

**Coleridge-Taylor
Somervell**

Violin Concerto in G minor op. 80

Violin Concerto in G major

Anthony Marwood *vn*
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra
Martyn Brabbins *cond*

Hyperion CDA67420 (65 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

This latest offering in Hyperion's series, 'The Romantic Violin Concerto', is an intriguing one, as it pairs two concertos by British composers who are primarily associated with other compositional genres – Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912) and Arthur Somervell (1863–1937). There are further parallels – both were pupils of Charles Villiers Stanford, and their respective additions to the concerto repertoire are both in the same key (G minor), each lasting just over 30 minutes. Curiosity value alone might identify this disc as a useful addition to any collection, but what is more important is the sense of advocacy which is evident in these impressive performances – particularly as there is no obvious performance tradition upon which to draw. Whilst a number of recent musicological studies focusing upon the English Musical Renaissance have been significant, providing a real sense of reassessment within historical and cultural contexts, it is performance which provides a practical test of the worth of individual compositions; on this evidence, both of these works represent a positive contribution to the performing canon.

Arthur Somervell is best known for his song cycles *Maud* (1898), *Love in Springtime* (1901), *A Shropshire Lad* (1904) and the Browning settings *James Lee's Wife* (1907) and *A Broken Arc* (1923); however, several of his choral works (including *The Forsaken Mermaid*, *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* and *Christmas*) are worthy of further exploration, as is his Symphony in D minor, 'Thalassa', with its poetic incipits prefacing the outer movements (including the finale's misquotation from Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale') and the central Elegy for Captain Scott, 'Killed in action near the South Pole March 28 1912' – an interesting musical precursor to Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica*. Somervell had completed his D minor Violin Sonata (a work which also deserves more frequent performance) in 1928, and followed this up two years later with his Concerto, written for the violinist Adila Fachiri (1886–1962), the less famous sister of Jelly d'Aranyi. Fachiri can be heard elsewhere (Symposium Records, CD 1312) in a touching version of Beethoven's Violin Sonata op. 96 with Donald Francis Tovey in 1928, and it was Tovey who was to have conducted the Reid Orchestra at the first performance of the Concerto with Fachiri in Edinburgh in 1932; owing to his indisposition, his place was taken by Mary Grierson. There are many things to admire in this work – the lilting 6/8 theme at the opening of the first movement, followed by its 2/4 Elgarian counterpart, the expansive phrasing in the slow movement, and the dance-like simplicity of the finale. What is particularly attractive is the gentle

lyricism throughout the work (as in the song cycles, revealing Somervell's melodic gifts), and a certain fluidity of thematic structure, with an effective manipulation of phrase lengths; only when Somervell attempts a more rhetorical approach (the *risoluto* dotted figure and coda in the first movement, for example), is the writing not quite as convincing. Anthony Marwood, as in his much-admired performance of the Stanford Violin Concerto earlier in the series, approaches the work with precision and commitment, displaying a variety of tone colour and a clarity of articulation. Having captured an effective lilt in the first movement, Marwood manages to convey the poignant simplicity of the central Adagio whilst also revelling in its rhapsodic decoration; similarly, the *giocoso* quality of the finale comes across well, giving the effect of a jocular bourrée. Given the understated nature of much of the material, orchestral balance is crucial, and Brabbins and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (BBCSSO) display a thoughtful approach; the *tutti*s are expansive without being forced, and the individual solos that permeate the orchestral texture (the oboe and horn in the slow movement, for example) are well-judged; perhaps the only criticism is that some of Somervell's contrapuntal lines in the inner textures might have been highlighted a little more. However, soloist and orchestra complement each other throughout, and there is a subtle sense of pacing that allows the music to flow; the slight increase in momentum at the move to G major in the slow movement represents one effective example.

As Lewis Foreman highlights in his characteristically informative sleeve notes, Tovey identified what he felt to be an English quality in Somervell's Concerto, produced by 'the treatment of the minor mode ... tinged with the Doric and Aeolian of English and kindred folk-song'; however, it is the harmonic nuances of Coleridge-Taylor's Concerto of 1912 – particularly the augmented triads and use of the flattened seventh – which are ultimately more distinctive, often betraying the influence of Dvořák, Coleridge-Taylor's work has a more complicated history. The composer was commissioned by Carl Stoeckel to write a concerto for Maud Powell, but a first attempt that incorporated Negro hymns ('Keep me from sinking down, good Lord', subsequently replaced with 'Many thousand gone'), plus a reference to 'Yankee Doodle' in the finale, was abandoned; as Coleridge-Taylor suggested, 'those native melodies rather tied me down', and he went on to complete an alternative concerto, 'a hundred times better',¹ which was first performed by Powell in Norfolk, Connecticut, on 4 June 1912. Compared with the Somervell, this is a more rhetorical work in the tradition of the nineteenth-century violin concerto, and Coleridge-Taylor's knowledge of the instrument (he entered the Royal College of Music as a violin student in 1890, studying with Henry Holmes) leads to a more overt virtuosic display in places, including the 35-bar cadenza in the first movement. The challenge in performing the opening *Allegro maestoso* is to characterize effectively the fluid range of material (negotiating the plethora of tempo indications peppered throughout the score – including *poco agitato*, *poco accelerando*, *rallentando*, *allargando*, *animato* and *strepitoso*) whilst at the same time suggesting the unity of the work as a whole. Marwood and the BBCSSO are convincing in this respect, again revealing a thoughtful approach to pacing and a shared vision of the work overall.

After a suitably majestic opening to the first movement, Marwood achieves a real sense of improvisation in the rhapsodical embellishments, which contrasts

¹ See Coleridge-Taylor's correspondence, quoted in Geoffrey Self, *The Hiawatha Man: The Life and Work of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995): 240 and 242.

with a lighter touch at the more mercurial dotted figure, with its cascading pizzicato accompaniment. Balance and ensemble are well judged, particularly where the wind have the triplet theme against the rich G-string sonority of the solo violin. In the central *Andante semplice*, the muted strings and woodwind, in their treble registers, provide a magical introduction, pointing the harmonic nuances effectively, and Marwood responds with an expressive account of the movement. In places, the composer draws upon his experiences in lighter musical forms (see, for example, the *Valse Suite* op. 71, *Three-Fours*) to create some attractive melodic contours, and Marwood's reading is persuasive, highlighting some of the sighing figures without over-indulging. Coleridge-Taylor's finale is more expansive than Somervell's, taking almost four minutes longer in performance. It represents an individual approach to rondo form, including some brief reappearances of the initial dotted theme (characterized by repeated pitches and tied notes over the bar line), a central orchestral tutti that reviews themes from the previous movements, and a modified recapitulation of events. It is only in the coda where Coleridge-Taylor seems to run out of inspiration, where the broad reworking of the Concerto's initial motif leads to a somewhat perfunctory ending. Again, Marwood and the BBCSSO produce a thoughtful approach to balance, with an effective highlighting of local colour, such as the woodwind scalic counterpoint just before the central orchestral tutti; as in the first movement, the various changes of pace are negotiated with aplomb. Coleridge-Taylor's output is perceived as somewhat patchy, despite the early promise of the Clarinet Quintet (1895) and the tremendously popular *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898); this highly recommended recording suggests that the Violin Concerto can now join the choral work *A Tale of Old Japan* (1911) as suggestive of an Indian Summer.

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