

light of the Ghindin recording, a far better work than is normally supposed and, despite shortcomings of which Rachmaninoff was excessively conscious, not abnormally long or dull; it is arguably stronger and more individual than the familiar revised version, and it contains some of the composer's finest invention.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Stephen Hough may be induced to perform and record this version in due course.

Recordings of a composer's complete contribution to a genre are a characteristic phenomenon of our time; they become symbols of an anthologized canon, as well as offering surveys of the current state of performance philosophy and the contemporary evolution of performance practice. The Hough-Litton Rachmaninoff recordings do exactly that: they combine an exploratory questioning with a scholarly awareness of the composer's own conceptions; and in opting for predominantly live recordings – a practice that is finding increasing favour – they achieve greater spontaneity than is normally possible under studio conditions. The composer's originals cannot avoid sounding like old recordings, however brilliantly the Naxos engineers have re-mastered them; but the Hyperion team have given us 'super Hi-fi Rachmaninoff', and the Hough-Litton performances help to maintain these works as very much 'the music of the present'.

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### Stanford

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String Quartet No. 1 in G major op. 44  
String Quartet No. 2 in A minor op. 45  
Fantasy for Horn Quintet in A minor (ed. Dibble)

RTÉ Vanbrugh Quartet  
Gregory Ellis *vn*, Keith Pascoe *vn*, Simon Aspell *va*, Christopher Marwood *vc*  
Stephen Stirling *hn*

Hyperion CDA67434 (68 minutes: DDD)  
Notes and translations included.

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The first two of Stanford's eight string quartets, op. 44 in G major and op. 45 in A minor, date from 1891, and were composed rapidly during August and September of that year. Although he was already a very experienced composer, with a long list of works – symphonies, operas, choral music and chamber music – to his credit, it says much for the circumspection with which Stanford approached the

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<sup>8</sup> See Geoffrey Norris, 'Rachmaninoff's Second Thoughts', *Musical Times*, cxiv (1973): 364–8; and Robert Threlfall, 'Rachmaninoff's Revisions and an Unknown Version of his Fourth Concerto', *Musical Opinion*, xcvi (1973): 235–7. Threlfall identifies three versions of the fourth concerto: the original autograph (1926); the first published edition (1928), which includes a two-piano arrangement; and the final published version (1944), already played and recorded by the composer in 1942.

taxing medium of the string quartet that he waited until he was almost 40 before trying his hand at it. He was doubtlessly well aware that no medium so exposes the shortcomings of a composer's technical equipment, but in these works he rose magnificently to the challenge. They show him at the height of his creative powers and arguably demonstrate the calibre of his compositional technique and the quality of his creative imagination even more emphatically than do the symphonies.

Both quartets are substantial works, and each lasts just under half an hour in performance. They reveal an impressive command of architectural design and proportion. Stanford follows a conventional four-movement sequence of a sonata-form first movement, succeeded by a lighter, scherzo-like movement, a slow movement and a quick finale. But if Stanford is content to employ standard formal procedures – such as sonata form – there is nothing routine in the way that he handles them: on the contrary, the differences between the comparable movements in each of the two quartets show an original creative imagination operating not only on the levels of thematic and textural inventiveness, but also on the level of structural organization. The continuous vitality and interest of the music stems in no small part from the fact that established procedures are freshly re-imagined in each case, as Stanford moulds the forms with an unobtrusive skillfulness to accommodate his attractive and personally distinctive lyricism.

His imaginative fecundity allows him to imbue each of the eight movements that comprise the two quartets with a completely distinct character. Within each movement, moreover, there is very little exact repetition of material, and where ideas or sections recur they are usually varied, decorated or otherwise modified in the most felicitous manner. This avoidance of literal repetition is never allowed to compromise the structural clarity of the music. Nor does Stanford ever lose the thread of his argument: he never introduces a theme or motif the implications of which remain unrealized, each new idea being always fully integrated into the unfolding musical design. But if every dimension of the music is impeccably controlled in the technical sense, the overall effect is always one of delightful spontaneity and freshness. This is music that was composed at a time when seriousness of purpose was not incompatible with elegance of expression.

The first movement of op. 44 is an appealing *Allegro assai*, fluent and relaxed in mood, with flowing lines and graceful melodic contours. Stanford's sophisticated approach to the problems of string-quartet writing is immediately apparent in the effortless interpenetration of accompaniment and principal thematic material in the movement's opening phrase – a technique that he successfully employs throughout the work and that is largely responsible for the rich suggestiveness of the textures and the persuasive coherence of the musical fabric. This fully developed sonata-form movement is succeeded by a *Poco allegro e grazioso* in G minor that functions as a scherzo. The Trio is a *Presto*, initially in G major and in triple time which, after an abbreviated and decorated return of *Tempo 1*, is repeated in B $\flat$  major, but now ingeniously recast in six-eight time. A final, further decorated, but this time full return of *Tempo 1* follows, and a brief coda rounds off the movement. The deeply felt *Largo con molto espressione* in E $\flat$  major demonstrates Stanford's ability to create a powerfully sustained slow movement. It is only in the finale that the composer gives any indication of his interest in his native Irish folk music. This sonata-form *Allegro molto* in six-eight time with a jig-like first subject is an exhilarating *tour de force* that brings the quartet to a brilliant close.

In general, the mood of op. 45 is more austere and it was undoubtedly intended by the composer to complement the genial op. 44. One of the most remarkable features of the first movement is its successful integration of two markedly contrasting ideas into an overall sonata pattern. The grave and spare contrapuntal lines of the opening strains of the *Molto moderato* are juxtaposed with an insouciant and song-like *più moto* second subject. Stanford handles these two ideas – which are so different in character, mood and even tempo – with confident assurance, and out of them constructs an unusual and powerfully eloquent movement. The *Prestissimo* Scherzo and Trio that follows is a brilliant and infectious creation with a driving muscular energy reminiscent of Beethoven. Like the slow movements of op. 44, the *Andante espressivo* is the centre of gravity of the quartet as a whole. It, too, is to some extent a study in contrasts. The dignified lyrical euphony of the opening is presently interrupted by a dramatic reiterated-note figure in the viola, and the consummate technical mastery with which this disruptive element is gradually absorbed into the fabric of the music, allowing the movement to close in a mood of peaceful serenity, must surely make this one of Stanford's most fascinating and compelling utterances. If the finale of op. 44 had a whiff of Irish folk music about it, then the finale of the present work recalls the music of Eastern Europe. This is an engagingly high-spirited *Allegro molto* with a quirky sense of humour. Before the final flourish of the coda, there is a curious recollection of the opening of the quartet, like a poignant backward glance on the events of the work as a whole. Although a simple and obvious device, it is nevertheless oddly affecting here, dispelling the good humour and producing a momentary sense of seriousness that even the brilliance of the concluding bars cannot fully dissipate.

The Fantasy for Horn Quintet is a late work, dating from 1922, two years before Stanford's death. It is not known what circumstances prompted him to compose a piece for this unusual medium, and it does not appear that it ever received a public performance. Jeremy Dibble, who also supplied the informative liner notes for the CD, edited the score for the performance on this recording. The work is cast in one continuous, multi-sectional movement. It opens impressively with a vigorous and arresting theme, the ensuing development of which demonstrates the composer's command of the textural possibilities the unusual combination of instruments affords. Unfortunately, the rest of the work fails to live up to the opening and, in spite of several enchanting passages, the overall effect is one of diffuseness.

The RTÉ Vanbrugh String Quartet and Stephen Stirling are persuasive and eloquent advocates of this music. The successful projection of the very varied characters of the different movements of the string quartets is particularly impressive in these performances: the *tempi* are well judged, and the textures are clearly and precisely realized. The only disappointing moment, in the opinion of the present writer, occurs at the point in the finale of the op. 44 Quartet where Stanford marks a return to *Tempo primo*. In this performance, this passage is taken considerably slower than the tempo of the opening, which means that the accelerando that follows never quite gains the headlong pace that one imagines Stanford desired at this point. The end of the work consequently lacks excitement and is something of a disappointment.

As these quartets are almost entirely unknown (all three works are recorded here for the first time), the Vanbrugh Quartet is in effect introducing them to a new public. The sheer quality of this music unquestionably makes the undertaking well worth the effort, and we can only express our gratitude to them and to

Hyperion Records for their enterprise. One looks forward with eagerness to the appearance of the remaining six quartets in due course.

Séamas de Barra  
*Cork*