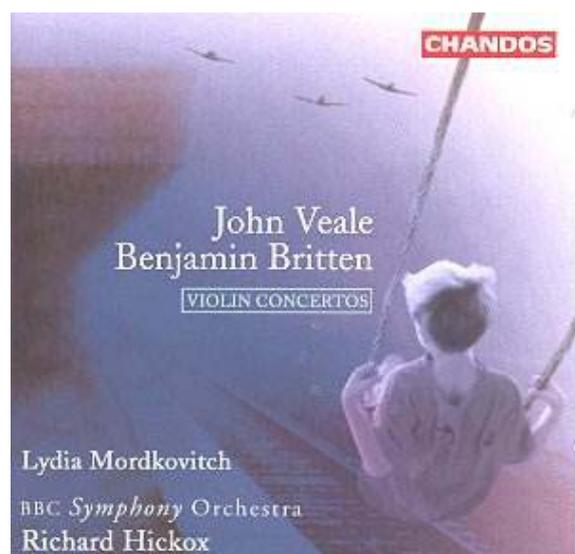


JOHN VEALE VIOLIN CONCERTO BENJAMIN BRITTEN VIOLIN CONCERTO



Lydia Mordkovitch/BBC Symphony Orchestra/Richard Hickox
rec 1999? (DDD)
CHANDOS CHAN 9910 [69.57]

This must be the disc of the year!

I have never heard such magnificent sound quality. The recording producer and his team have done such a first class job that merely to mention the expression first class is hopelessly inadequate. The balance and clarity are so evident and the detail that comes through makes you aware that you are listening to the Britten for the first time.

Lydia Mordkovitch is ideal. I have not heard violin playing like this for a long time. Her recordings of the Bax and Dyson concertos under the superb Bryden Thomson are also magnificent and available on Chandos. "Jack" Thomson sang her praises to me on more than one occasion. Her intonation is perfect and so secure and among her many rare qualities is that she can make the high notes on the E string sing. This is one of the marks of that very very rare breed of supreme musicians. Richard Hickox and the dependable BBC Symphony Orchestra are truly superb and, if I were a gambling man, I would say that Mr Hickox has paid great attention to all of John Veale's intentions and open to any further suggestions that the composer made but not in the sense of being servile. He is too good a conductor to be like that!

The colour in the orchestra is simply stunning and only eclipsed by Ms Mordkovitch's marvellous variety of tone. Her performances are different. She has that rare ability to live the music not just play it. Of a truth this is nothing short of sensational. As I write this I am listening to her perilous high notes in the second movement of the Britten; cliff-hangers they may be to all of us, but not to her. It is that thrilling, edge of the seat, nervous excitement that you dare not miss, a real musical experience. Yet her sensitivity is equally amazing. Her matter of fact style does not hide the warmth she displays. Anyone who can play like this has a heart and a good one too.

Chandos were wise in combining John Veale's glorious concerto ... and it is ... with a more familiar one like the Britten. That is good marketing but the Britten concerto is nowhere near such as good work as that by John Veale. The Britten has so many flaws or stylish indiscretions. I listed some 114 and then gave up. To name but three ... the lovely melody in the first movement, so smooth and sensual, is accompanied by a chirpy clownish bassoon part. Then there is the compositional weakness that lesser composers follow of trying to show off and be virtuosic whereas great and even good composers allow the virtuosity to naturally flow out of the development of the music. Thirdly, the end of the concerto, the best part of it, is noted for the simplicity of diatonic chords. Britten studied at the RCM as did Constant Lambert who ten years before the Britten Concerto wrote a super piece called Rio Grande. Britten knew the work and for me the end of the Concerto is too close to Rio Grande. Britten goes further and tries to make the playing of scales in full orchestration interesting. It isn't.

There are other strange happenings on the way, a trip to Spain, a ghastly waltz, an imitation of Shostakovich, two piccolos playing high in contrast to a rising tuba line and the closing passacaglia, a set of variations which device seldom makes a good finale. There are exceptions, of course, Brahms' Fourth Symphony, for example.

If Britten's composition is seriously flawed and unsatisfactory, which it is, the recording isn't. It is truly superb but even that is eclipsed by the sensational violin playing.

I have had a score of Veale's work for many years. It is a work I play regularly. Erich Gruenberg premiered

it in Manchester with the BBC Philharmonic under Edward Downes and that was a good performance and that fact must not be overlooked. Nor must the sterling work of Lewis Foreman in his part in bringing the premiere into being. Ms Mordkovitch's performance is different and it works

The John Veale concerto is autobiographical but don't spend time trying to decipher its meaning. If you do, you'll miss the joy of the music. The concerto is a good old-fashioned one in three large movements. The first contains an unknown theme that Veale recalls from his childhood which he may have sung while singing on a swing, hence the superb cover to this disc. This innocence gives way to varying degrees of anger and despair which may hint at World War Two which explains another feature of the cover. The anger here is marvellously portrayed and, thankfully, without an over-dependence on percussion. The music's fatalism is never morose. In fact the violin part speaks of hope and confidence. The fire that Ms Mordkovitch puts into this movement absolutely fizzles whereas the slow movement is full of the most glorious sensitivity you would wish for. The composer told me that this was love music and while it is diatonic I have always sensed a type of Tristan and Isolde feel about it. But the love is tinged with a sort of agony, perhaps some sort of unrequited love and so many of us have been that way. Yet the music is neither sentimental nor banal and the soloist really makes it live. This is a slow movement par excellence. The sign of a great composer is not to deploy overkill and Veale is successful in this.

The finale strikes me as a celebration party, full of vigour. The dark days are past and the music has a burlesque feel and, unlike the Britten, the virtuosity does not get in the way of the music.

The work is unashamedly tonal. It does not have the Britten weakness of trying to find a style by imitating others.

Richard Hickox and the orchestra must take a lot of credit, too. The shaping of the luscious warm string melody in the first movement is stunning. There is the excellent attention to musical punctuation and the magical spell of innocence he sets of the slow movement is unbearably beautiful. Add to this his party spirit and sheer sense of fun in the finale and what have we got?

Is this really played by mere mortals?

When I bask in the slow movement I feel I am in Heaven and , the trouble is, someone wakes me up.

My only reservation about the concerto is the sudden ends of the movements. I hope my friend Mr. Veale does not get his solicitor to write to me. I like to be eased into ends of movements and when we have three super movements ending like this it is like a series of sudden deaths and one can but grieve. Losing old friends is never easy.

Apart from the Britten, beautifully played and executed though it is, this is the 'disc of the year' It sets a standard of sound quality and performance that will hardly be beaten.

Many years ago, I was present at a concert conducted by Bryden Thomson in which a famous British violin concerto was played. In the interval of that concerto, Jack said to me, "We still do not have even a good British violin concerto!"

Jack, wherever you are now I have to say to you, "We do now!"

David Wright

Further Information:

[David Wright's biography of John Veale](#)

[John Veale as I knew him](#)