

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 11 July 2019 14:31 -

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## Gavin Bryars - Piano Concerto (The Solway Canal) • After Handel's Vesper • Ramble On Cortona (2011)



1 *After Handel's Vesper* 11:47 2 *Ramble On Cortona* 12:34 3 *Piano Concerto (The Solway Canal)* 28:21 Ralph van Raat - piano Cappella Amsterdam (tracks: 3) Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic (tracks: 3) Otto Tausk - conductor

This disc shows some of Gavin Bryars' compositions for piano. The first two works are for solo piano, and the third is for piano, choir and orchestra.

*After Handel's Vesper*, a 1995 work, is played here on piano, though it was written for harpsichord. There is some beautiful, subtle music at the beginning of this piece, with light melodic touches and a great deal of space, which would sound odd on the harpsichord with its quicker decay. The work has a number of discrete sections, some that recall a minimalist style, and others that hark back to the baroque with a fair amount of ornamentation. At times this piece almost sounds like an improvisation; the melodic material is simple and undeveloped, almost uninteresting.

*Ramble on Cortona* was Bryars' first composition for piano, oddly enough, and was composed in 2010. Bryars, for some reason, has never written for this instrument before, and this piece is based on some themes from a recent vocal work of his, *Laude*, which is, in turn, based on some 13th century manuscripts discovered in Cortona, Italy. It is slow and melancholic, at first, featuring a simple right-hand melody over arpeggiated chords played with the left hand in a high register. The work shifts to other forms that all suggest simple song-like melodies at the high end of the scale, with varied accompaniments by the left hand. There are sections that are more minimalist, others more impressionist, but the work lacks any overall cohesion.

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The Piano Concerto, The Solway Canal, is a large-scale piece for piano, choir and orchestra. The solo piano never takes on the role of soloist here, but rather, as the liner-notes say “takes on the unexpected rôle of a guide instead, soberly leading the orchestra and the choir into new territories of colour.” Early on, the choir comes in singing words from the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan, with the music becoming layered: the piano as one layer, the orchestra another, and the choir above them. There is no solo-tutti structure in this work, but rather a flowing combination of the three. The work starts out with a slow, one could say “flowing” tempo, and slowly increases in speed after the first section with the choir. In this part, the interplay between the piano and orchestra is very attractive, yet unfulfilling; the music seems to have no clear direction. A long section for piano and orchestra goes by, then the choir returns, with a more romantic background. The piano plays constantly here, driving a rhythm that conflicts with the slow chanting of the choir. The music then becomes a bit confused - the liner-notes suggest that this is somehow “reminiscent of works by Charles Ives, or perhaps even Iannis Xenakis” - around the 18 minute mark, when each of the three elements - piano, orchestra and choir, seem headed in different directions. But that all stops, the piano comes back in control, with sweeping, romantic riffs. From here to the end, it's piano and orchestra playing meandering melodies, with the exception of a brief return of the choir.

As much as I like Gavin Bryars' music - I recently reviewed another disc of his, which contained a very moving work called New York (review) - I found it hard to get interested in these piano works. The solo works lack overall form, and sound like they each just contain a number of different, unrelated sections. In fact, if I listen to this disc without paying attention, it's hard to tell where the first piece ends and the second begins. The Piano Concerto is more interesting, once one realizes that it is not a concerto, but something about it just doesn't grab me. It has its attractive bits, and its being a concerto without the standard concerto form is interesting. But ultimately, there's something missing; it just doesn't have enough direction to keep my interest.  
---Kirk McElhearn, musicweb-international.com

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