

properly – but unfortunately this is not always so. While the tenor (O'Neill) and baritone (Michaels-Moore) seem to make the English verses understandable to the listener, the female singers normally fall short, requiring the listener to read the libretto to know what is being said, which clearly undermines the purpose of recording the work in English in the first place. This is particularly problematic for the fast-moving passages for Oscar, but fault should not necessarily be found with the soprano (Richardson), but rather with the near impossibility of anyone's being able to enunciate English words with the notes and rhythms intended for the more fluid Italian verses. However, my criticisms aside, all of the singers normally perform with focused and precise pitch and fairly accurate rhythm.

Verdi composed *Un ballo in maschera* between late 1857 and early 1859, setting a libretto by Antonio Somma (who based his text on the libretto *Gustavo III* by Eugène Scribe); it had its premiere on 17 February 1859 at the Teatro Apollo in Rome. Because of censorship issues it encountered before its premiere, the opera exists in multiple versions, two of which are routinely performed.³ The 'original' (actually the opera titled *Gustavo III*, not *Un ballo in maschera*) is set in Stockholm in March 1792; the censored modification, the 'final' version known as *Un ballo in maschera*, in Boston at the end of the seventeenth century. Each has different names and titles for its characters. The Chandos recording uses the Swedish characters, probably believing this was more faithful to Verdi's original intent. It is, however, rather unfortunate that the 'American' setting was not chosen, for then, on some level, singing English verses and thus this recording may have been justified.

Roberta Montemorra Marvin
University of Iowa

York Bowen

Piano Sonata No. 6 in B, minor op. 160

24 Preludes op. 102

Rêverie op. 86

Joop Celis *pf*

Chandos CHAN 10277 (69 minutes: DDD)

Notes and translations included.

Perhaps when we have examined or listened to the works of Granville Bantock, Hubert Bath, Paul Corder, York Bowen, W.H. Bell, A. von Ahn Carse, Arthur Hinton, Benjamin J. Dale and Joseph Holbrooke we have mentally decided that these composers were all, more or less, especially gifted and naturally endowed with remarkable powers; ... But these men, who seem to embody the hope and glory of our present English school of composition, received their instruction in the art of

³ David Rosen discussed the situation in 'A Tale of Five Cities: The Peregrinations of Somma's and Verdi's *Gustavo III* (and *Una vendetta in dominò* and *Un ballo in maschera*) at the Hands of the Neapolitan and Roman Censorship', *Verdi Forum* 26–7 (1999–2000): 53–66.

composition from Mr Frederick Corder, Professor and Curator of the Royal Academy of Music: we then realise that there must be something more than natural aptitude to account for their achievements. It is in fact an unique and all-sufficing testimony to the excellence of the teaching methods of their master; a result of which we must all be exceedingly proud.¹

That summation by Raymond J. Tobin of British musical talent in 1912 is striking, given that the composers he cites as representative of 'the hope and glory' of English composition are hardly household names, and that Frederick Corder is something of a marginalized figure. However, just as a study of Corder's published writings may help to counter negative perceptions of his teaching methods, so performance, in the form of several notable recordings, is helping to reassess the status of some of his pupils. York Bowen (1886–1961) is a case in point. Bowen was one of the most promising young musical talents of his generation; a glittering student career as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music (1898–1905) was followed by several early successful performances of his music – his tone poem *The Lament of Tasso* in 1903, his first three Piano Concertos (1904, 1906, 1908), his Symphonic Fantasia in 1906, the Viola Concerto in 1908, and the Second Symphony in 1912. Sadly, Bowen's subsequent career as a composer never reached the heights of his pre-war status, despite some striking instrumental and chamber works, and the engaging Violin Concerto, Fourth Piano Concerto and Third Symphony.

Several recent recordings of Bowen's music suggest both a reawakening of interest, and that a reassessment of his compositional status is long overdue; these performances include the Second Symphony on Classico (CLASSCD 404), the Viola Concerto on Hyperion (CDA67546), and Dutton's releases of sonatas for wind and piano, cello and violin sonatas, works for viola and piano, and various chamber works (CDLX 7129, CDLX 7120, CDLX 7126, CDLX 7115) performed by the Endymion Ensemble. However, it was the piano that was Bowen's main focus – his career as a concert pianist included not only authoritative readings of his own works, but the first recording of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. His understanding of keyboard technique, rhetoric and the expressive range of the instrument is evident from the miniatures through to the concerted works. Dutton's ongoing series of the Piano Concertos (number one has already been released, coupled with the Violin Concerto, on CDLX 7169) represents an exciting long-term project, and is a significant addition to Stephen Hough's recent advocacy of selected preludes, the Fifth Sonata and other miniatures on Hyperion (CDA66838). As a pianist-composer, Bowen's music has led to comparisons with figures such as Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Chopin, Ravel and Medtner, but his particular brand of pianism would benefit from a more rigorous stylistic analysis – something that these recordings will no doubt help to achieve. The most exciting feature of this new Chandos disc is the opportunity to hear Bowen's Sixth Piano Sonata op. 160 (a premiere recording), coupled with the complete set of Twenty-four Preludes op. 102, and the delightful *Reverie* op. 86. As an attractive pianistic range, this recording allows listeners to consider whether Bowen's music represents (as suggested by the composer Kaikhosru Sorabji)

¹ Raymond J. Tobin, 'Great Teachers – No.1 Frederick Corder', *Musical Opinion* 35 (Jan. 1912): 249.

'independence of musical thought, the blessed freedom from the monomaniacs of fashionable haberdashery'.²

Bowen's Sixth Sonata (1961) was his final work, and combines a clarity of structure with an effective range of expressive material, showing a real understanding of writing for the piano. The first movement articulates a powerful sonata structure. After a brooding introduction on a dominant pedal (*Moderato e serio*), a *con fuoco* B \flat minor theme with dotted rhythms, chordal textures and octave leaps creates a real sense of rhetoric; this eventually calms to a *poco più sostenuto* theme in the relative major, characterized by writing in thirds and sixths. The development section has a three-part division corresponding to the three major events so far – the principal theme, the second theme, and the introductory material, which is recast over a pedal A. Semiquaver textures over a dominant pedal lead to the recapitulation, where a truncated version of the first theme in the tonic minor is followed by a tonal surprise – a reference to the second theme first in D major, then in F major; it is only an increase in the *agitato* figuration which provides the return to B \flat minor. Celis obviously believes in this music, and communicates the musical design effectively with some convincing changes of pace; the only minor quibble might be that the shorter chords of the *poco più sostenuto* theme might have been lightened a little more to really highlight Bowen's range of moods. The central *Intermezzo* combines a charming simplicity with more intense chromatic sonorities and sequential descending phrases, and again Celis provides an effective sense of pacing, judging the *poco rubato* well, and bringing out the harmonic nuances. On occasion, a greater sense of improvisation might have been suggested, but this is a beautiful movement, expressively played. However, it is in this movement that the particular sound of the Steinway D used in this recording does become something of an issue; the brightness of the upper registers tends to obtrude rather, occasionally undermining Cellis's gradations of melodic contours. Conversely, the brightness of tone allows Cellis to achieve a real clarity of articulation in the final movement (*Finale alla toccata*), where he again exhibits an awareness of harmonic detail and structural design. However, there is scope for greater characterization here, particularly in the moments marked *giocoso* and *with humour*, which provide a brief respite from the continuous semiquaver textures.

Bowen's Twenty-four Preludes in all Major and Minor Keys op. 102, published in 1950, follow the traditional plan of having a major and minor prelude in each key, moving up chromatically. They were dedicated to Sorabji, who had a clear idea of their merit: rather than the composer 'clinging desperately to the sinking hulk of tonality', he described how Bowen employs the structural key system with 'such freedom, such flexibility and elasticity, such delicate and richly resourceful harmonic piquancy and colour that all lingering suspicion ... of academicism or scholastic pedantry melts from the mind as soon as the preludes start'.³ Given that Marie-Catherine Girod's 1994 performance of this set (3D CLASSICS 8012) is difficult to get hold of, and Stephen Hough's 1995 recording only includes selected preludes, Celis's contribution has the advantage of being both available and complete. His performance is technically assured, and there are many good things in his readings – the pacing of the *Moderato appassionato* in C major, the voicing in the lilting 6/8 Prelude in C minor, a clarity in the *con fuoco* C \sharp minor

² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, 'A Note on York Bowen', in *Mi contra Fa; The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: The Porcupine Press, 1947): 238–9.

³ *Ibid.*, 237.

and F minor Preludes, the march-like D major Preludes, the fanfares of the Ninth Prelude in E, and a sense of *rubato* in the expressive A \flat major Prelude. Again, however, a greater characterization in places would make these interpretations more convincing (there is scope for more caprice in the E minor Prelude, for example, or a greater feeling of *serioso e tragico* in the final number of the set), and the unforgiving tone of the instrument does not give the performer the range needed to communicate the rich colours of Bowen's palette. It is in some of the slower preludes where this deficiency becomes more marked – a more magical tone is required in the *Andante grazioso* in D \flat major, the *tranquillo* moods of the E minor Prelude coda or the G \flat major Prelude need a softer approach, and the simplicity of the D minor, G minor and B \flat major Preludes does not come across as effectively as it should.

The delightful miniature *Reverie* op. 86 completes the disc. It is marked 'Freely, expressively and gently moving', and although Celis manages to convey an effective *rubato*, there is perhaps scope for a greater feeling of improvisation and fantasy here; although there is an attention to harmonic nuance, the decorative mordents occasionally sound a little self-conscious, and the repeated chords heralding the central section might have explored a wider range of quiet dynamics. One of the challenges in this piece is to communicate Bowen's frequent *tenuto* marks without impeding the sense of flow, and although some of the bass notes might have been pointed a little more Celis is successful in finding the balance between the underlining of significant moments and the sense of line. Overall, therefore, some effective performances of fascinating repertoire, undermined by a somewhat abrasive instrument – but still a welcome addition to Bowen's growing musical rehabilitation.

Michael Allis
Leeds University