Roads less travelled

Ralph Vaughan Williams is hardly renowned for his piano music, but intrepid musical explorer Mark Bebbington has unearthed a discful of little-known works, from original piano solos to striking arrangements of familiar orchestral pieces. *Jeremy Nicholas* reports

'VAUGHAN WILLIAMS? PIANO music? *Really*?' This might be the entirely justifiable reaction from most music lovers for, apart from the relatively well-known Piano Concerto (in its original or two-piano version), what else is there? Well, as pianist Mark Bebbington has discovered, there's a whole discful of works to enjoy, many of them recorded for the first time on a new release from the enterprising Somm label.

Among the titles on the *Complete Piano Music of Vaughan Williams* are two of the composer's most popular works: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (arranged for two pianos) and *Fantasia on Greensleeves* (arranged for piano duet). Bebbington is joined in these by the brilliant young half-Romanian, half-Nigerian rising star Rebeca Omordia. The version of *Greensleeves* is a world premiere recording, as is another item, the 1947 *Introduction and Fugue*.

'It's the key work to this release,' Bebbington tells me, 'a significant work which happens to have been written for one of my teachers, Phyllis Sellick.' She and her husband Cyril Smith, Britain's leading piano duo of the time, tried it out in the late 1940s but, says Bebbington, 'it didn't sit well with *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* and *Scaramouche*. It had too much gravitas for their audiences in the 1940s and '50s.' The duo dropped it. 'The mood of the piece is uncompromising. Some of the loudest passages are marked *fff*! It's based on the *Dies irae* theme. Everything is organic in such a way that when I first got the music I couldn't believe that he had written a double fugue for two pianos that lasts the best part of 14 minutes. As we got into it, we came to appreciate it and realise that as a piece of music it sits alongside the Fourth Symphony and the later Sixth Symphony.'

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Sir Adrian Boult's recordings of Vaughan Williams' music are some of the greatest we have, so it is an exquisite irony that this recording of the composer's piano music was the last to be made in Birmingham's Adrian Boult Hall. The building was demolished shortly after the sessions were completed in March 2015.

Bebbington's enthusiasm for the VW project is infectious. 'The arrangement of the *Thomas Tallis Fantasia* is absolutely fascinating because it has such clear metronome marks from Vaughan Williams. I don't know whether it is because the [orchestral] premiere was in Gloucester Cathedral, but a tradition has grown up that makes it much slower. VW's marking was 13 minutes. Some conductors come in at 18, 19 or even 20 minutes. This is not VW's idiom, yet we've become accustomed to it. There's an elegiac quality in the original which translates quite nicely to two pianos.'

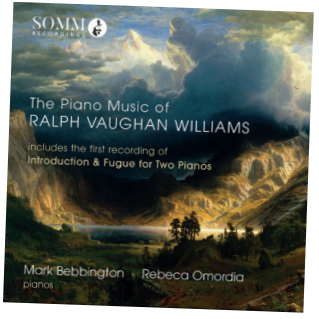
Has any pianist done more to promote British keyboard music of the last century than Bebbington? His impressive discography suggests not: the complete solo works of John Ireland, Arthur Bliss

and Frank Bridge, discs of Ivor Gurney and Howard Ferguson, Malcolm Arnold and Constant Lambert, William Alwyn, Reginald King, Elgar (his Symphony No 1, transcribed by Karg-Elert), sonatas by Dale and Hurlstone, concertinos by Bax and Frederic Austin, concertos by Rawsthorne, Ireland, Jacob, Carwithen, Williamson and Mathias, not to mention a disc of chamber music by Ian Venables.

As to the other works on the new disc, in *The Lake in the Mountains*, also written for Sellick, you can hear that VW's lessons with Ravel had borne fruit. 'The astonishing thing about that piece,' Bebbington tells me, 'is that it starts in D-flat major and ends in D minor.' This is a charming work; but *the* discovery for many people, I suspect, will be the *Suite of Six Short Pieces*, better known in its later version for strings as the *Charterhouse Suite*. 'I have tackled some difficult stuff for Somm, such as the Benjamin Dale Sonata, but the *Six Short Pieces* are astonishingly hard to play well. I thought I'd be able to learn them in a few days. Wow! No way. Some of them are absolutely mesmerising.'

The genial Bebbington, now in his mid-forties, began his association with the Somm label by releasing a disc of Castelnuovo-Tedesco, repertoire suggested by his teacher Aldo Ciccolini. It garnered very positive reviews. That led to a disc of Ivor Gurney's piano music and the utterly unplanned path his recording career has since taken. It was the late Italian maestro who planted the seed of pianistic inquisitiveness that has resonated with such fruitful consequences. Bebbington is also keen to acknowledge that what he has achieved could never have been accomplished without Somm: 'We are very supportive of one another. There is a mutual trust. I doubt whether I'd ever find another label where there was the same degree of underpinning.'

Last year Bebbington spread his wings. A widely-praised disc of Gershwin brought him the international attention that had so far eluded him. It might mean a move away from the peripheral to the mainstream: *by your Schubert, Chopin and Rachmaninov shall ye be judged*. Nevertheless, one hopes there will be no lack of discoveries from him in the future, for straying off the beaten track is something that Bebbington does supremely well. Whatever comes next, piano lovers everywhere are already much in his debt. ♪



Mark Bebbington's Complete Piano Music of Vaughan Williams *with Rebeca Omordia will be released by Somm Recordings on 27 January 2017 (SOMMCD 0164). www.somm-recordings.com*