been few and far between. As Mr Neil says, not much happens (on the surface) in this opera: one reason for failures is that directors try to do too much.

For what it's worth, I cannot recommend the current Bayreuth production. It is horribly cluttered. There are some good ideas, although most of them have been borrowed from the J-P Ponnelle staging.

Derrick Everett

27 November 2024

Beckmesser lives on, I see.

I went to four performances of this production and enjoyed myself each time.

It was a great treat to hear Wagner's lines clearly articulated and pointedly expressed - instead of the usual morass of can-bello caterwauling. Credit to conductor Kim for her restraint.

'Ninedragonspot'

Lucas Ball: An interesting **Mozartian** first half with the familiar *Magic Flute Overture* (1791) followed by *Solemn Vespers* (1780). Perhaps because of the echo of the *Magic Flute* overture still lingering, we might, at times have felt as if we were at Glyndebourne during *Solemn Vespers*.

This, in part, was because soprano Brittany King, mezzo Frances Gregory, tenor Greg Tassell and baritone Peter Edge were especially delectable when the chorus and soloists were imitating one another.

At times when the soloists only had orchestral backing, they were able to produce a warm tone as well.



Soloists Brittany King, Frances Gregory, Greg Tassell and Peter Edge with Worcester Festival Choral Society, Meridian Sinfonia and conductor Samuel Hudson in Worcester Cathedral on 23 November 2024. Photo © 2024 Michael Whitefoot

After the interval came two choral works by **Gabriel Fauré**. The choral miniature *Cantique de Jean Racine* (1865) came before the Requiem (1887-90) and in both, conductor Samuel Hudson was able to conjure the gentlest orchestral sound from the Meridian Sinfonia that built up to the most robust moments in the score at the same time as maintaining sonorous tones.

Of course, it helps that Fauré's Requiem is a great choral work, but when both orchestral and choral forces of Worcester Festival Choral Society are able to produce a delivery of these Fauré works that is like liquid gold, it is this element that may make an audience feel it was well worth putting up with the miserable weather on their way to and from Worcester Cathedral.

Nicholas Freestone (organ) also ought to be given great credit for his conspicuous efforts during the *In Paradisum* movement of the Fauré Requiem as well. [READ LUCAS BALL'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)

Mike Wheeler: Revivals of three well-loved productions made up Opera North's latest tour, beginning with **Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*** - Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 20 November 2024.

In Martin Duncan's production - directed for this revival by Matthew Eberhardt - with set designs by Johan Engels, the wood near Athens was a silvery-grey world of semi-transparent screens, and balloon-clouds hovering over the action.



Daisy Brown as Tytania with the children of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* cast as Fairies in Opera North's production of Benjamin Britten's opera. Photo © 2024 Richard H Smith

Ashley Martin-Davis's costume designs clearly differentiated between the three worlds - Oberon's and Tytania's glittering outfits echoing the set; the lovers, initially in hippyish bright colours; the rustics in workaday browns and neutral tones. Bruno Poet's lighting brought vivid reds and greens into the mix as the various enchantments took hold.

Mysterious shapes appeared behind the front-of-stage screen, which lifted to reveal the fairies - mainly boys and girls from Opera North's youth ensembles, as General Director Laura Canning told us in the programme. In white tee-shirts and shorts, and identical blonde wigs, they were, while not exactly unnerving, certainly no troupe of fluffy Tinkerbells either.

James Laing returned to the role of Oberon that he played when this production was new in 2008. His big Purcellian aria 'I know a bank' was a moment of uncanny stillness.

Daisy Brown's Tytania matched him for imperiousness to begin with, shedding her regal persona to become positively flirty in her scene with the ass-headed Bottom in Act II.

Daniel Abelson's down-and-dirty, gravel-voiced Puck - more Caliban than Ariel, perhaps - hinted at an emotional dependency on Oberon. [**READ MORE**](#)

Mike Wheeler: To Inherit the title Baronet of Ruddigore is to be handed one hell of a poisoned chalice. Thanks to the sinister activities of the first baronet, and a resulting curse, you are condemned to commit a crime a day or die in agony. Gilbert and **Sullivan's** spoof melodrama-cum-gothic horror suffers from the usual problem - few of us these days are familiar enough with their targets to get the point. Add to that one of my nagging doubts about G & S productions: just how far can you ham it up, particularly in the spoken dialogue, without losing credibility? Too many, in my experience, cross that line, and Opera North's staging, the second of this season's revivals, didn't always avoid the pitfalls - Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 21 November 2024.

But Jo Davies' original production, directed for this revival by James Hurley, brought plenty of fresh thinking to bear. The 1920s setting was heralded by the silent film-style captions filling us in on the back story during the overture. The spooky goings-on in Act II were particularly effective, with just enough thunder and lightning, and you really had to be there to marvel at the inventive way the portraits of previous generations of baronets came to life.



Dominic Sedgwick as Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd (seated) with members of the Chorus of Opera North as the ghosts of Ruddigore in Opera North's production of Gilbert & Sullivan's comic opera *Ruddigore*. Photo © 2024 Richard H Smith

Conductor Anthony Kraus kept the score on its toes, and there were no weak links in the singing, either solo or ensemble. John Savournin, who knows his way round the repertory as well as anyone, relished his pantomime-villain role as Sir Despard Murgatroyd, the current baronet (because older brother Ruthven, who should have inherited the title, ran away and changed his name to Robin Oakapple). [READ MORE](#)

Watch out for Mike's review of Opera North's *The Magic Flute*, coming soon. Mike also listens to Leon McCawley's Nottingham piano recital, to a horn and piano recital from Martin Owen and Anna Tilbrook, and to a joint J S Bach / Vivaldi concert from Derby Cathedral Choir and Sinfonia Viva.

[READ MIKE WHEELER'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)

Ron Bierman: San Diego Opera celebrated the opening of its sixtieth season with **Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème***, the same opera the company staged to open its first season. Its magnificent melodies, a touchingly tragic love story, and arias that are among the most beautiful ever written have made it one of the world's most performed operas for many years, an obvious choice for attracting audiences and donors ...

San Diego Opera originally presented this production in a drive-in parking lot during the pandemic, the audience listening on their vehicle radios. For that performance, director Keturah Stickann cleverly overcame contagion challenges, including a fifteen-foot separation between singers, by setting the production a decade after the original libretto ends.



A scene from San Diego Opera's production of Puccini's *La bohème*. Photo © 2024 Karli Cadel

Rather than a garret, Rodolfo (César Delgado) is in his study writing as he recalls his love affair with Mimì (Sarah Tucker). The creative concept compresses the four-act opera to about ninety minutes by eliminating three minor singing roles and a few crowded scenes with soldiers, children or other extras because of social distancing requirements.

The revisions also removed most of the first act's humorous exchanges with the landlord out for his rent and the kidding banter among the starving artists. Without a crowded stage of noisy extras in the café, the second act loses its usual colorful commotion, strangely replaced in the current production by the Opera's chorus waving indiscernible flags while making noise in an unlit side aisle as though on a street near the café.

Turning the opera into pure tragedy imagined by a reminiscing Rodolfo worked when viewed from automobiles to avoid a virus that can cause the same lack of breath that dooms Mimì. In the Civic Center sans N95 mask, I was disappointed the company hadn't returned to the original libretto with tragedy made more compelling by the contrast with lighter moments. [READ MORE](#)

Ron Bierman: The music that people enjoy the most, whether fans of classical or hip hop, is music that evokes emotion. The San Diego Symphony under guest conductor Antonio Méndez took note of that with a concert of proven favorites, Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas* Overture, **Bruch's** first violin concerto, and Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony.

The first emotion of **Mendelssohn's** overture is foreboding menace, but from there it is largely rising excitement that climaxes with heroic triumph in C major, the sunniest of all keys.

What were you thinking, Felix?

Ruy Blas is a tragedy. It ends with murder and the suicide of its main character. Your music doesn't match!

That was apparently Mendelssohn's intention. The overture is actually a mocking satirical comment on the plot of Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*. He wrote to his mother:

I read the play, which was so absolutely ghastly and beyond contempt that you wouldn't even believe it.

He went on to say:

Few of my works have caused me more amusing excitement ... I mean to call it, not the overture to 'Ruy Blas', but to the Theatrical Pension Fund.

(This was the organization which commissioned the piece and was admired by the composer.)

The overture has retained its original, though less colorful title. The play, despite Mendelssohn's review, went on to modest success, and the story became the basis for an opera.



Antonio Méndez conducting the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. Photo © 2024 Jenna Gilmer

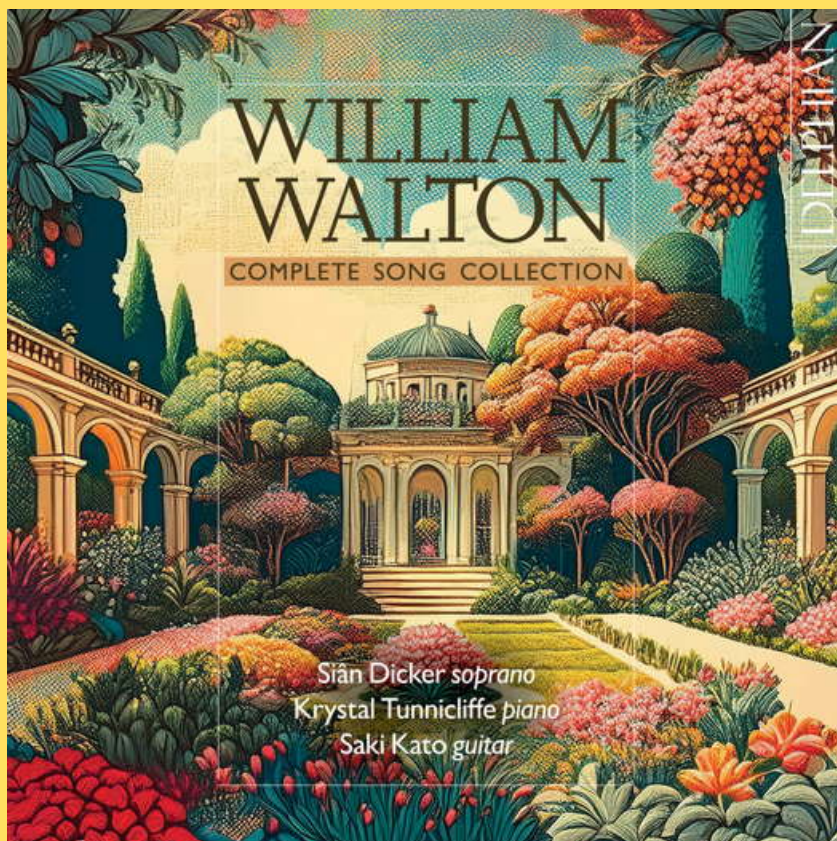
Maestro Méndez and the orchestra played the overture as a suitably rousing concert opener, one Rossini might have been proud to use for one of his comic operas. The quiet first theme allowed clarinetists Principal Sheryl Renk and Max Opferkuch to demonstrate their skills, and the way they stood out as soloists rather than muffled in the orchestra was further evidence of how successful the redesign of hall acoustics has been. [READ MORE](#) [RON BIERMAN'S LATEST REVIEWS](#) [OUR LATEST CONCERT REVIEWS](#)

SPOTLIGHT — MOST WELCOME

Geoff Pearce: William Walton has always impressed me as a composer since I first heard *Façade* and also *Belshazzar's Feast* in my youth. I did not know any of his songs so was quite keen to listen to this disc which contains his complete song selection.

A Song for the Lord Mayor's Table was composed in 1962 and premiered by **Elisabeth Schwarzkopf** and Gerald Moore. I would have loved to be present at that premiere. These six songs are of contrasting character, are quite delightful and reveal a side of Walton that I was unfamiliar with.

Anon in Love, from 1960, was premiered that year at the Aldeburgh Festival by Peter Pears and **Julian Bream**. I had heard of these songs, but had never previously listened to them. Walton wrote well for the guitar (as was later evidenced by his *Five Bagatelles*). These six pieces were set to texts by Christopher Hassall. Some are humorous, whilst others more gently reflect on the subject of love.



'... I am thrilled that these songs have been presented.'

Three of the *Four Early Songs* (1918-1920), composed when Walton was between sixteen and eighteen, to text by Algernon Charles Swinburne, only turned up at auction some years after Walton's death, were not published until 2022 and are premiered here.

The last song, *The Winds*, was published in 1921 and, as such, has the distinction of being his first published work. The first three are somewhat intimate and calm in nature, whereas the short last one is a bit more tempestuous, as befits the subject.

The short song *Tritons* is unusual: the melodic line is angular and the piano part is somewhat reminiscent of Debussy and Ravel. This was composed in 1921 on text drawn from an obscure 'Madrigal' by William Drummond from the seventeenth century.

Walton composed *Under the greenwood tree* for Paul Czinner's 1936 film of *As You Like It* in a style reflecting an Elizabethan song as if accompanied by a lute. I love this little work for its sincere simplicity.

Beatriz's Song is a little piece written for the 1942 radio play *Christopher Columbus* by Walton's friend Louis MacNeice. Walton was reluctant to publish this song, but it was arranged by Christopher Palmer for voice and piano and published by Walton in 1974. It is slow, reflective and rather sorrowful with a distinct Spanish flavour. [READ MORE](#) [GEOFF PEARCE'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)

Music of the Angels

Cello Concertos, Sonatas & Quintets by
LUIGI BOCCHERINI

STEVEN ISSERLIS

ORCHESTRA OF THE AGE
OF ENLIGHTENMENT

MAGGIE COLE

LUISE BUCHBERGER

JONIAN ILIAS KADESHA · IRÈNE DUVAL
EIVIND RINGSTAD · TIM POSNER

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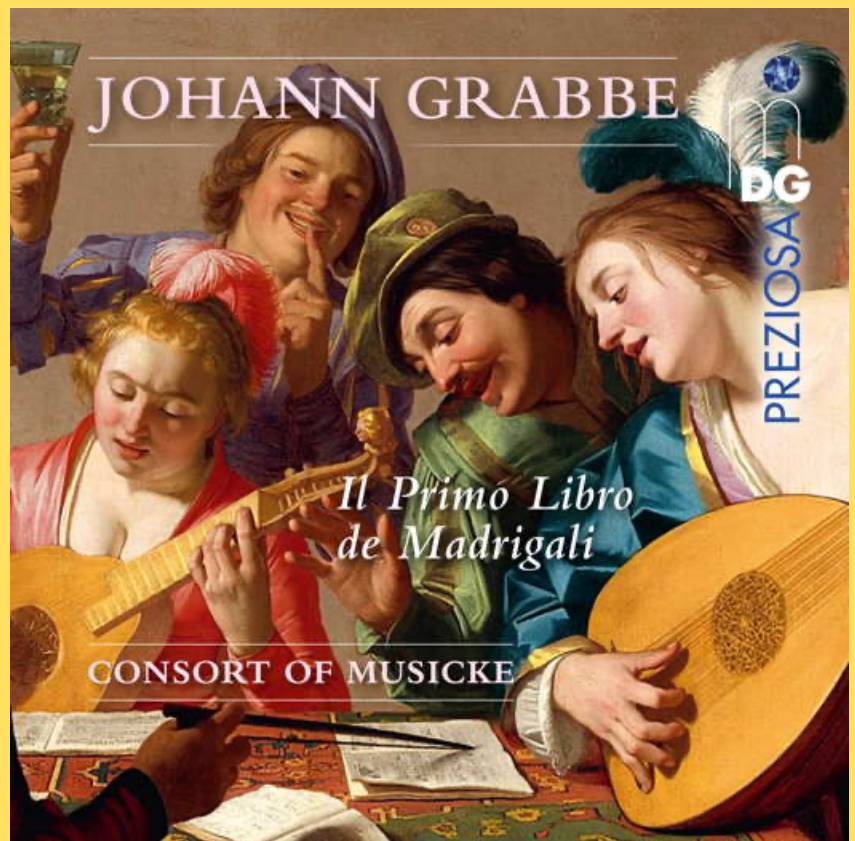
Gerald Fenech: Luigi Boccherini was born into a musical family in Lucca in 1743. He was the third child of Leopoldo, a cellist and double-bass player, and the brother of Giovanni, a poet and dancer who wrote libretti for Salieri and Haydn. When aged five Luigi received his first music lessons from his father who taught him cello and, when aged nine, he continued his studies with Abbé Vanucci, music director of a local cathedral at San Martino. Four years later he was in Rome, where he continued his studies with G B Costanzi.

In 1757 father and son both went to Vienna, where the court employed them as musicians in the Burgtheater. In 1768 Boccherini went to Madrid, entering in 1770 the employ of Infante Luis Antonio of Spain, younger brother of King Charles III. There the composer flourished under royal patronage, until one day when the King expressed his disapproval at a passage in a new trio and ordered the composer to change it. Boccherini, no doubt irritated with this intrusion into his art, doubled the passage instead, which led to his immediate dismissal. [READ MORE](#)

'... truly glorious performances ...'

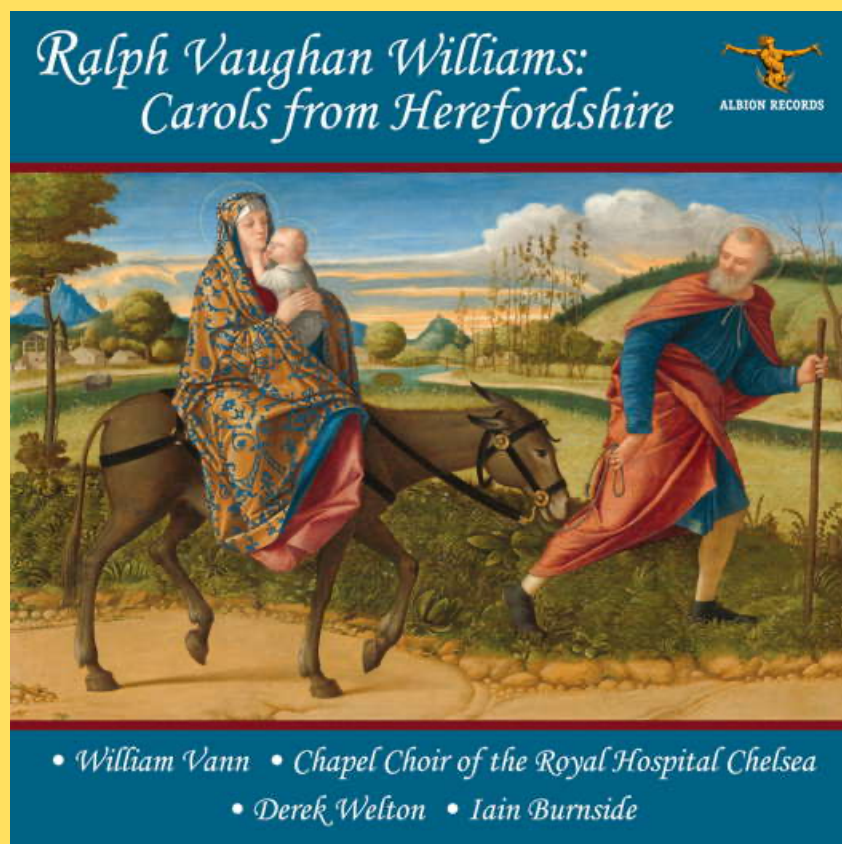
Gerald Fenech: Johann Grabbe (1585-1655) was born a hundred years before **J S Bach**, so one can consider his music as being the catalyst, with those of others, for what was to come at the height of the Baroque era. A child prodigy, he became a member of the Buckeberg Court Choir at eleven, learned the organ from Cornelius Conradus, succeeded him as organist and was then, like **Heinrich Schütz**, awarded a scholarship to study with **Giovanni Gabrieli** in Venice. Grabbe returned to Schloss Brake, the home of the Buckeberg Court Choir, but shortly thereafter Conradus died. Appointed as the Vice-Kappellmeister to Count Ernest III, he was able to learn about instrumental music of England as Brade and Simpson were employed at Buckeberg.

The madrigals which Grabbe composed show currency with Italian styles and flowing shapes in the structures of his melodic lines. Bar one book of madrigals, Grabbe's music had almost been completely destroyed by time, war and fire. [READ MORE](#)



'Emma Kirkby's glowing soprano alone makes this recording not only an absolute delight but also a listening experience in a class of its own.'

Gerald also listens to Cistercian chant on the Christophorus label, to *Sweelinck: The Orpheus of Amsterdam* and a profile of Anita Cerquetti, the so-called 'Verdi Soprano', both on Pan Classics, to Renaissance polyphony on Glossa and to a recent recording on Hyperion of Beethoven piano sonatas by Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin. [READ GERALD FENECH'S LATEST CD REVIEWS](#)



'... clear, stylish and sympathetic performances.'

Keith Bramich: This 2024 recording on Albion Records, the Ralph Vaughan Williams label, presents twelve traditional carols from Herefordshire, UK, collected, edited and arranged by Vaughan Williams and local folklorist Ella Mary Leather, who lived in the Herefordshire village of Weobley. If you're not familiar with this area, it's a largely rural English county on the border with mid-Wales.

This album's detailed liner notes by John Francis, chairman of both Albion Records and the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, give much information about Ella Mary Leather (*née* Smith, 1874-1928). An important member of the local community, she was born in Dilwyn, a few miles north of Weobley. It's now known, for example, that her contributions to our wealth of collected folk songs are much greater than originally thought. Her 1912 work *The Folk-lore of Herefordshire* is scientifically important, she collected songs from local singers and travelling gypsies, and she collaborated with both Cecil Sharp and Vaughan Williams.

Mrs Leather and Vaughan Williams first met in Weobley in 1908, and after several further visits, they published *Twelve Traditional Carols from Herefordshire* in 1920. What normally comes to mind when thinking of Christmas and Herefordshire is the well-known *This is the truth sent from above*, which we know in two different versions, one collected by Ella and Ralph in the village of King's Pyon, Herefordshire, plus the more familiar version discovered by Cecil Sharp in nearby Shropshire. But you won't find this carol here, as this new release is made from rarer stuff.

To my ear, all the music on this album is new. Some of the carol names - *Dives and Lazarus*, *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen*, *On Christmas Day* and *The Angel Gabriel* - are very familiar, as are the words to these carols, but one fascinating thing about the pieces on this recording is that the melodies are all different to those I expected, even though I grew up quite near to the area where this music was collected, albeit many decades later. [READ MORE](#) [READ KEITH BRAMICH'S LATEST ARTICLES](#)

Our reviews of recorded music are worth exploring in more detail than shown here. They are all illustrated with short sound samples, usually chosen by the author of each review, and each review has a detailed information page about the album under scrutiny.

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RESOUNDING ECHOES, WITH ROBERT McCARNEY

There are now twenty-one short radio programmes in **Robert McCarney's** chronological survey of lesser known twentieth century works, running from the beginning of the century until the end of World War II.

Each episode plays for between twelve and thirty-three minutes and includes short samples of the works being discussed. [LISTEN NOW](#)



'KARYNX' CLASSICAL MUSIC WORD-SEARCH PUZZLE



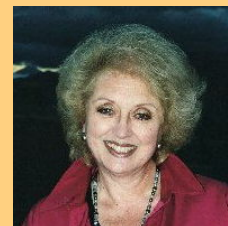
Canadian composer **Allan Rae's** latest classical music word-search puzzle, *Karynx*, is **here**.

The image on the left is a detail from the *Karynx* puzzle, in which is hidden the word 'Karynx', superimposed over a frightening looking photo of an Iron-age wind instrument which bears this name. The full puzzle is a complex one - please allow several hours to find all the words.

You'll find a total of twenty of these puzzles linked from **Allan Rae's page**, and we're currently publishing one each month.

Our long-time contributor **Jennifer Paull** celebrated her eightieth birthday a few days ago, and we wish her well for the future.

Read about her interesting background and explore her many features for this magazine and its predecessor **here**.



CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS

This month we have news of the recent discovery of Imogen Holst's cello concerto, John Challenger's new arrangement of Gustav Holst's *The Planets* for church organ, a new book compiled by Monica McCabe of letters to and from her late husband, *So Written to After-Times: John McCabe - A Life in Letters*, and news about the future of the Divine Art record label.

We also have a list of performances of Handel's *Messiah* in December 2024 and January 2025 in various countries, and news of the Australian Youth Orchestra's January 2025 festival in Adelaide.

We mark the passing, last month, of the Hungarian violinist and teacher **György Pauk**, and also the tragic death of Russian ballet dancer **Vladimir Shklyarov**. [READ OUR LATEST NEWS HERE](#)

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