

## CD REVIEW 29

### IAN VENABLES

Piano Quintet, Op 27

Three Pieces for violin and piano, Op 11

Elegy for cello and piano Op 2

Soliloquy for viola and piano, Op 26

Poem for cello and piano, Op 29.

Coull Quartet with Mark Bebbington (piano).

Graham Lloyd (piano) accompanies the soloists in the solo instrumental works.

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Ian Venables is rightly admired for his magnificent songs, but I hope he does not get typecast as merely a song composer. On this welcome CD, we have four works for a string instrument and piano which are not slight or miniatures but worthy pieces, and the totally satisfying Piano Quintet.

Venables' love of composing songs is partly due to his love of poetry and his songs are never 'one minute jobs' but are given the space and care they deserve and so many of them are major works in themselves and, all the better, for that. His songs are never fillers for a CD that can squeeze another quick one in.

He is also a very knowledgeable musician with a wide compass of information and a courteous and fascinating conversationalist.

Some of his songs are favourites of mine and I have been teaching singing for decades. He has an enviable understanding of the voice and negotiates well the two changes of register in the voice which many composers do not comprehend. His piano parts are integral not just vamps and common chords as you find in other composers.

His String Quartet Op 32, composed in 1997 -8 and dedicated to Tippett, is a very fine piece with a freshness and coherence that can only be admired and I hope he returns to this medium again. It is available on a Signum Classics CD. The string quartet medium seems to be out of fashion with British composers at the moment, and so to have Venables' work is welcome.

The Piano Quintet is a gem. It has so many qualities that to mention them all would be like a weekly shopping list. I cringe a little because some liken it to Barber but Venables work has a language all his own and originality is the major essential ingredient in any score. This work is not pompous or excessive in any way and while I usually find comparisons odious this master work has a glow such as that you find in Berg although this Quintet is not like Berg in style or harmony. There is a therapeutic warmth in Venables piece. It is not pompous or mawkish and yet it glows with a sensitivity that is natural and never extreme. It is distinctly satisfying music and I judge that it may be biographical and highly personal as well. There are moments of sadness with a glorious indefinable beauty. There is some wonderfully telling interplays between the instruments particularly the viola and cello as if it were love music. Whether that is so, it does not alter the fact that it is lovely music.

I have heard it said that it is Chopinesque but I cannot see that. Venables's music is so original that it defies comparison. Its expressiveness is all his own and it certainly is his own which makes the work so poignant at times and telling always.

It is not a piece of music but a highly rewarding piece deserving of awards. I am trying to think of another Piano Quintet of a similar quality but I cannot.

A friend who listened to it with me said, "If you don't like this piece, you have no heart or soul!".

The other works on this CD are the Elegy for cello and piano Op 2 which someone has described as Elgarian which is both untrue and unnecessary. It is well written and like the Poem for cello Op 29 is a dark and fascinating work. The Soliloquy for viola and piano is a work of various colours which has a beauty that only this Cinderella of the orchestra has. The Three Pieces for violin and piano Op 11 has a delicate sweetness about them.

The performances and the sound cannot be faulted. The composer was present at the recording and was deeply impressed and totally satisfied with the performances.

Wonderful British chamber music that must be taken up by ensembles everywhere. Apart from Op 2 and Op 11 these are world premiere recordings.

I will add that Ian Venables's cantata Remember This Op 40, to words by Andrew Motion, is to be premiered at the Cheltenham Festival on 29 June. It is scored for soprano, tenor and piano quintet.

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