

CD REVIEWS

Alice Mary Smith

Symphony in A minor

Andante for Clarinet and Orchestra*

Symphony in C minor

Angela Malsbury* *cl*
London Mozart Players
Howard Shelley *cond*

Chandos CHAN10283 (66 minutes: DDD: recorded in 24-bit/96 kHz)

Notes and translations included.

When Alice Mary Smith died of typhoid fever in 1884 at the age of 45, the *Musical Times* recorded 'a profound feeling of grief amongst her fellow artists'.¹ Smith, also known by her married name of Mrs Meadows White, was acknowledged to be an accomplished and prolific composer, recognized for widely performed choral and orchestral works, such as her cantata *The Passions*, a setting of an ode by the eighteenth-century poet William Collins for soloists, chorus and orchestra, first performed at the 1882 Three Choirs Festival in Hereford and published by Novello in the same year. There was much praise for this work. Reviewers described it as displaying 'much musical taste and intelligence' (*Daily News*), as 'well-conceived and powerful' (*The Sunday Times*) and as 'a work of great merit' (*Athenaeum*).² The critic for the *Daily Telegraph* praised it for decidedly masculine, and therefore of course especially praiseworthy, qualities: 'Firmness, vigour, and strength mark the treatment of conceptions which are massive rather than graceful and elegant. I welcome Mrs Meadows White's "Ode to the Passions" as the production of undeniable talent, and a worthy addition to the musical things which, being English, give Englishmen cause for pride.'³ A writer in *The Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions* proudly quoted a review of the Hereford performance in the *Echo*, which recognised the composer as 'one of the musical geniuses of the day'.⁴

In a paper given to the Musical Association in 1883, Stephen Stratton claimed that a recent London performance of *The Passions* 'has given rise to much comment,

¹ Unsigned, 'Mrs Meadows White', *The Musical Times* 26 (1885): 24.

² All quotations from the Novello advertisement for *The Passions* in *The Musical Review* (28 Apr. 1883): 279.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Unsigned, *The Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions* 14 (1883): 134.

and re-started the subject of women's musical genius'.⁵ The impassioned debate in both the musical and national press in the 1880s about whether there would or could ever be a 'great' woman composer frequently made reference to Smith. Her work and prominent position in musical life, brought into focus by her early death, were used to prove that there was a place for 'feminine perception and expression' in music.⁶ Her example was seen by some to prove that women were capable of producing complex, extended musical forms⁷ but also, conversely, to argue that since she appeared to be the only woman to have written symphonies, such things were beyond the grasp of other women.⁸ Needless to say, Smith was not the only woman, or even the only British woman, to have written a symphony. Oliveria Prescott (1842–1917), for example, like Smith a pupil of George Macfarren, produced many orchestral works, including at least one symphony.

Despite her high profile during her lifetime and despite the obvious appeal of her imaginative and well-constructed music, Smith's work, like that of so many Victorian composers, especially those who were women, has been largely unplayed and unknown since her death. Most of her music remained in manuscript in the hands of her descendants. Fortunately, some years ago, these manuscripts were rescued from a damp garden shed by Ian Graham-Jones, a musicologist who has also worked on the composer and diarist John Marsh (1752–1828). Graham-Jones has edited Smith's two symphonies for A-R Editions⁹ and provided the informative, albeit rather brief, liner notes for this admirable Chandos recording of her two symphonies and *Andante for Clarinet and Orchestra*.

So much unpublished music by nineteenth-century women is now irretrievably lost. Thanks to the unwillingness of Smith's grandchildren to indulge in bonfires, and the perseverance and hard work of Graham-Jones, a substantial amount of Smith's music is now available to the scholar and performer in the library of the Royal Academy of Music, an institution that elected Smith as an Honorary Member shortly before her death. Together with contemporary reviews and other writings, the manuscripts enable us to reach a clearer understanding of the career of this fascinating and important figure of Victorian musical life.

Born in 1839 into a prosperous upper-middle-class mercantile family, Smith studied with two of the leading teachers and composers of the day: William Sterndale Bennett and George Macfarren. Her earliest composition to appear in print appears to have been a canzonet 'Sing on sweet thrush' to words by Robert Burns, published in 1857. Other songs followed and her first instrumental piece, the difficult and atmospheric *Vale of Tempe*, a rondo for piano, was published in 1862. The previous year Smith had joined London's newly established Musical Society as a 'lady associate'. This organization's wide-ranging aims included giving concerts and invaluable readings of new music, mainly by its own members. The Society was to give several performances of Smith's chamber and orchestral works, starting with a piano quartet in B \flat major in 1861 followed by

⁵ Stephen S. Stratton, 'Woman in Relation to Musical Art' *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 3 (1882–83): 128.

⁶ Unsigned, 'The Feminine in Music', *The Musical Times* 23 (1882): 521.

⁷ See *The Lute* 3/1 (Jan. 1885): 8.

⁸ Unsigned, 'Women as Composers', *The Musical Times* 28 (1887): 81.

⁹ Alice Mary Smith, *Symphonies*, ed. Ian Graham-Jones, vol. 38 (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2004).

a string quartet in D major in 1862, the Symphony in C minor in 1863, a concert overture *Endymion* in 1864, and both the overture *Lalla Rookh* and an Introduction and Allegro for Piano and Orchestra in 1865.

Much of Smith's chamber music, mostly written in the 1860s and including further string quartets and piano quartets as well as a piano trio, remained unpublished, although the Melody and Scherzo for Cello and Piano was issued in 1869. Smith was clearly aware of the problems of achieving high sales of anything other than songs or piano music, writing to the publisher Stanley Lucas: 'I hope my Viol^{cello} Pieces are not absolutely unsaleable although of course I cannot expect a very rapid movement'.¹⁰ Her most financially successful piece was the wistful duet 'Maying', to words by Charles Kingsley, for soprano and tenor, first published in 1870. In 1883 the copyright was sold for £663¹¹ and it was still being reprinted as late as 1944.

In 1867 Smith had married Frederick Meadows White QC, a music lover who was honorary consul to the Royal Society of Musicians. Later the same year, she was elected a female Professional Associate of the Philharmonic Society, a prestigious position which she regarded 'as one of the highest honours of her Musical Life'.¹² Unlike many women of the time, Smith continued to maintain her high-profile musical career while embracing life as a wife and mother. Shortly before her death, her husband was to remark that 'there is nothing inconsistent with the little eminence my wife has attained in music with the good management of domestic affairs'.¹³ In the 1870s her orchestral works began to reach wider audiences. Her overture to *The Masque of Pandora*, for example, was played by the New Philharmonic Society in 1878 and then at the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts in London and by the Liverpool Philharmonic Society. Another overture performed by the New Philharmonic Society and at the Crystal Palace was *Jason, or the Argonauts and the Sirens* (1878), a work described by the reviewer for *The Times*, presumably J.W. Davison, as 'a very pleasant and sympathetic piece of music, well-constructed and by no means badly scored'.¹⁴

In the 1880s Smith appears to have turned her attention to works for chorus and orchestra. As well as *The Passions*, discussed above, she produced three secular choral works to words by Charles Kingsley, all of which were published by Novello: *Ode to the North East Wind* (1880), *Song of the Little Baltung* (1883) and *The Red King* (1885). Like so many British composers, she doubtless found the British tradition of choral societies and choral festivals made it easier to obtain performances and publication of such works than of purely instrumental music.

The Chandos CD of orchestral instrumental works opens with the latest of the three works, the Symphony in A minor, which was apparently written but not completed in time for an Alexandra Palace competition run in 1876 for a symphony by a British composer. In the event, prizes were awarded to William Davenport, Oliveria Prescott and Charles Stanford. Smith's symphony, which

¹⁰ Philharmonic Society Papers, BL Loan 48.13/35, f.239.

¹¹ J.C. Hadden, 'White, Alice Mary Meadows (1839–1884)', rev. David J. Golby, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Available online at www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29235 (accessed 6 Jan. 2006).

¹² Letter from Frederick Meadows White to Francesco Berger (Honorary Secretary of the Philharmonic Society), 10 December 1884. Philharmonic Society Papers, BL Loan 48.13/35, f. 240.

¹³ Stratton, 'Woman in Relation to Musical Art': 138.

¹⁴ Unsigned, 'Fourth New Philharmonic Concert', *The Times*, 9 Jun. 1879: 8

appears not to have been performed during her lifetime, is – like most of her music – in the classical Mendelssohnian mould of her teachers, Sterndale Bennett and Macfarren, with sonata-form first and last movements framing an extensive Andante and an elegant Minuet and Trio. The writing is assured and confident with memorable themes and, despite being somewhat old-fashioned for the 1870s, is always distinctive and individual.

It is often wrongly claimed that Smith wrote a clarinet concerto, performed at the Norwich festival in 1872.¹⁵ What was in fact heard at Norwich was Smith's orchestration of the slow movement of her Clarinet Sonata, which had been first heard at a New Philharmonic Society concert in 1870, played by the Victorian clarinet virtuoso Henry Lazarus (1815–95), accompanied by Smith on piano. Lazarus frequently performed this attractive orchestral reworking at venues throughout the UK, including the Brighton Festival and with the British Orchestral Society in London. It is a fluent and appealing work, which clearly displays Smith's gift for elegantly expressive melody and should find a welcome place in the nineteenth-century clarinet repertoire.

The early Symphony in C minor, written when Smith was only 24, is an exuberant and impressive work. The sombre slow introduction immediately claims the listener's attention, leading into a deftly handled and substantial sonata-form Allegro with a delightfully lyrical second subject. The slow movement is marked 'Allegretto Amorevole' and demonstrates the appeal of the clarinet for Smith. The third movement is a playful through-composed Scherzo, and the work finishes with a majestic Rondo finale.

This CD is an important addition to our knowledge of both the British symphony before Elgar and Parry and the still little-explored role played by women in Victorian musical life. The performances have all the panache that the listener would expect from the London Mozart Players, expertly directed by Howard Shelley, with soloist Angela Malsbury clearly delighting in the lyricism of the Andante. In the dedication of Graham-Jones and these musicians, Smith has finally and deservedly found enthusiastic advocates of her long-silent music.

Sophie Fuller
London

¹⁵ The mistake is found in the first edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, published not long after Smith's death, and is perpetuated in many later writings on Smith, including the entry on her in my own *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers* (London: Pandora, 1994): 283–5. *Grove's Dictionary* also appears to be the first source to mistakenly give the key of Smith's second symphony as G major, leading some writers to claim mistakenly that she wrote three symphonies.