

CD REVIEW 42

ERIK CHISHOLM Piano Music, Volume 7

Elegies;

Peter Pan Suite;

E Praeterita: sonatina no 4;

Suite no. 1;

Suite no 2;

Suite no 3.

Murray McLachlan (piano)

Dunelm series of Divine Art Records ddd 24155 (68.45)

Murray McLachlan has done a very fine job in his seven CDs of Erik Chisholm's piano music and the musical world should be grateful to him.



It has been said that Chisholm's piano music is highly specialised but that certainly does not mean it is unworthy. It is time that people starting listening to his piano music, much of which has the essential quality of greatness which is originality. The massive Sonata in A is one of the finest British piano sonatas. Being original, it has its unusual moments but it is more accessible than the sonatas of Tippett.

I do not have to say how good a pianist McLachlan is. That is well known.

Chisholm's music is not easy to play. People have tried to classify it as somewhere between the Romantics and Impressionists but I would say that he is an independent just as, for example, Janacek was. In Chisholm's music there is sometimes an uncompromising virtuosity which McLachlan is certainly equal to.

The Elegies are based on A Collection of Highland Airs and begin with one after Dan Liughair. The second is after Tha mo ghruaidhean air preasadh and there are two versions, both presented here. The third is after Gur muldach tha mi's mi gun mhacnus, gun mhanran. The fourth is based on Dan Liughair and is a strong and expressive piece.

These are examples of many pieces which shows Chisholm's commitment and interest in the music of the Highlands. He never forgot his Scottish heritage.

In the Peter Pan Suite of 1924, the composer captures both the fantasy and childhood adventures very well. Peter is playful and unaware of danger, Wendy is thoughtful and reticent and Chisholm has caught her femininity and gracefulness. Tinkerbell has lovely 'music -box' music and the crocodile is sinister and the music suggests it is creeping up on you only to be put to flight. Captain Hook has an arrogant swagger. All are well portrayed. Chisholm can portray characters in a musical setting.

The Sonatina no 4 exists as one short movement. The title E Praeterita means from the past. This delightful miniature is based on a lute tune by Hans Neusiedler (1508-1563) and is charming, flid and well realised.

The Suite no 1 has five short movements... the first and fourth being a waltz or in waltz tempo, the third a scherzo and the finale a moto perpetuo. The first is the caprice in waltz tempo and is very engaging. Fun to play, if you can, and fun to listen to. The second piece is an Albumleaf, a sensitive andante with charming filigree and musical cascades one of many features of Chisholm's piano music. It has a melody that lingers and is therefore memorable. The scherzo has infectious humour and I actually laughed out loud. A man that can write music that makes you laugh happily must be clever!

McLachlan is obviously enjoying it as we are!

If music is about communication, then both the composer and performer have succeeded.

The waltz is a bit of an enigma and the finale is really another joke in the best sense of the word. It may cause a pleasant frown since it is highly entertaining and calls for a pianist of great skill.

This music would go down well with any audience but it must be heard. It must be fun to watch being played as well.

The Suite no 2 has a prelude marked presto, a caprice marked Allegro scherzando then the 'Chopsticks' theme with eight following variations, an intermezzo and the finale is a jig. I judge that the opening prelude is tongue in cheek. You will either find it hilarious or a puzzle. At 3.45, can you guess what the simple nursery tune is?

The caprice follows which is lyrical and shows the composer's enviable ability with counterpoint. The middle section is impressive with its ostinato figure and a left hand melody. Humour returns, at which emotion this composer was very able.

Now for Chopsticks which not the theme you expect and to which schoolchildren used to sing
Daddy washed his dirty shirt
Daddy washed it clean.

We used to play it on black notes only.

But this is not the tune Chisholm uses. The variations are brief and playful. The final variations are especially fine.

Suite no 3 has one movement called ballet which is quirky and seems to suggest someone trying to lead you into mischief.

Chisholm's piano music is never banal and always busy and active.

The sound is very good. John Purser, who has written a book about Chisholm, has some very informative and welcome sleeve notes.

I also like the way he acknowledges the work of Chisholm's daughter, Morag, who has used her resources to set up the Erik Chisholm Trust. She lives a couple of miles from me and is a person of generosity and sincerity.

I understand that the pianist Danny Driver has just recorded Chisholm's two piano concertos and I am an enthusiast of Chisholm's Pictures from Dante, also recorded, which shows the composer's marvellous sense of orchestration.

Finally, a message for Murray McLachlan... thank you.

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