

Hanson – Symphony Nos.1 & 2 Song of Democracy (1990)

Written by bluesever

Wednesday, 04 November 2015 17:09 -

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Hanson - Symphony No.1 in E minor, Op.21 "Nordic" 1.1. *Andante solenne - Allegro con* 11:32 2.2. *Andante teneramente, con semplicita* 5:44 3.3. *Allegro con fuoco* 9:24
Hanson - Symphony No.2, Op.30 "Romantic"
4.1. *Adagio - Allegro moderato* 13:59 5.2. *Andante con tenerezza* 6:36 6.3. *Allegro con brio* 7:20 7. *Hanson: Song of Democracy* 12:04
Eastman Rochester School Of Music Chorus Eastman-Rochester Orchestra Howard Hanson
– conductor

Was it really almost thirty years ago that I first heard the music of Howard Hanson? A friend had taped a miscellaneous BBC Radio 3 programme of American music. It was broadcast one Sunday in 1971-2. Apart from including Griffes' *Pleasure Dome* there was also the middle movement of Hanson's *Romantic*. It was the first time I had heard any Hanson. In due course I got the Charles Gerhardt LP of the whole *Romantic* Symphony. Then having started my first qualified job I threw caution to the winds and ordered via the then Crotchet Records mail order a batch of USA LPs selected from a Schwann catalogue I had picked up in a jazz specialist shop in Plymouth. That bulky parcel came by surface mail from the USA (I seem to recall the name 'Harlequin Records' as Crotchet's US suppliers). It included some fascinating Hanson, Piston, Schuman, Hovhaness, Harris and Randall Thompson. The Hanson was the Mercury LP of the first two symphonies - the same two tapes as appear here. I played that LP to death and came to know the *Nordic* complete with one or two clicks and groove skips as if those blemishes were integral parts of the music. I was, and remain, a resolute Sibelian; the music of Hanson has some Sibelian resonance with a Tchaikovskian pungency. It is highly emotional and emotive music. If you know the history of favourite works by Sibelius, Nielsen, Peterson-Berger and others it should come as no surprise that the *Nordic* was actually written in Rome where he was studying with Respighi. It was premiered by the Augusteo Orchestra, with the composer conducting, on 30 May 1923. The recording here was made 35 years later. It positively throbs with soulful Scandinavian feeling. Hanson is no dawdler and keeps the pressure on his players who respond with the alacrity of an orchestra that has grown up under Hanson's shaping hands. The precision of the final 'crump' of the *Nordic* is deeply impressive.

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The Second Symphony is in the grand romantic manner with melodic material to match. Just listen to the horn 'fall' at 4:31 and the easy-does-it solo that follows. This is Hollywood before the grand Rózsa, Herrmann and Korngold scores were written. Here the accent is even more Sibelian. Hanson wrote a gift of a tune in the first movement and matched it in the tender balm of the andante con tenerezza. The strings glow with a Hollywood sheen - ample in tone with only a feint suggestion of 'dated-ness'. The plungingly bright allegro con brio is well named with darting winds, commanding brass (00.49) all grippingly exciting (3.20). The reprise of the great theme from the first movement appears at 5:20 and is a spectacularly moving moment.

Only Charles Gerhardt (now on Chesky) has excelled the composer in the Romantic although Kenneth Montgomery (Arte Nova) is I think very fine even when taken at the almost parodied distended pace he adopts. Schwarz and Slatkin each have their own strengths but lack the belligerent passion the composer brings.

The Song of Democracy sidles modestly in. The singing is well coached and marvellously clear. The wild dance of 3.23 must have been in Hanson's mind for the scherzo elements of the Sixth Symphony. There are some Waltonian triumphalisms (3:52) and memorable moments include the opulent and increasingly urgent chiming obbligato at 10.03. If we flinch and wince in the face of the sincere sentiments on display here then let us also recall works such as Ireland's These Things Shall Be and wonder if we have become too knowing ... too cynical. --- Rob Barnett, musicweb-international.com

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