

CD REVIEW 122

The Malcolm Smith Memorial Album

ROBIN HOLLOWAY Grand Heroic March for six hands at one piano

LESLIE HOWARD Ruddigore, Concert fantasy for piano

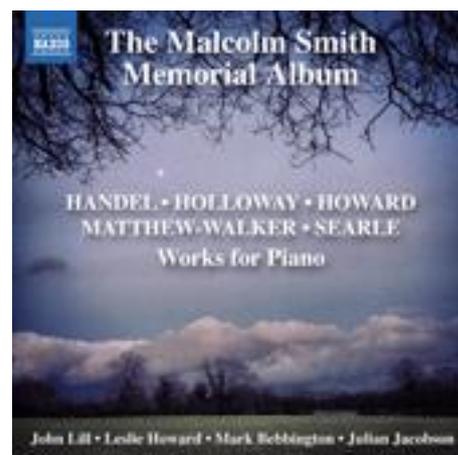
ROBERT MATTHEW WALKER Fantasy Sonata: Hamlet

HANDEL Come, but keep thy wonted state

HUMPHREY SEARLE Sonata

John Lill, Leslie Howard, Mark Bebbington, Julian Jacobson (pianists)

NAXOS 8.571354



Malcolm Smith (1932-2011) was a leading figure in London's musical life and a friend to many composers and involved in many organisations to promote music. He was Vice President of the British Music Society which promotes some composers and, perhaps, ignores others. He left money to enable this CD to be made.

The Holloway is a very ordinary piano piece lacking in originality and purpose. Leslie Howard is an admirable pianist but his Concert Fantasy owes something to Liszt's operatic fantasies but, as it is based on the music of Arthur Sullivan, the starting point may not be very interesting.

Whether the Handel transcription works is also open to debate.

One can understand such works being written a century or so ago, but, with all the readily available radio and commercial recordings of the original works, are these transcriptions really needed today?

Robert Matthew-Walker's Third Piano Sonata is said to be a portrait of Hamlet with an introduction and five moods. Works that try to convey a character, painting or natural event are subject to inadequacy and, therefore, absolute music is always preferable. Debussy's Fireworks certainly does not sound like fireworks and some of John Ireland's music with illustrative titles are inadequate as regards the titles as Rachmaninov and others pointed out.

Matthew-Walker was born in London in 1939, and has the distinction of studying privately with the underrated Darius Milhaud. But he is not primarily a serious composer and, rightly or wrongly, many will not take him seriously as such. He founded the Tunnel Club rock venue in Greenwich in 1968 and has written books about Muhammad Ali, Elvis Presley, Simon and Garfunkel, David Bowie, Madonna and The Hollywood Musical and the Cinema, as well as books about Rachmaninov, Hoddinott, Simpson, Havergal Brian, Grieg and Mahler. On Radio 3 today, the guest said that people are prejudiced and that rock music, particularly progressive rock music is as good and important as classical/serious music, and when someone tells me that this is as good as Beethoven and Rachmaninov, I cringe. Wilfrid Mellers said that The Beatles was as good as Bach and I have heard people say that Johann Strauss was as great a composer as Mozart!

Another said that John Lennon was the greatest British song writer of all time! What about Gurney, Finzi and Quilter?

The sonata is dedicated to Hans Keller and includes a brief aleatoric right hand passage. A friend who is an expert on piano music has opined that it is palatable.

This CD is important for the magnificent Piano Sonata of Humphrey Searle of 1951 which year was the 140th anniversary of Liszt's birth and was written for the brilliant Australian pianist, Gordon Watson who received the score in parts over a period of time, and said that had he received it complete

in one go, he may never have tackled it. But Watson was a truly amazing pianist and his Bartok Two was a revelation.

People have said that this sonata owes something to Liszt but only in two aspects. It is in one continuous movement and is fiendishly difficult. Pianists who are not able to play it condemn it, which shows their prejudice very quickly. Julian Jacobson is the pianist here and he actually chose to perform it which tells us much about him. The sleeve notes imply that it was inspired by Schoenberg's twelve note system. I do wish people would get their facts right. It is not a strict dodecaphonic piece.

The work made a great impact and still does today and, even if you do not like it, you have to admire it. The score was published by OUP and can be obtained now from Allegro Music.

It has rightly been called the greatest ever British piano work, a veritable masterpiece. It has been played by only the few competent pianists who can play it and in such places as Poland and Italy and always to tremendous acclaim. In the 1960s, John Barstow gave a sterling performance for the BBC. The BMS piano prize was won by a pianist who performed this incredible work. I believe his name was Steve Neugarten.

This work has taken over 60 years to become available.

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