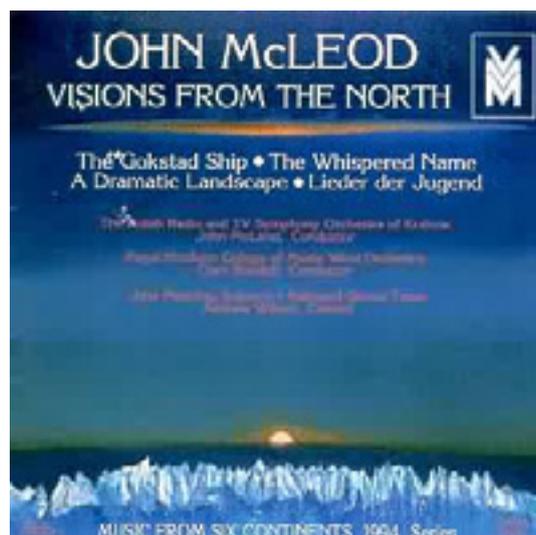


CD REVIEW 116

1 JOHN McLEOD *Visions from The North*

Gokstad Ship for orchestra;
Whispered Name for soprano, strings and harp;
Leider der Jugen for tenor and orchestra;
Dramatic landscape for clarinet and band.
Jane Manning (soprano), Ramund Gilvan (tenor)
Polish Radio and Television Orchestra of Krakow
conducted by the composer. RNCM Wind ensemble.
Clark Rundell
VM Records, (Vienna Modern Masters)



In the last decade I have only been impressed by four ‘modern’ orchestral scores namely John Casken’s *Orion Over Farne*, John Buckley’s *Taller Than Roman Spears*, Robert Crawford’s *Lunula* and John McLeod’s *The Gokstad Ship* the first item on this highly recommended disc. It was composed for the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland premièred in Kirkwall, Orkney Islands on 30 July 1982 (Evelyn Glennie was in the orchestra). The piece is inspired by the Vikings and their mode of transport.

Few orchestral scores are as vivid as this. We are in the ancient world with its savagery and culture. We have fanfares, a dirge and a regal burial in a vivid orchestral score of stunning power and mystery.

The Whispered Name is a set of five songs for soprano, string orchestra and harp with Jane Manning as the singer and how wonderfully she performs these very moving songs, all written by women. McLeod captures a telling beauty and poignancy. This is a faultless score and a performance of outstanding depth.

Andrew Wilson is the excellent soloist in *A Dramatic Landscape*. This is a well-balanced concertante work inspired by a painting by Paul Klee and from views of various landscapes seen from aeroplanes in which much of its composition took place. One can detect shifting clouds and the chorales suggest the closeness of Deity.

It is not just Mahler that has set texts from *Das Knaben Wunderhorn*. McLeod sets four as a symphonic song cycle *Lieder der Jugend* which won the Guinness Prize in 1979. There is a telling dignity in these settings and a perfect aura of nostalgia but, I hasten to add, there is no pomposity or wallowing sentimentality. The first song is of a young soldier bidding farewell to his girlfriend as he leaves for war but they both know that he is unlikely to return. The second song is of a young man trying to discover what is wrong with him. Next, comes a song about a child dying of hunger and waiting for bread. In the last song, a young drummer is awaiting execution and, as the soldier in the first song, is bidding farewell to the world. The song ends, “Gute nacht! Gute nacht!”

While certainly not wishing to criticise Mahler’s settings I have to say McLeod is more direct and refined. The soloist, the tenor Raimund Gilvan is very good indeed.

John McLeod, having been born in 1934, is now 64. He is an outstanding composer and this disc should be made widely known. It will make many friends. He is a very fine composer indeed.

Recommended without reservation.

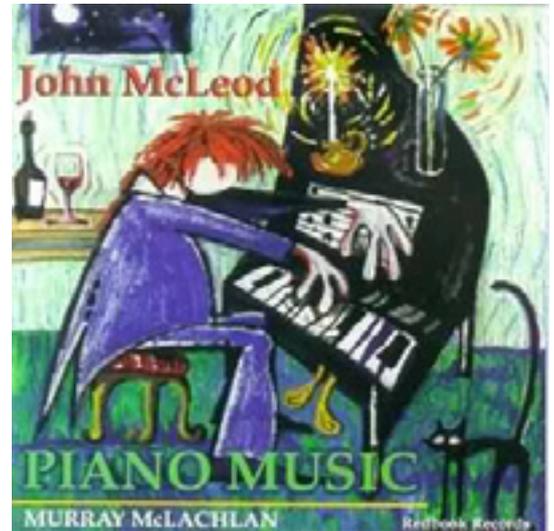
2 JOHN McLEOD *Piano music*

Twelve Preludes;
Hebridean Dances;
Four Impromptus;
Piano sonata no1;
Piano Sonata no 3
Murray McLachlan
Redbook Records RBCD002

This is a welcome disc. Not only do I recommend its purchase but that recitalists take up McLeod's best piano music.

Writing for the piano is many composers' Achilles heel. In the final analysis, few composers can write really effectively for the piano. Among the British composers still happily with us, Francis Routh is possibly one of the finest composers for the piano and, certainly, John McLeod is another.

So much piano music today is of the static and tedious variety, a sort of updated melancholic dreamy expression of a few famous names from the beginning of the nineteenth century when, although piano music was tuneful, it meandered and, perhaps, sometimes wallowed. But this CD is, in the main, of real piano music and while the quality of the music varies from uneventful to excellent, it must be remembered that no composer can compose music of supreme quality all the time.



The Twelve Preludes are exceptional. The theme of the opening prelude has remained with me since I heard it. There is a finely judged balance of virtuosity and excitement and thoughtfulness. But the great thing is that the work is always full of interest; it is never static or dull.

It is one of the most rewarding piano works I have experienced for a long time.

The Piano Sonata No 1 is a compact work in a single movement. After an introduction, we have a fast-slow-fast format. The continuity does not always seem to be there but watch out for the final pages. Of these I can, in all truth, use the word brilliant correctly. It is very exciting indeed.

Arrangements of Hebridean folk dances follow. Dressed in 'unexpected' harmonies and a craggy ruggedness which may not appeal to everyone and there is always that group of listeners who spend their time 'trying to find the tune' rather than paying attention to the music. The Harp of Dunvegan is superbly realised.

One of McLeod's earliest compositions is the Four Impromptus of 1966. The work is dedicated to his then-teacher Lennox Berkeley. These four pieces are, thankfully, nothing like the Schubert Impromptus. We are not in the realms of pretty melodies and endless repetitions but direct statements and communication. What I discovered was that the descriptions of each of the four pieces were perfectly apt: energico, tranquillo, cantabile and risoluto.

The Piano Sonata No 3 dates from 1995. It uses a quotation from Scotland's Renaissance composer, Robert Carver. The episodic style greatly hinders the logic and continuity of the piece. It is a work of depths that I cannot yet fathom and there are exciting bursts of powerful virtuosity but I was left with a conviction that, while this work is expertly pianistic, it may fare better in an orchestral dress. In my view, the piece needs more colour. I found it a little tedious.

Murray McLachlan needs no further words from me as to his reliable, exciting and exemplary performances.

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