

CD REVIEW 134

HUMPHREY SEARLE

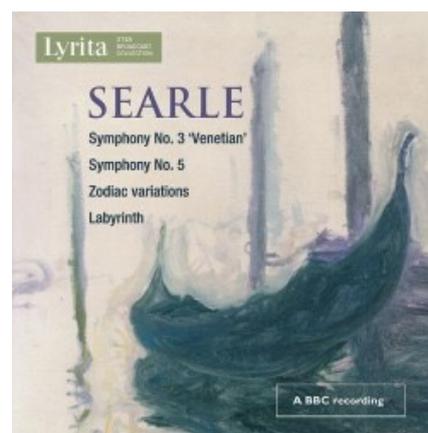
Symphony no 3, BBC Symphony Orchestra John Pritchard,
Broadcast 12 July 1971

Symphony no 5, Halle Orchestra Lawrence Leonard Broadcast,
12 March 1966

Zodiac Variations for small orchestra, Sinfona Nova Lawrence
Foster Premiere and broadcast 7 July 1970

Labyrinth, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra Louis
Fremaux Broadcast 23 November 1971

LYRITA REAM 1130 (mono) (ADD) (70.19)



This is a most welcome release in BBC broadcasts being available on CD.

Sadly, I have to correct a couple of things. Some bright spark has referred to the Third Symphony as the Venetian, a title Humphrey did not give and would not have sanctioned. On the back of the sleeve notes, Humphrey is said to have died in 1983 whereas it was in 1982 as Paul Conway's excellent sleeve notes rightly say.

This reminds me of the man who regards himself as the expert on British contemporary music whose sleeve notes are often suspect. He called Labyrinth, Searle's Sixth Symphony and wrote some offensive letters saying that he was right. He was wrong.

I had the pleasure of knowing Humphrey well and know for a fact that what I write here is definitive.

The Symphony no 3 is a masterpiece inspired not only by Venice but the Greek islands. It dates from 1960 and is dedicated to the artist, Yolande Sonnabend. It is in three movements, the first of which is both striking and somewhat sinister. The middle movement is a highly dramatic, action packed scherzo and a real scherzo at that and not for nervous orchestral players. I cannot think of any British scherzo more exhilarating. The final adagio is refined and less challenging but a very effective movement which is often tender. Pritchard thought highly of this work as have many other discerning musicians.

The Symphony no 5 dates from 1964 and is in five movements. It is dedicated to the memory of Webern and captures glimpses of life in Vienna including the obligatory waltz. It is fundamentally a reflective work but it is not weak.

The Zodiac Variations were written for the Cheltenham Festival and premiered by the Orchestra Nova conducted by Lawrence Foster on 7 July 1970 and is dedicated to John Maundell, the Festival's director. It is scored for two oboes, one doubling cor anglais, two horns and strings. There are twelve short variations representing the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

Labyrinth is not a symphony but an extended rondo for orchestra. It was inspired by the classical legend of Daedalus and Minos who both made a total maze around themselves. As usual, Searle shows his mastery of the orchestra. There is probably no better British composer at orchestration than Searle.

In his last years, Searle was neglected particularly after the great William Glock left the BBC in 1972. Glock did more than anyone in promoting all styles of British music. from early music, tonal and traditional music and, very occasionally, the avant garde which he did not like.

Searle was subject to adverse and unfair criticism. He was pilloried for studying with Webern and writing serial music but only a great composer can write in this disciplined form. His music is sometimes tough and very difficult. One recalls a BBC orchestra going on strike because the Symphony no 1 was unplayable.

It is a great irritation when shallow people state that music without tunes is not music at all. There is much melody in Searle's music as, for example, in the splendid Symphony no 2. He was often criticised for being too romantic and melodious.

For those who admire Liszt, you owe it to Searle for making it readily available because of his selfless championship of Liszt. The same can be said of Alkan and Searle's championship of his work as well.

The mono sound is completely acceptable.

The CPO set of all the symphonies are recommended and are conducted by Alun Francis. The current CD is also recommended.

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