Newsletter

No.32 – October 2026

Compiled and edited by Tony Sanderson FRMS Chairman.

From the Chairman's Desk – Part 1

Welcome to the Autumn 2026 issue of the FRMS Newsletter. We have some exciting interviews in this issue. Harry Christophers of the Sixteen joins Cath Edwards, the label manager of Coro Records, to discuss how they put an album together and their fascinating choice of classic choral masterpieces together with fine new works by contemporary composers (p.1). The composer John Pickard has just completed his seventh symphony and talks about composing as well as the composer Havergal Brian (whose 150th Anniversary it is this year) and John's friendship with the renowned conductor Martyn Brabbins (p.4).

The composer and FRMS Treasurer, Paul Corfield Godfrey, shares how he has set scenes from Tolkien's *The Hobbit* to music (p.13). Our Secretary, Adele Wills, marks the 400th anniversary of the death of John Dowland (p.11). Ian Bailey writes about the late Slovakian composer Jan Cikker (p.15), and John Beaumont draws our attention to a wartime concert with Yehudi Menuhin and Sir Adrian Boult (p.19). Christopher Proudfoot talks about the City of London Phonograph & Gramophone Society, the world's oldest gramophone society (p.20). Hywel Jenkins writes about the composer Rutland Boughton (p.22).

On page 8 I write about some of the recordings that I have enjoyed listening to and about putting my programme together for the Northampton Recorded Music Society. I also share how the British railway system can turn attending a concert into a very edgy experience, especially my attempt to hear Martha Argerich at the BBC Proms, which almost came to naught.

An event that some of the Committee attend is the Torbay Musical Weekend. We give brief details of this year's event in November (p.25).

Interview with Cath Edwards

It was a great pleasure for me (TS) to discuss Coro Records with their label manager Cath Edwards (CE), and the Sixteen's musical direction with their renowned music director Harry Christophers (HC).



Cath Edwards – Label Manager for Coro Records

TS: Cath, it was lovely to meet you at the UK premiere of Sir James MacMillan's *Angels Unawares*. Some of our readers may have watched the world premiere at the Vatican. It was certainly a powerful experience hearing it live at Cadogan Hall.

TS: I would like to congratulate Coro records on its 25th anniversary this year. Well done! How did the formation of Coro Records come about? Was it partly inspired by the growth of other own-labels such as those from other ensembles like the London Symphony Orchestra and the Berlin Philharmonic?

CE: In its early years The Sixteen worked with a number of labels but for most of the 1990s the group recorded for Collins Classics. When Collins folded in the late 90s all of The Sixteen's back

catalogue became unavailable. It was at that point The Sixteen's board of trustees took the bold decision to buy back The Sixteen's master tapes and start an own-label. CORO was launched in October 2001 in part to re-release the entire Collins back catalogue, but also to give Harry Christophers and The Sixteen recording freedom and to be the vehicle for new Sixteen projects.



Harry Christophers with the Sixteen (Photo Credit Johny Millar)

TS: With the growth in streaming, do CD sales still hold up? There are probably others such as myself who appreciate having the booklet that comes with CD releases.

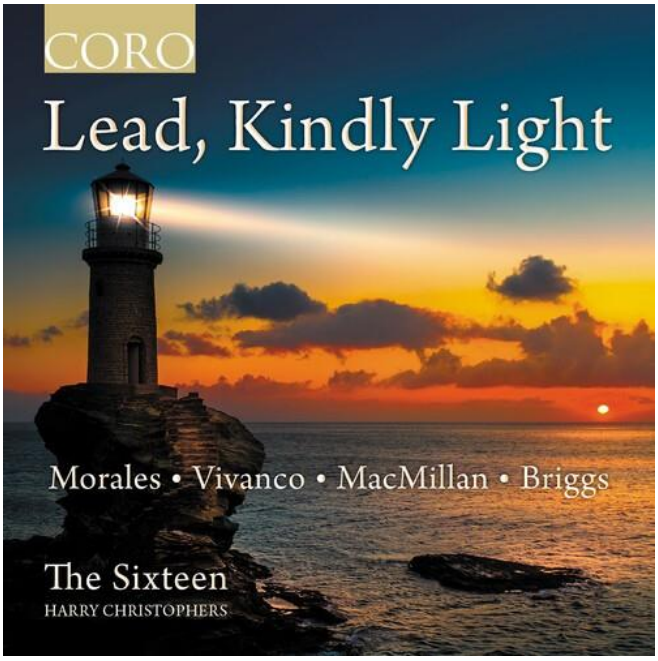
CE: CORO was very much an early embracer of digital. Downloads had some impact on our physical sales, but the margins were still good (and the costs lower). But, of course, things changed further and with streaming now dominating the musical landscape we have definitely seen the impact on our physical sales. But we are pragmatic and, while we believe that the CD format will continue for some years (and who knows? might have a resurgence like vinyl) – we can hope. We value the massive opportunities for reach and new audiences that streaming gives us...but we will continue to champion the CD for as long as it sells.

TS: Cath, when did you become involved with Coro Records?

CE: I started working for The Sixteen Ltd. in May 2004, joining the team as the Press and Development Officer. I moved over to The Sixteen Productions Ltd (CORO) in 2007 when the CORO label manager role became available and have been here ever since.

TS: What do you most like about being Label Manager and what do you find are the biggest challenges in your role?

CE: Funnily enough, what I love about my job is also the biggest challenge. Working as part of a very small team you have to be a jack of all trades and I love the variety that provides - no two days are the same and I could be creating marketing materials for an album or dealing with a logistics problem one day and at a recording session or scooting around the country after The Sixteen with a boot full of CDs the next. But the scope of the role also creates challenges – and there are definitely some parts of my job which are less 'exciting' shall we say! The annual German VAT return is pretty high on the list of things I would gladly see the back of, but there are definitely more pros than cons!



Cover of the album *Lead, Kindly Light*, the album supporting the Sixteen's 2026 Pilgrimage Tour

TS: Coro Records also record albums by other ensembles such as Magdalen College, Oxford, I Fagiolini and most recently De Profundis? How do you go about selecting groups to work with? Presumably, some apply to Coro Records?

CE: Our ethos is simply to bring the very best choral music to as wide an audience as possible

and increase its profile, and the label partners that we work with reflect this desire. We aim to be the home of choral music, building an exciting and diverse catalogue of recordings by a selection of carefully chosen artists – some of whom have approached us or been recommended to us and some of whom we have approached ourselves.

Whilst initially formed as the record label of The Sixteen, CORO is now very proud to be the home of a number of celebrated artists from the world of choral music including I Fagiolini, The Choir of Magdalen College Oxford, De Profundis (who have joined the label this year) and the Handel and Haydn Society from Boston, USA.

TS: Browsing through my CD collection I notice Coro Records have produced a number of recordings featuring Sir James MacMillan's music. For example, his *Miserere* and *Strathclyde Motets*, his *Stabat Mater*, his fifth symphony *'Le grand inconnu'*, and *The Sun Danced*. How did this close musical relationship between the Sixteen, Coro Records and Sir James come about?

HC: I first approached James MacMillan way back in 2000 to write something for The Sixteen. For years I had been searching for a composer to whom I could really relate and, speaking to James, I knew I had found someone who not only got what the group was all about, but would also stretch them. So I commissioned a setting of *O bone Jesu* for the 2002/2003 Choral Pilgrimage (which also featured Robert Carver's 19-part setting of the text). Since then, the bond has got stronger and stronger, resulting in a close association with the Genesis Foundation which has led to a further six major works by James for The Sixteen, all of which have been recorded and released by CORO. James's *Miserere* was commissioned by the Flanders Festival Antwerp and premiered by The Sixteen in the Carolus-Borromeuskerk Antwerp in 2009.

TS: I have just attended the Oxford stop of The Sixteen's 2026 Pilgrimage Tour entitled *Lead, Kindly Light*. I see that on the supporting CD you have another piece by Sir James entitled *Nothing in Vain* (commissioned by the Genesis Foundation) and Kerensa Briggs's *Lead, Kindly Light* (the title track of the album). This is the premiere recording. It seems to be a theme of the recordings that support the Pilgrimage Tours to have works composed by contemporary composers as well as those by famous composers through the ages. How do you go about selecting the composers and works to compile these albums and for the tours?

CE: It was fortuitous that the launch of CORO coincided with the start of The Choral Pilgrimage because, back in 2004, Harry adopted a school of thought which very much applied to pop and rock albums (but less so to classical releases) in that you record first and then tour the repertoire. The Sixteen has done that with every Choral Pilgrimage since.

HC: The Sixteen has been working with contemporary composers for a long time and, through its partnership with the Genesis Foundation, has recorded many new commissions. However, since 2022, the group has commissioned a new work for its annual Choral Pilgrimage. I very much keep my ear to the ground and have an ever-growing list of composers who I feel would write well for The Sixteen. Once a composer is chosen, I am in constant dialogue with that person ensuring that the new work fits well into the theme of the Pilgrimage. Every year I put together a new programme, sometimes based around a theme, sometimes a substantial work, but every programme introduces audiences to works—and indeed composers—they may well have never heard of. Programming is an art and it's something I relish doing.

TS: Other composers you have included are Arvo Pärt, Will Todd, Dobrinka Tabakova and the Sixteen's own Kim Porter. CORO must feel it very important that the sacred music repertoire is refreshed by works by modern composers. Do you feel that the future for sacred music is in good place right now?

HC: Very much so. In the world we live in there is a constant need for solace and reflection. That doesn't mean to say all sacred music has to be reflective, but we do believe it needs to be in some way spiritual. Our music, whether it be old or new, is for everyone and we are so fortunate that the

human voice is continuing to inspire composers of our time.

TS: Cath, thanks for sparing the time for this interview. May I be a bit cheeky, but can I ask you if Coro Records have any plans to record *Angels Unawares*?

CE: The UK premiere performance of *Angels Unawares* at Cadogan Hall was recorded live by CORO and will be released in early 2027. Keep an eye on www.cororecords.com for more info!

Interview with John Pickard



John Pickard

It was fascinating to discuss musical issues with John Pickard. John has produced a significant musical output and has just completed his seventh symphony. Many recordings of his music are on the BIS Label and on the Toccata Classics label. Professor of Composition and Applied Musicology. He is also conductor of the University of Bristol Symphony Orchestra and Choral Society. As well as all this he is vice-chair of the Havergal Brian Society.

TS: John, it has been a great pleasure getting to know you over the last three or four years as we are both on the committee of the Havergal Brian Society. As it is the 150th anniversary this year of Havergal Brian's birth, please tell us what attracted you to Brian's music?

JP: I first heard Brian's music in the autumn of 1976. It was the centenary year, and I had just turned 13. I'd already read about the *Gothic* Symphony in the Guinness Book of Records, so was curious when four centenary concerts were mounted by the BBC and broadcast. I then managed to get hold of the early LP recordings by the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra, thanks to my local music library, so I heard a good chunk of Brian in a short space of time. At that point, I had no interest in his unusual biography; I just liked the sound of what I heard. I was getting to know Mahler, Shostakovich etc. at the same time, and Brian's music seemed to belong naturally to that tradition. It was only later that I began to realise he was a very different kind of composer from them.

TS: If you were talking to someone who is new to Brian's music, where would you advise them to start listening?

JP: There are various ways in – not necessarily via the 32 symphonies, which he only started writing later in his career. The early orchestral works like *In Memoriam* and *Doctor Merryheart* are a good place to start, so the new BBC NOW disc is ideal really. One could also start with the solo songs, some of which are extremely fine. The first opera, *The Tigers*, is extremely appealing: wonderfully funny and completely surreal (though deep down it is a serious work: an anti-war opera written during the First World War). The symphonies and later operas can be pretty tough to get to know. The musical language is more complex, and they often unfold in quite an elliptical way, which can be disconcerting at first. With the symphonies, I would probably start with the Sixth, *Sinfonia Tragica*, a work of great dramatic power concentrated into 20 minutes.

TS: There are three releases of Havergal Brian's music this year which are new recordings. The BBC Philharmonic have recorded Brian's *Tinker's Wedding Overture* on Chandos, which is Vol. 3 of their series of overtures from the British Isles. Toccata Classics have released Vol. 2 of Brian's Choral Songs, which range

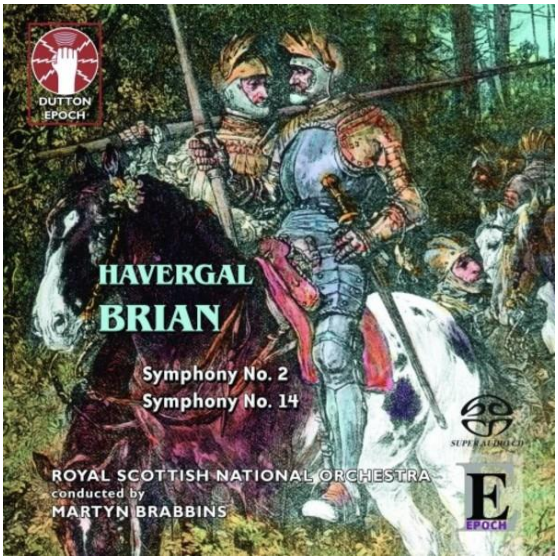
from simple settings for children's choirs to complex settings of Shakespeare, Blake and Longfellow. To be released shortly is Martyn Brabbins' recording with the BBC National Chorus and Orchestra of Wales of Brian's setting of Psalm 23 and Rodney Newton's realisation of Brian's setting of the highly evocative psalm *By the Waters of Babylon*. Do you feel that Brian's choral music stands up well in comparison with other composers?

JP: I do. He writes very well for voices and seems to understand their capabilities. I recently spoke to Adrian Partington, who prepared the BBC NCW for the recordings and was also one of the chorusmasters for the 2011 Proms performance of the *Gothic*, and he said how much the chorus had enjoyed learning them. There are a lot of unaccompanied choral songs, and they are often very fine. They often tend to start out simply, but become more complex and unpredictable, often making the music very challenging to sing. Brian had highly developed literary sensibilities too, and he aimed high in his choice of poets to set: Shakespeare, Blake, Herrick, Shelley. In that sense, he was far more discerning than Elgar often was.

TS: I understand that some of his earlier scores have been lost, so perhaps we would have a different appreciation of Brian's music if that were not the case and maybe he would have become more of a household name.

JP: It's not just early scores that are missing. The full orchestral manuscript scores of the *Te Deum* part of the *Gothic* and also his vast setting of *Prometheus Unbound* have been missing for many years. Fortunately, the *Gothic* was already published when the manuscript went missing, but *Prometheus* was not and, since the work was written between 1937 and 1944, we have this gaping black hole at the centre of his output.

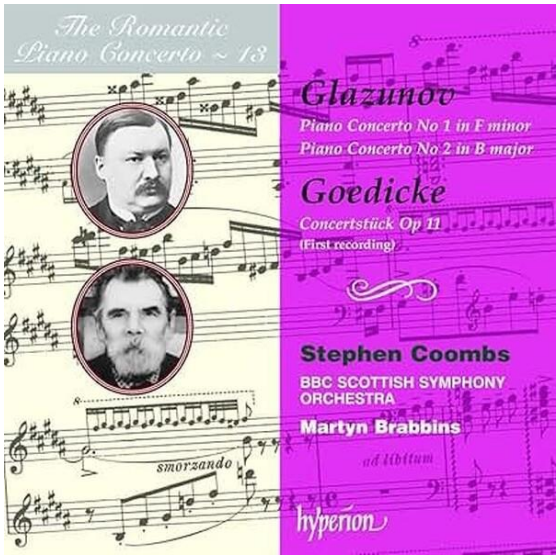
TS: I notice that many of the more recent recordings of Brian's symphonies and orchestral music have been conducted by Martyn Brabbins with you writing the booklet notes, which are of a very high quality. Has your personal friendship with Martyn played a large part in bringing these projects to successful realisation?



CD cover for Havergal Brian's Symphonies 2 & 14 conducted by Martyn Brabbins

JP: Martyn and I have been friends and colleagues for almost 40 years. But I'm not sure whether he knew Brian's music before we got to know each other; I certainly pointed him in the direction of Brian through my work with the Havergal Brian Society. I think Brian definitely requires a sympathetic conductor who is able to navigate the challenges of the music in a way that orchestral players can immediately understand. There are sometimes notational peculiarities in the scores and parts, and the music often doesn't unfold in a conventional way. In that sense, it has some features in common with Bruckner and, like him, it requires careful handling. Martyn has an instinctive understanding of these matters and is so respected by performers that they are happy to trust him to find a way through. Certainly, the many recording sessions of Brian that I have sat through with Martyn at the helm have been notable for their positive atmosphere.

TS: I recently purchased the first box set of Hyperion's Romantic Piano Concerto series, and I was amazed how many of the recordings have Martyn as the conductor. He certainly has a voracious appetite for rarely performed scores, and his promotion of British music reminds me of the late Vernon Handley. This leads me to his work recording your music. It must be very important for you to work with a conductor with whom you already have a great working relationship.



Works for piano and orchestra by Glazunov and Goedicke with Stephen Coombe (piano) and Martyn Brabbins (conductor)

JP: Martyn sometimes reminds me of Vernon Handley, Sir Charles Groves and Sir Adrian Boult all rolled into one! The range and versatility of his work is extraordinary. He has conducted hundreds—possibly over a thousand—world premieres, and there can't be many conductors who are as at home conducting Stockhausen as they are conducting Elgar.



The CD cover for John Pickard's Symphonies 2 & 6 conducted by Martyn Brabbins

Martyn's enthusiasm for my work, and the expertise with which he performs it, is something I value enormously. I'm really very fortunate. But he's also a critical friend. If he feels that something is not working, he will tell me and I always take what he says seriously, because I know that he simply wants to make the work as good as possible and that he is drawing on vast experience of conducting new music. Martyn started out as a composer (and continues to compose when he has the time), so he understands how it is from the composer's side.

TS: The BBC Singers recently gave the World Premiere of your choral work *Elemental*. It was conducted by Martyn and I think it must have been a challenge for the choir as well as the harpist and percussionist. It is quite unusual for a harpist to have to use a football rattle. Please tell us more about the work.

JP: I worked with the writer Gavin D'Costa. It's actually our third collaboration and in this case, he wrote the text at the same time as I was writing the music – which was as exhilarating as it was scary! We use the idea of the four classical elements as a starting point for stories of human courage and endeavour, framed by the image of earth floating in space. *Elemental* is also the product of an association with the BBC Singers, whose virtuosity and versatility are simply astounding. It's also worth remembering, as yet another massive round of job cuts sweeps the BBC, that we almost lost the Singers for good in 2023. It was the wave of public support that saved them. I wanted to pay tribute to that, so the piece is almost a choral concerto with them at the centre. The percussion and the harp act as a kind of orchestra and really extend the potential of the voices. The harpist seemed more than happy to double up on football rattle!

TS: I found Gavin D'Costa's poem about the black American aviator Bessie Coleman, who had to train in France because of the colour bar in the USA, very powerful at the time. Bessie fell to her death aged 31 when performing an aerobatic display. How did you approach the setting of that poem?

JP: That was the most problematic movement to write. It was the only movement where I had trouble with Gavin's text and had to ask him to rewrite some of it, which he did superbly. The text invokes the jazz-age of the 1920s and so I tried to respond to that in my setting, which pushed me into (for me) new musical territory. It's a kind of

scherzo in which the various aerobatic stunts are reflected in increasingly wild and virtuosic music. It culminates in catastrophe and ends with a sort of requiem for the intrepid and inspirational Bessie. A funny thing happened in the first rehearsal. As soon as they started singing, I instantly realised something was wrong. I stopped them (which is very unusual for me) and pointed out that really this music needed American accents, not English. I hadn't given it any thought up to that moment. A groan went up from the Singers – I think they anticipated a painful process of carefully calibrated vowel-modification – and Martyn said just one word: 'loose'. And we never had to revisit the issue! It shows what a difference an experienced and understanding conductor can make. He knew exactly what to say at that moment, and all it needed was *le mot juste*!

TS: You have composed music for brass bands, chamber music, symphonies as well as choral music. You have written six symphonies so far; which do you feel is your most successful to date?

JP: Well, I have in fact just completed No. 7. I finished it last year and it took a year to write. Obviously, I always feel that the one I am writing is the best, but with the others I feel I did something rather new in the No. 5, which has three timpanists often playing melodically. I am also quote proud of No. 6 which was written during the Covid pandemic. It's a rather austere work in some respects, whereas the new symphony is more expansive.

TS: What prompted you to start writing symphonies?

JP: Going back to my earlier comment about discovering Brian's music, it was really symphonic composers who first grabbed me and it wasn't long before I was attempting to write symphonies myself (little realising at the time that symphonies were not considered to be what young composers ought to be writing!). I wrote No. 1 when I was 19-20 years old. It was never played but it will finally be recorded next year along with the new one. I have made some revisions to No. 1, mainly cutting material. It was a fascinating experience to encounter once more music that I had written over 40 years previously – like finding old photographs of yourself that you had forgotten existed. I tried to resist the temptation to interfere too much with the original and certainly didn't change much of the orchestration – I definitely knew how to write for a large orchestra at that age. We will be recording the work next year alongside Symphony No.7.

TS: After all these things, I wonder how you find time for your day job as an academic. What does your role at Bristol University involve?

JP: Well, these days I am part-time, so that gives me more composing time. My teaching is mainly composition and orchestration and nowadays I'm exclusively teaching postgraduate students. For many years I also conducted the University Symphony Orchestra, and we did very ambitious things (including Brian on several occasions), but when I went part-time, I decided to give that up. I wanted to quit while I was ahead! When I was teaching full-time, composition tended to be something I mainly did during the vacations. It seemed to work and, although I am not massively prolific, I have written quite a lot of music. I work hard at composing and am quite disciplined in my approach.

TS: What do you find the most challenging aspect of your work?

JP: Timing. In the sense of where one places musical events. When should something happen? Should it be a beat earlier? A beat later? Half a beat? A painter can step back from a canvas and assess the rhythm of the painting and, if necessary, alter it. With music, because it unfolds in time, it is much more difficult to judge the proportions. I wrestle with this the whole of the time.

TS: John, thanks for spending time on discussing your work for FRMS Newsletter readers. I am sure it will be of great interest to them. We wish you every success in the recording of your seventh symphony.

JP: It has been a pleasure.

From the Chairman's Desk – Part 2

Avanti Classic regularly releases box sets entitled *Rendez-Vous with Martha* Argerich. They are taken from the Martha Argerich Festival in Hamburg, which is an organisation of the Symphoniker Hamburg orchestra. Volume 4 of this series was released in August. It was recorded during the 2022 Festival.



Cover for Rendez-Vous with Martha Argerich Vol. 4

There is some wonderful chamber music in which Martha Argerich plays with some of her long-term musical partners. I would especially single out CD1, which features music by Clara and Robert Schumann. Martha also features in a wonderful performance of Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe* with the baritone Michael Volte. She is the pianist in Robert Schumann's Piano Quintet in E-flat major Op. 44 with Mischa Maisky cello, Rosanne Philipens 1st violin, Sascha Maisky 2nd violin, and Lyda Chen viola. She plays with Mischa Maisky in Chopin's Cello Sonata and Beethoven's 2nd Cello Sonata. This set showcases the Maisky family as well as many other musicians. It is a testament to Martha Argerich's ability to create a musical family and develop young musicians such as Chopin Competition laureates. But if it's just Martha Argerich playing you want to hear you are better looking elsewhere, as the works I have listed are the only ones she plays in during this five CD set.

Trying to hear Martha Argerich live at this year's BBC Proms proved very frustrating. I had decided to attend the BBC Prom featuring Martha Argerich playing Beethoven's 2nd Piano Concerto with the Munich Philharmonic under Lahav Shani. I managed to get two tickets so I could go with a friend. So far, so good. Unfortunately, the first train from Oxford, where I was staying at the time, only made it to Didcot. The next train from Didcot only made it to Reading due to a fire near London Paddington, and the train from Reading to London Waterloo was a slow train. I got there in time to hear about two thirds of the final movement playing on a relay. We were allowed in for the encore.

On another occasion, I had attended an LSO concert at the Barbican and on arriving at Euston Station the staff advised us to find a bed for the night. My friend and I did manage to get home, fortunately.

Has anyone else had any frustrating concert experiences they would like to share with us all?



Marth Argerich and Lahav Shani together with the Israel Philharmonic Playing Beethoven and Ravel

So, I had to content myself with BBC iPlayer. Martha and Lahav have recorded the concerto with Ravel's Piano Concerto in G. Martha is playing the Ravel concerto in Oxford in February as well as Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, so better luck next time, I hope.

It was my turn to bat in the September meeting of the Northampton Recorded Music Society. I wonder what goes through your mind when putting a playlist together? I would be interested to hear.



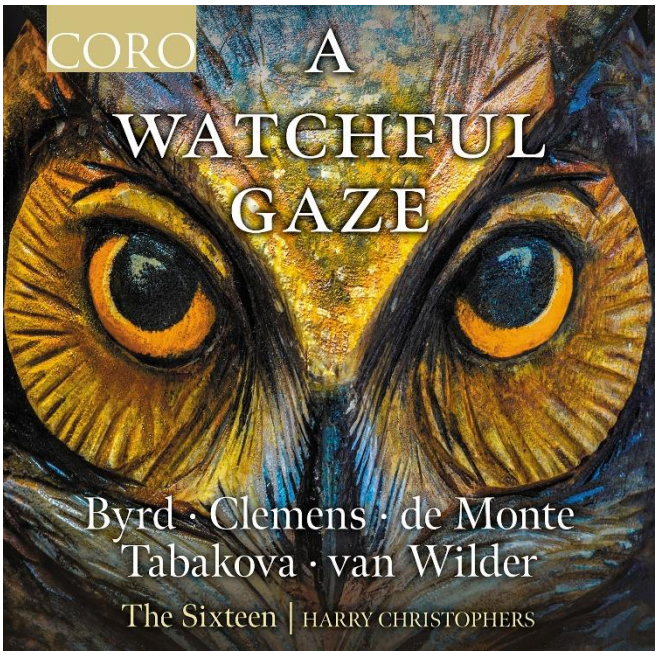
Young Friedrich Maria Veracini in 1716

I took a punt on a couple of Naxos albums of the Complete Overtures and Concertos by Francesco Maria Veracini played by Alberto Martini and the Accademia I Filarmonici. A contemporary of Vivaldi's, Veracini certainly had a colourful life. He was a gifted violinist himself. He had a reputation for mental instability and on one occasion tried to murder his wife. He gained the nickname *Capo pazzo*, 'head lunatic'. On one occasion, fleeing a quarrel, he jumped out of a window and broke a leg and walked with a limp for the rest of his life. He visited London a couple of times.

His first violin concerto dates from 1712 and is scored for solo violin and an orchestra that includes two trumpets, two oboes, timpani, strings and keyboard. Some solo passages are left to the violinist. I strongly recommend this concerto. Anyone who likes baroque music will enjoy it.

A new release of Martinů's six symphonies played by the Bamberger Symphoniker under Jakub Hra was released this year to great acclaim. This certainly sparked my interest in Martinů's music. I didn't have time for a symphony so I settled on his *Overture* from a disc of his orchestral music by the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra under Tomas Netopil. The overture gave a good flavour of Martinů's music.

This year marks the 150th Anniversary of Havergal Brian's birth. Although he's best known for his gargantuan *Gothic* Symphony, I decided to highlight other aspects of his music. We played Sir Charles MacKerras' recording of Brian's *Tinker's Wedding – Comedy Overture*, which those present enjoyed. Toccata Classics have released two volumes of Brian's choral songs. From volume 2 *If I had but two little wings* for children's chorus was a sheer delight and gave a completely different perception of the composer.



Album Cover for A Watchful Gaze released to support the Sixteen's 2023 Pilgrimage Tour

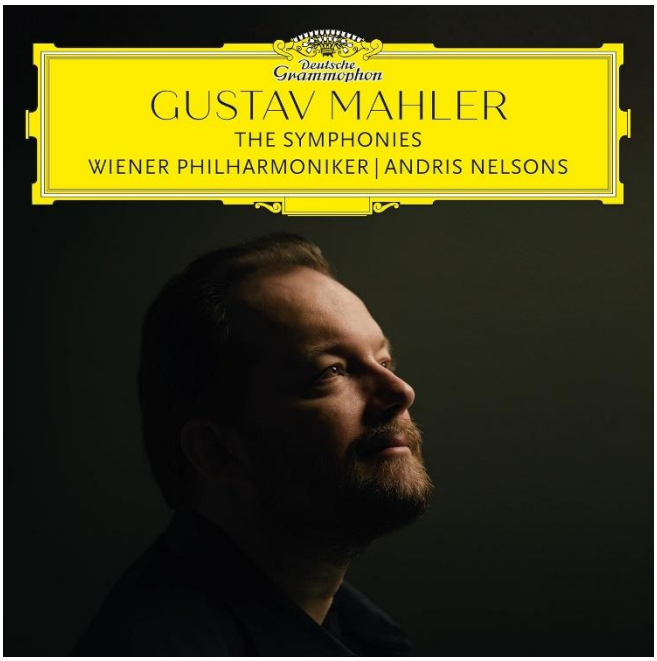
Of the other items in my programme I should make special mention of The Sixteen's album *A Watchful Gaze*. Released to support the Sixteen's 2023 Pilgrimage tour, it features two anthems entitled *Turn our Captivity*: one by William Byrd and one by the Bulgarian-British composer Dobrinka Tabakova. Everyone remarked how beautiful Dobrinka's anthem was.

I played John Ireland's anthem *Greater Love hath no man* in a new recording by the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge conducted by Stephen Layton, which again went down well. From Paul Godfrey's setting of *Musical Chapters from The Hobbit*, I played the track *Roads go ever ever* on, which is very beautiful.

I preceded Movement 2 of Joe Hisaishi's Harp Concerto with Emmanuel Ceysson as the soloist with the Royal Philharmonic conducted by the composer, with an arrangement of Handel's *Prelude and Fugue in A minor* played by Magdalena Hoffman from her new album *Fantasia*. I first heard the slow movement from Joe Hisaishi's harp concerto on BBC Radio 3 and thought it very lovely.

I ended my presentation with two nods to the BBC Proms. First, yes, you guessed it, the final movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 with Martha Argerich. This was taken from Volume 3 of Martha Argerich's *Rendez-Vous* series. This time she was accompanied by the Symphoniker Hamburg.

The Last Night of the Proms this year featured Yuja Wang as the soloist in Samuel Barber's Piano Concerto and Alexander Tsfasman's *Suite for Piano and Orchestra (Jazz Suite)*. I finished with another jazz influenced Soviet era piece, the third and fourth movements of Shostakovich's Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and Strings. The Boston Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Andris Nelsons in this acclaimed performance.



Cover of Andris Nelsons' Mahler Cycle with the Wiener Philharmoniker

The management of the Boston Symphony Orchestra have sadly decided not to continue with Andris as their music director much to the disappointment of the orchestra's players, and this season will be his last with them, despite their Shostakovich cycle with Andris Nelsons winning four Grammy awards. His recent release of the Mendelssohn Symphonies and the oratorios *Elijah* and Paulus got good reviews and his cycle of Mahler's symphonies with the Wiener Philharmoniker on DG has just been released. Only the fifth symphony had been released before DG went straight to the full box set containing the tenth symphony as well as the other nine. It will be interesting to see what the reviews are like.

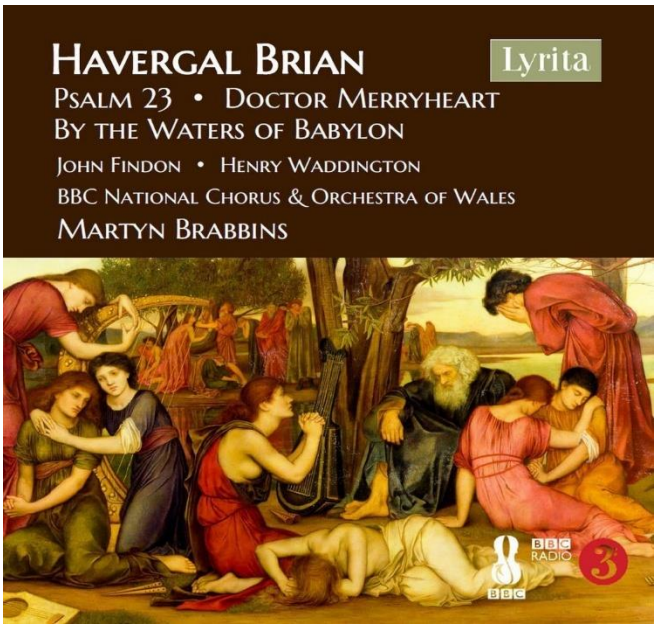


Cristina Ortiz – The Warner Classics Collection

Albums I am looking forward to include a new box set of recordings by the Brazilian pianist Cristina Ortiz. Her recordings of Shostakovich's piano concertos with Paavo Berglund are highly regarded. My appetite for South American piano music was whetted by Mauricio Vailina's playing on the first Martha Argerich *Rendez-Vous* set. In her set Ortiz plays music by Villa-Lobos, Vianna, Miguez, C Guarnieri and OL Fernandez. The Shostakovich concertos are included as well as favourites such as the Chopin Ballades, Grieg's Piano Concerto and Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

Having attended the recording sessions in Cardiff, I am particularly keen to hear the forthcoming release of psalm settings by Havergal Brian with the BBC National Orchestra and Chorus of Wales. This is the first recording of *By the Waters of Babylon,* and I feel lovers of British choral music will enjoy this

composition. Brian's setting of the much-loved *Psalm 23* has been recorded before, but I feel this recording is particularly good. The Comedy Overture *Doctor Merryheart* is included as a contrast.



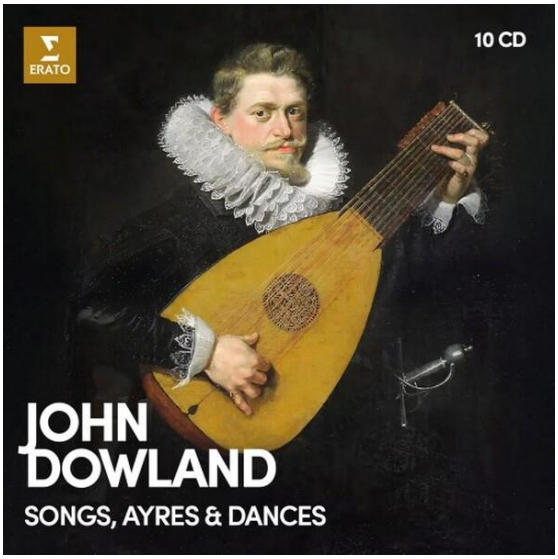
Martyn Brabbins conducts music by Havergal Brian, including the first recording of *By the Waters of Babylon* and *Psalm 23*

Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens

By Adele Wills

(Secretary of the FRMS)

2026 is the 400th anniversary of the death of John Dowland. There have been numerous concerts and festivals across the country marking this occasion including the Dowland 400th Anniversary Weekend at London's Wigmore Hall, the Dowland 400 Festival in Norwich, the Oxford Early Music Weekend, and the Leeds Baroque. There has also been a significant surge of new CD box sets, reissues and streaming releases including a 10 CD box set released by Warner Classics spanning renowned recordings from 1949 to 2021. There is even a new YouTube series of videos dedicated to Dowland.



Cover for the 10 CD set of John Downland's *Songs, Ayres and Dances*

So why are we still listening so enthusiastically to a composer who died in 1626? Perhaps that question is slightly redundant when we consider that we are still very much engaging with the works of one of Dowland's near contemporaries who died in 1616 – William Shakespeare. As Jan Kott argued in *Shakespeare: our Contemporary*, there may be something about the Elizabethan age that speaks to us now more than any other age.

Mark Padmore certainly takes this view. In an article for The Guardian published in 2009, he argues that Dowland's melancholy has a particular resonance for the British who have, he suggests, developed misery into an artform! Twentieth century composers – from Benjamin Britten to Harrison Birtwistle – have offered reworkings of Dowland's music, and even Morrissey's *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now* mines the same seam in a popular music context.

So why are so many composers and writers obsessed with misery? In 1621, Robert Burton published the work that he is most remembered for: *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* In it, he explores sadness in all its forms but also explores ways of alleviating it. And art – visual, written and musical – plays a central part in expressing and relieving sadness. Perhaps that's the reason. And many certainly have taken advantage of this: Elizabethan and Jacobean literature is full of melancholic characters – Hamlet is only the most well-known – and the music of John Dowland certainly captures this feeling of gloom.



John Downland (1563-1626)

Let's look, then, at Dowland in his Elizabethan context. Many of his early years are shrouded in obscurity. He was probably born in London in 1563 when Elizabeth I was only five years into her spectacular reign. He may have had some musical training in the church – and he may have been apprenticed to a master lutenist. We know he joined the household of Sir Henry Cobham, Elizabeth's ambassador to France, at the age of 16 and lived within the French court of Henri III. The Valois monarchy in France set great store by music and this provided a rich environment for the young musician. The king ordered dances three times a week and Dowland would have heard pavans, galliards, courants and allemands, all forms that he was later to use.

It is possible that Dowland converted to Catholicism while he was in France, but he kept this largely secret. Remember that Edmund Campion was hung, drawn and quartered in England in 1581 for being a Catholic priest – so Dowland may have felt secure in France, but it would have been folly to publicise his beliefs in England. He met many influential men at the French court who would later support his career, including the man to become Elizabeth's Lord High Treasurer, Robert Cecil.

Around 1584, Dowland returned to England and entered Christ Church in Oxford to study music. Someone must have sponsored his studies, and he had to sign the Oath of Supremacy to get his degree – so any Catholic beliefs were certainly secondary to his musical ambitions. He married and his son, Robert, was born in 1591 although his wife remains a mystery. In 1594, a lutenist position became available at Elizabeth's court but, oddly, Dowland was overlooked for the post. Some have suggested that his Catholicism held him back – but Elizabeth had other Catholic composers, such as William Byrd, on her staff. Dowland was never to achieve a position in Elizabeth's court and he was forced to work abroad, at first in Germany where he was showered with riches and acclaim, and later in Italy where he met some of the most influential composers of the day and even performed for Ferdinando di Medici. In 1597, he returned to England to publish his *First Book of Songes or Ayres* in London which quickly became the most popular anthology of secular music and the first full collection of lute songs for voice.

Listening note*: Now, O Now, I needs must part* from the First Book – sung by the British soprano Grace Davidson with David Miller on lute.

By 1598, riding high on the success of his first book of songs, Dowland was offered two court positions: back in Germany or as personal lutenist to Christian IV, King of Denmark. He chose Denmark, where he had a huge salary, unlimited adulation and, living in a Lutheran household, suspicions over his religious sympathies abated. It was an incredibly creative time, and he stayed there for seven years, producing two more song books and a collection of instrumental music.

Listening notes: *Flow my Tears* – performed by Andreas Scholl with Andreas Martin on lute; *I saw my Lady Weep* – sung by Iestyn Davies with Thomas Dunford on lute; *Weep no More Sad Fountains* – The Dowland Project.

In 1604, Dowland published his first instrumental work for Elizabethan consorts –21 pieces for five bowed string instruments plus lute. He called the collection *Lachrimae* and the first section consists of seven tear-sodden pavans all called lachrimae with an additional adjective – for example, the first is called *Lachrimae Antiquae* or Old Tears which is based on the song *Flow My Tears* from the *Second Book of Songes*.

Listening note: *Lachrimae Antiquae performed by Jordi Savall and Hesperion XX.*

After the lachrimae pavans, the rest of the book of consort music consisted of dances, some dedicated to Dowland's wealthy patrons such as the Earl of Essex and the King of Denmark. There is also a pavan called *Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens* – always Dowland, always doleful. He was obviously well-known by now.

Listening note: *Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens* performed by the Jupiter Ensemble with Thomas Dunford on lute.

Elizabeth died in 1603 and James I became king. By 1609, Dowland was back in England to oversee the continued distribution of his printed works. Remember that every gentleman at that time aspired to play the lute – so every aristocratic household would have been alive with the sounds of Dowland music. In 1610, Robert Dowland, John's son, published a musical anthology called *A Musical Banquet* including songs in English, French, Italian and Spanish. Robert's father contributed a new piece to the anthology, perhaps his most disconsolate work yet – *In Darkness Let me Dwell*.

Listening notes: *In Darkness Let me Dwell* performed by Ian Bostridge with Xuefei Yang on lute.

In 1992, Thomas Adès wrote an extraordinary piano piece based on Dowland's song – *Darknesse Visible.* The title of Thomas Adès' piece is a conflation of lines from John Dowland with John Milton's poetry from *Paradise Lost*: 'no light, but rather darkness visible'. Adès' intention, in his own words, was to 'explode' Dowland's music. All the melodic sounds and the harmonies are Dowland's own; but presented in shimmering, unpredictable and volatile slow-motion. Adès writes: 'no notes have been added; indeed, some have been removed. Patterns latent in the original have been isolated and regrouped with the aim of illuminating the song from within'. This is a unique piece, resplendent with the sounds of its Elizabethan inspiration but taking that music through a journey of four hundred years and accumulating touches of a dreamy French impressionism as well as twentieth century discordance along the way. There is an extraordinary performance of it by Ricardo Descalzo on YouTube.

Dowland's final printed anthology was *A Pilgrim's Solace* or *The Fourth book of Ayres* in 1612.

Listening note: *Go Nightly Cares* performed by the Consort of Musick conducted by Anthony Rooley with countertenor, York Skinner.

At this time, Dowland's name also starts to appear as a lutenist in King James' court – had he finally broken through? Dowland seems to have produced less original music at this time and settled to a regular life as a court musician. James died in 1625 and Dowland was one of the musicians performing at his funeral. Dowland followed him in early 1626, around the age of 73. He was buried on 20th February so probably died towards the end of January.

So perhaps this survey gives us a little taste of why we still listen to Dowland 400 years after his death and why so many composers have been inspired by him. He does not merely wallow in grief but transforms sorrow into a thing of enduring beauty that continues to resonate across the centuries.

Paul Godfrey writes about his setting of Musical Chapters from *The Hobbit*

With the release in September 2026 of the "musical chapters from *The Hobbit*" Volante Opera Productions and Prima Facie recordings finally made available the remaining segment of Paul Corfield Godfrey's cycle of works based on the mythology of J R R Tolkien, to complement their earlier releases of "epic scenes from *The Silmarillion"* and "musical chapters from *The Lord of the Rings.*"

The music for *The Hobbit* was originally written in the early 1970s to form part of a projected cycle of musical works based upon *The Lord of the Rings*, but has now been revised and adapted to form a link between the two other substantial works. The recording extends over four full CDs and includes an appendix in the shape of a setting of *The Quest of Erebor*, an additional chapter looking back at the events of *The Hobbit* from the perspective of a later generation in Tolkien's history.

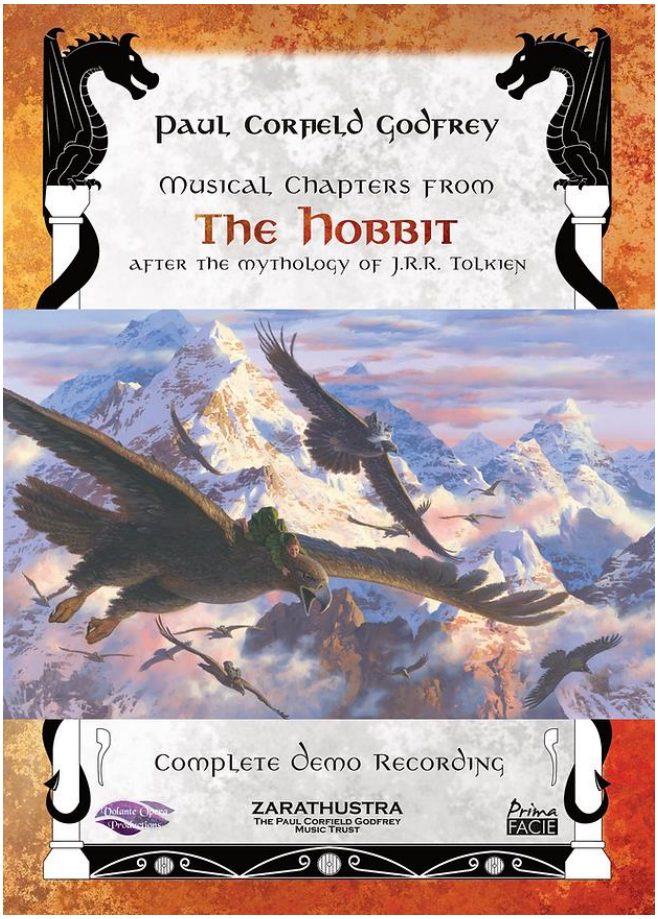


The Hobbit Cast

L-R: James Schouten, Helen Greenaway, Jasey Hall, Paul Corfield Godfrey, Gareth Long, Julian Boyce, Simon Crosby Buttle

This recording, as with previous works in the cycle, features professional singers drawn mainly from Welsh National Opera. Returning artists in the same roles as earlier releases include Huw Llywelyn as Bilbo, Philip Lloyd-Evans as Gandalf, James Louden as Elrond, Michael Clifton-Thompson as Gollum, Gavin Davies as Glóin, Simon Crosby Buttle as Frodo and other roles, Rosie Hay as Gwaihir, Gareth Long as Gimli, as well as Julian Boyce as Thorin, Laurence Cole as Smaug and Beorn, Owen Webb as Bard, Rhodri Prys Jones as Kili, Angharad Morgan as the Thrush; and Helen Jarmany, Emma Mary Llewellyn, Martin Lloyd, Helen Greenaway, Sophie Yelland, Jasey Hall, Alastair Moore, Peter Wilman, Francesca Saracino, Edmond Choo, Howard Kirk, Sam Snowden and Steffan Lloyd-Evans taking on other parts. Several of these singers attended the launch of the recording in Oxford in September [see photograph above–Ed].

Although the text is inevitably abridged, it adheres without any but the most minor alterations to the author's original words, and the original plot development remains unchanged. The CD set includes not only the complete musical score, but also a substantial booklet containing full details of the recording (including the text as set). As with the earlier issues of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* the cover art has been furnished by Ted Nasmith.



Album Cover of Scenes from The Hobbit

For more information about recordings by Volante Opera Productions, please visit:
www.volanteopera.wales
and about the music of Paul Corfield Godfrey:
www.paulcorfieldgodfrey.co.uk

Quotes from Christopher Seeman's review from the American-based *Tolkien Music List*

I was pleasantly surprised to find how well the performers were able to capture the alternately serious, alternately comic polarities of the text. From Gandalf's pedantic query concerning the semantics of 'good day' to the abusive buffoonery of Tom, Bert and William, this opera is FUN!

It is also well integrated into the overall sequence of the mythology, with occasional nods to motifs drawn from Godfrey's *Silmarillion* and *Lord of the Rings* repertoire to facilitate audience recollection or foreshadowing.

Speaking of talking animals, 'there's plenty, and to spare.' Eagles, spiders, and a howling wolf-chorus enable the libretto to touch the fantastic. At the same

time, Godfrey's attention to detail, such as Thorin & Company's crossing of the Enchanted Stream or their gate-crashing of the Wood-elves' feasts, keeps it rooted in Tolkien's realism. But the gems in this musical hoard are Godfrey's renditions of *The Hobbit*'s songs, some of which, like the *Song of the Wind* or the Raft-elves' chantey, have rarely been given melody and breath.

Musical Chapters from The Hobbit is a fitting conclusion to a lifelong labour of love. Thank you, Paul and Volante, for making it happen!

JÁN CIKKER – Lifting the Iron Curtain

Ian Bailey



Ján Cikker's Slovak Suite Album Cover

Looking across the expanse of twentieth century Slovak music, three names emerge effortlessly into view….Alexander Mozyes (1906–1984), Eugen Suchoň (1908–1993) and Ján Cikker (1911–1989).

In terms of the western concert repertoire, perhaps none of them has created a true foothold, although the work of Suchoň occasionally nudges into view, mainly thanks to his 1949 opera *Krútňava* (*The Whirlpool*).

As well as being born only a few years apart, this Slovakian triumvirate also shares a key commonality.

In addition to scholarly work in various Slovakian institutions, between 1929 and 1936, all three studied with the great Czech composer Vítězslav Novák.

In Cikker's case, he graduated from Novák's masterclass with his *Symphonic Capriccio* in 1936, performed by the Czech Philharmonic later the same year. Followed immediately by a one-year scholarship in Vienna at the Music Academy, where Cikker studied conducting with Felix Weingartner.

Following two years in the army, Cikker taught music theory at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in Bratislava, and for a short time was associated with the Slovak Philharmonic. In 1944, he became involved in the official resistance movement, becoming a member of the local resistance radio station.

For three years after the War, he worked as a dramaturg in the National Theatre Bratislava, before moving to a lecturing post at the city's Academy of Performing Arts, which delineated much of the rest of his life, i.e. lasting from 1949 to 1977.

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Whilst sharing examples of orchestral, choral, chamber and instrumental repertoire with his compatriots Moyzes and Suchoň, Cikker expressed a greater commitment to opera than his colleagues. Indeed, Moyzes eschewed the medium altogether, concentrating instead upon twelve symphonies.

Cikker wrote nine operas in total, some of which 'travelled' beyond the bounds of Slovakia with productions in East and West Germany, Belgium and Switzerland. Even those which didn't achieve a wider exposure were subject to much discussion in European operatic circles, hence the quote (attributed to Madame Cikker), that operatically at least, the composer had "lifted the Iron Curtain".

Much was also made of Cikker's participation in the so-called *Literaturopern* movement, which emerged after World War Two. Along with composers such as Hans Werner Henze, Cikker produced operas based on strong, even profound, literary sources.

The details of Cikker's operatic achievement are listed below:

Juro Jánošík (1954), *Beg Bajazid* (1957), Mister Scrooge (1960), *Vzkriesenie* (Resurrection, 1962), Hra *o láske a smrti* (The Game of Love and Life, 1969), Coriolanus (1970–72), *Rozsudok* (The Verdict, 1978), *Obliehanie Bystrice* (The Siege of Bystrica, 1983), and *Zo života hmyzu* (after a play by the Čapek brothers From the Life of Insects, 1987).

To deal with his oeuvre briefly: *Juro Jánošík* dates from the very early 1950's and is a tale of a popular Slovak folk hero. It featured assistance in its writing from Cikker's friend, conductor Václav Talich, who at that time was in Bratislava establishing and conducting the Slovak Philharmonic. *Beg Bajazid*, an exposition of tales of Slovak resistance to the Turks, was conceived during a subsequent holiday in the Tatra mountains. Dickens, meanwhile, inspired *Mister Scrooge*, a chamber opera with few scenes. Concentrating on its soloists, it featured many declamatory solos. Dubbed too experimental and controversial, it had to wait several years for its premiere.

Vzkriesenie (*Resurrection*) followed (and is discussed below). It was succeeded by *The Game of Love and Life*, an exposition of texts by Romain Rolland. Set in revolutionary France, the author's work was officially revered in Slovakia as the poet was a Communist sympathiser.

Coriolanus became Cikker's sixth operatic score, adapting Shakespeare's play, and was then succeeded by a final trio of works, only "The Verdict" achieving much traction outside Slovakia.

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Cikker's frustration at the rejection of *Mister Scrooge* led him to turn to the writings of Tolstoy, and resulted, arguably, in his masterpiece, *Vzkriesenie*.

It is clear from the above table that *Resurrection*, at least at the time of Sobakina's *Study on the Operas of Jan Cikker* in 2018, had enjoyed by far and away the greatest exposure of all Cikker's operas, on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Apart from clearly meriting attention for that reason, there is also the practical question of convenience. My research indicates that only three Cikker operas appear to have been recorded on vinyl in the 1960's and 70's: *Vzkriesenie*, *Coriolanus* and *Rozsudok* (*The Verdict*). Of these, the first two listed (that I could trace) made it to commercial CDs.[1]

One is *Vzkriesenie*, recorded by the Supraphon label soon after its premiere. Transferred to CD by OPUS in 2001 (catalogue number 91 2660-2), it features the baritone Teodor Šrubař as Neklyudov and the soprano Alena Míková as Katyusha.[2]

Briefly, the plot of the opera is as follows: Prince Neklyudov, an officer off to war, visits with his two Aunts, en route to the front. He has met an orphaned 'stray' Katyusha Maslovová living in their household before. Taken in by his aunts, she works as a maid, whilst being cared for and educated by the older women. Neklyudov is drawn to her and succeeds in her seduction. The consequence is a child. The aunts expel Katyusha, judging her as the guilty party.

Destitution forces the young woman into the brothel of Madame Koyeva. Here Katyusha is unwittingly caught up in a plot to defraud a local businessman, which misfires and ends in Katyusha, the Madam and a servant being arrested for murder.

At the trial, Neklyudov happens to be present on jury service. Initially, he doesn't recognise Katyusha. Once he does, he is consumed by overwhelming guilt at having driven her to this situation, whilst being convinced of her fundamental innocence. Despite his attempts to mitigate Katyusha's punishment, the three in the dock are all convicted. They are all condemned to the gulag.

In the final act, Neklyudov visits the prison and swears his love to Katyusha, promising to secure a Tsar's pardon and his hand in marriage. Eventually freed, we find her and a prison companion outside a peasant's hut on the Siberian plane. Mortally ill Katyusha finally acknowledges her love for the prince, as a column of prisoners shuffles past on their way to the camp.

In terms of the recording, both the principals are most accomplished, the soprano tackling the occasionally high tessitura with aplomb. Indeed, all the singers fill out their roles well, and supported by the characterful orchestral background (Krombholc and his orchestra clearly fired up from recent live performances), the

atmosphere is kept vivid and realistic. Listen particularly to the interlude and prison scenes in Act Two, or the Act Three conclusion, and the atmosphere is quite chilling. Technically, the sound is studio-based, and while without modern range and finesse, it is perfectly up to the task.

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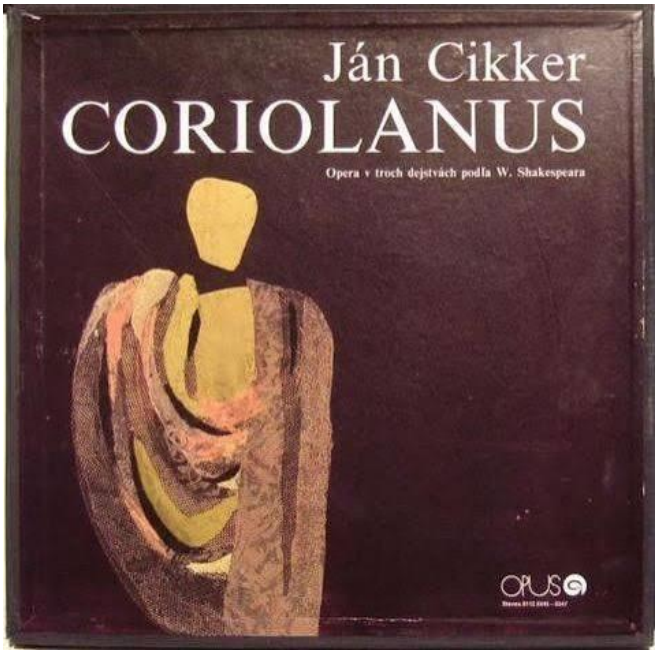


An album of Ján Cikker's piano music

Throughout his career, Cikker, whilst not forgetting his Slovak roots in drama and music, had always attempted to incorporate modified elements of the twentieth century's musical style into his work, notably twelve-tone composition. In the *Resurrection*, alongside the inevitable Russian elements, the composer produces a dark, gritty tragedy which, whilst never emulating sweeping Puccini-like melodies, nevertheless resolves, albeit in somewhat bleak hope, at the end of a compelling listening experience.

I was greatly taken with the score, which, to me, echoes the darkness of Shostakovich (Lady Macbeth), Berg and Janáček, but without the cinematographic elements found especially in the latter two composers, i.e., it is not marked by short scenes, quickly cutting from one to the next. Cikker seems unafraid of the 'traditional' elements of operatic construction and is content to expand and allow the drama to unfold at its own pace.

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The cover of the 1975 vinyl release of Coriolanus

Turning to *Coriolanus*, we find a work that essentially embraces the same tale as Shakespeare's play.

We are in the early days of the Empire. Rome is in conflict with the neighbouring Volscians. Rome is in turmoil, with crowds rioting over a lack of grain as well as the privilege of the patricians. They direct their anger particularly at Gaius Marcius, whose excellent generalship has saved the city previously. News confirms an old enemy of Rome, Aufidius, is preparing war against the city. Gaius determines to do battle with him.

He successfully defeats Aufidius at Corioli and thus gains the nickname "Coriolanus". Reluctantly persuaded to stand for Consul, despite his success, there is opposition amongst both the senators and the people. Tribunes Sicinius and Brutus goad the mob against him and manage to get him condemned to exile; he leaves amid a torrent of abuse.

Travelling to Atrium, Coriolanus switches sides and joins Aufidius and the Volscians. Aufidius welcomes him but warns that any sign of treachery will be fatal. They return to sack Rome, which is once again rioting, the crowd killing Sicinius and Brutus in terror of the Volscian attack.

Menenius, an old friend, followed by Coriolanus' wife and daughter, all seek him out in his tent outside the city walls to persuade him to change allegiance once more. But unbeknownst to him, Aufidius is hidden in a

corner of the tent, overhears the conversation, and stabs Coriolanus for his treachery. His wife, Virgilia, returns just in time for his dying breath and falls upon his corpse.

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To my mind, *Corolanus* presents rather a different proposition than its predecessor. As befits its 'ancient' setting, the music is, I feel, more 'statuesque' and imposing. In its abhorrence of violence, the opera, it is claimed, is directly related to the "Prague Spring" of 1968, with its force expressed in what Sobakina terms as a *'clarified' musical style*. Perhaps more emotionally cool and calculated, it is nevertheless unafraid of expressing dark feelings.

This 'aloofness' does make the action, at least to me, resemble a frieze surrounding an ancient urn. A degree of romantic feeling and conventional operatic sweep found in the work's predecessor is missing, which, in fairness, is in keeping with Cikker's greater embrace of atonal techniques. *Coriolanus* is, after all, written more than a decade later than *Vzkriesenie*.

Also, it is interesting to observe that it is over 30 minutes shorter than its predecessor and boasts fourteen scenes against its predecessor's six. In this way, it reflects the 'cinematographic technique' observed in Berg and Janáček and absent from his previous Russian tragedy.

To sum up my personal reaction to these fine works: I felt *Coriolanus* was to be *admired*, whilst *Vzkriesenie* was more to be *embraced*.

That said, the recording makes every possible case for it. Based on a Prague National Theatre production of April 1974, it was originally issued on the Opus label as an LP set the following year. Then reissued, again by Opus, on CD in 2011 (catalogue no. 91-0138-2), it is directed by the immensely able figure of Zdeněk Košler.

The title role of Gaius Marcius, or Coriolanus, is sung by the accomplished baritone Antonín Švorc (1934–2011). Whilst ably supported by the rest of a distinguished Czech cast, I would make particular mention of Eduard Haken, who takes on the role of the sage and sympathetic Menenius. One wishes his interventions were more substantial.

Technically, the recording is fine; although I cannot substantiate it, the sound would appear to be studio-based, since there is no evidence of stage presence, off-stage noises or audience participation. Occasionally, in the crowd scenes, the sound does get somewhat confused, and lines of music can become obscured, but I didn't find it worrisome.

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So much then to explore and appreciate in both these fine works. It is just a pity that, currently at least, admiration of Cikker's operatic output is restricted by such limited availability of the product.

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Fortunately, when we turn to the composer's remaining works – i.e. those embracing orchestral, vocal and instrumental music – material is rather easier to access. But that will be the subject for another article in a later Newsletter.

NOTES

[1] I should point out that several other Cikker operas are available from a particular internet retailer, as transfers of European radio broadcasts. As their copyright status is unclear, I cannot endorse them in these pages.

[2] *Vzkriesenie* is listed as available on sites such as Discogs, but this is generally only as an LP set. Alas, this format doesn't appear to contain either a Slovak libretto or an English translation, whereas the CDs include both. I was very fortunate to gain a copy of the CDs courtesy of our Society's recent sale of donated stock.

[Ed. We would like to acknowledge that this article was originally prepared for the Dvořák Society.]

Menuhin Concert RAH London 1944

John Beaumont

October 1944. The war was turning in favour of the allies; life in London was gradually returning to peacetime normality; theatres and night clubs were reopening; and air raid sirens were almost totally ignored. My older sister worked for the Ministry of Transport and, with a group of office colleagues, arranged a visit to a concert given by Yehudi Menuhin at the Royal Albert Hall, and as a 14th birthday treat, she suggested that I might like to join them. Might? I jumped at the chance.

I had developed a fondness for classical music from the various BBC radio broadcasts at the time; recordings of orchestral works and the regular Saturday evening live broadcasts of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, so the opportunity of attending a concert at the R.A.H. was more than I could have hoped for. Our group had central seats in the upper circle, and one thing that will always stay in my mind was that before the concert began, the manager came on to the stage and, pointing to a pair of lights on each side of the stage, told the audience that if there was an air raid alert a red light would show there during the performance. The performance would continue uninterrupted but those wishing to leave may do so, a green light would indicate the *all-clear*. There was no alert, but I doubt if anyone would have left. The programme consisted of Beethoven's violin concerto in D major and Lalo's Symphony Espagnole, which is actually a violin concerto in five movements.


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The poster for the 1st October concert given by Yehudi Menuhin and London Philharmonic under Sir Adrian Boult

Menuhin made more than one visit to Britain during the war and was greatly admired for it because of his determination. There were no passenger airlines or shipping lines operating at the time, so it was understood that his means of travel was by 'hitching' a lift in American bomber aircraft crossing the Atlantic to Britain for the war effort[1]. I never found out by which means he returned.

The outcome of all this was that I set about building a collection of as many Menuhin recordings of violin concertos as were available. Ironically however, when at the HMV shop in Regent Street I asked the nice sales lady for the Beethoven concerto with Menuhin as the soloist, she explained that he had not recorded

[1] I can find no mention of this in his autobiography 'Unfinished Journey'

it, the only available recording was by Heifetz. I bought it anyway.

The City of London Phonograph & Gramophone Society

Some thoughts from the President of the world's oldest gramophone society

Christopher Proudfoot

The article in the March 2026 FRMS Newsletter on the Putney Gramophone Society (now 'Putney Music') and the early days of FRMS prompted some thoughts on our own Society (CLPGS) – not least because of my horror at the picture of one of those dreadful modern Indian fake horn gramophones, so beloved of television set designers. We have a rude name for them, which I will not repeat in the respectable organ of the FRMS.

The article suggested that earlier societies' interest was more in comparing different gramophones than in listening to music. There may be a grain of truth in that but reports of meetings of the various phonograph and gramophone societies that grew up from 1911 suggest that records were even then the main focus. However, they differed from societies within the FRMS in the sort of music played, due in part to what was then available. Classical music was largely confined to operatic arias (the leading opera singers of the day were fêted much like today's pop singers). Otherwise, concert ballads and music hall songs formed typical fare at society meetings, along with the new dance music of the 1920s.

The arrival of electric recording in 1925 revolutionised the industry; only then did orchestral and choral recordings become a worthwhile proposition. The records were expensive, though, and given that a typical symphony needed five records, few people could afford them. It was this, I believe, which gave rise in the 1930s to the FRMS pattern of societies, providing opportunities for listening to fine recorded performances without having to fork out six shillings per disc (the cost of a typical red label 12-inch HMV record in the 1930s), so that a five-record set cost 30 shillings. That's £1.50 in modern debased money, which sounds nothing now but was substantial in 1935 [equivalent to about £140 today–Ed]. Such a set came in a handsome, but staid, brown album with a set of 'Analytical Notes': no pictures or biographies of the performers, just an intelligent guide to the music. The inclusion of short staves of music showed that these essays, and the records they accompanied, were aimed at musically literate listeners.

About every 4½ minutes, you had to get up and change the record (unless you had an auto-change gramophone and a specially arranged set of records with consecutive sides on different discs). No doubt part of the joy of an FRMS meeting at the time was having someone else by the gramophone to attend to this for you! It may sound tiresome, but as I write I am playing a 1930s set of records of the Bach Orchestral Suites by the Adolf Busch Chamber Players on a wind-up EMG gramophone with fibre needles – and loving it!

I am, however, not typical of CLPGS members in my taste for album sets. The Society was formed in 1919 by some stick-in-the-mud members of existing societies who resisted the move to disc records and insisted on the superiority of the Edison cylinder – noted for its technical quality more than its repertoire. They instituted, for a time, a loan system for cylinders ('Blue Amberols', made of celluloid, not the old, fragile wax variety); another way of providing recorded music at minimal cost. Edison continued to make Blue Amberols until 1929, after which the CLPGS bowed to the inevitable and allowed disc records into their meetings. We still play cylinders, though, and jazz and dance music of the 1920s are much favoured, though there are some operatic titles, usually by not quite first-rate singers because Victor and HMV had the top names under contract. We have even been known to make new cylinders: for our Centenary in 2019, we issued a cylinder recording of the Keble College Choir in 'Moses and the Children of Israel' from Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, along with another of, the Rossini 'Cats' Duet'.

Thus, the City of London Phonograph & Gramophone Society caters for all musical tastes, and also for those interested in machines that play records, mainly those that do so without electricity, but we have evolved from a group of diehard Edison enthusiasts to a research-based Registered Charity with a worldwide membership. We still hold regular meetings in

London (if not actually within the City walls), as well as elsewhere in the UK, at which we listen to recordings. Our cumbersome title comes up for review periodically, but as no one has yet produced anything snappier with which a majority can agree, the old name survives. To join, visit the website:

www.clpgs.org.uk

Some Reminiscences from Dennis Darling

The article in the FRMS Newsletter marking the 150th anniversary of Havergal Brian refers to the *Gothic* Symphony. I was at the first performance which took place in Central Hall, Westminster on 24th June 1961 conducted by Bryan Fairfax. The Polyphonia Symphony Orchestra and the choir were mostly amateurs strongly supported by the London Philharmonic. At times there was some rather scrawny choral singing in the setting of the *Te Deum*, which comprises the finale. In places it was at the limit of their capabilities. But the performance was



Original CD Cover of Havergal Brian's *Gothic* Symphony Conducted by Sir Adrian Boult in 1966

successfully achieved. When the composer, who was 85 years old at the time, fell off the stage whilst receiving applause, he fortunately landed on his feet without any mishap. At the first fully professional performance at the Royal Albert Hall on 30th October 1966, which was conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, he stood before the audience, looking somewhat bewildered at the acclamation.

Living in the south and south-east of London until I retired, I was able to attend quite a few first performances including Vaughan Williams' 9th Symphony.



Vaughan Williams Ninth – The Premiere Performance Conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent

Things did not always go according to plan. At the premiere of Tippet's *The Knot Garden*, in the second act, two of the characters were playing chess when one of them deliberately upsets the board. On this occasion it disappeared through a gap in the stage; to the delight of the audience – and I am sure the composer too – the next words were, "Something went wrong with that move". When the English National Orchestra performed Wagner's *Ring* at the Coliseum in 1976,

During the first act of *Siegfried*, Gregory Dempsey, playing Mime, leant on the anvil and it fell in half before Siegfried could forge the sword with which he was supposed to sever it.[1] I was not at Hans Hotter's last performance of Wotan at Covent Garden (I saw

[1] Attendees at a Bristol performance also report seeing the anvil falling in half before Siegried could forge the sword with it.

him in it the year before). He was suffering from bronchitis and was not well enough to perform in *Siegfried*. So, it was replaced with *Götterdämmerung* and the cycle ended with S*iegfried* when he was well enough to perform. It became known as the only performance of the *Ring* with a happy ending.

In the 1960s significant works by the Second Viennese School—Schoenberg, Webern and Berg—received their first performance in this country.

Peter Hall staged Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron* in a superb production at Covent Garden in July 1965. Tickets sold moderately at first until the *Daily Mirror* announced thar there was an orgy in the second act, and seats sold out overnight! And the theatre staff commented, "some people were coming to hear the music".

The first time I heard Beethoven's *Choral* Symphony in the concert hall was at the penultimate Prom (it was traditionally performed at the last night but one then) when it was sung in English. I was only at the last night once, in 1971. It was not a vintage last night, but it was conducted by Colin Davis and we had Jessye Norman singing Berlioz. And I was also there when Thomas Allen famously collapsed during a performance of *Carmina Burana* in 1974 and one of the prommers, Patrick McCarthy, stepped out of the audience and very creditably took over. At the last concert I went to at the Colston Hall in Bristol, the Czech Philharmonic had taken four hours to get from Oxford and arrived just half an hour before the concert. It ended with one of the finest performances of Dvořák's seventh symphony I have ever heard.

Rutland Boughton: A Latter-day Glastonbury Festival

Hywel Jenkins

I imagine that some at least of the several hundred thousand who descend upon Worthy Farm in Pilton, near Shepton Mallet, mid-Somerset, in late June most summers—though not this—for what is known globally as the Glastonbury Festival, may be aware that a century ago the original Glastonbury Festival also drew devotees from far and wide, though they were of a somewhat different ilk.

The present Festival has had rather more longevity than the original's 12-year tenure in Glastonbury, having been inaugurated by farmer-turned-impresario the now *Sir* Michael Eavis back in 1970, but the original Glastonbury visionary, Rutland Boughton, had similarly global ambitions, imagining the town as a British Bayreuth for the production of his own operas.

Glastonbury itself has for centuries held a mysticism all its own**;** its Abbey, sadly brought to ruin by Henry Vlll's henchmen, was one of the grandest and richest in the country, and it is even thought to contain the grave of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, while Glastonbury Tor, rising from the Somerset Levels with its isolated church tower on top, the remnant of an earthquake on 9/11 (September), but in 1275, is a landmark known worldwide.

These days a walk down the High Street takes you past a collection of shops selling healing crystals and other mystical souvenirs, and you're often likely to bump into flamboyantly dressed folk in the town for a Princess Conference, the Beltane Festival or something similar.



Rutland Boughton at the Glastonbury Assembly Rooms c.1920

Rutland Boughton's operatic venue was a tiny hall known as the Assembly Rooms set back off the High

Street and now graced by a Blue Plaque – a visit to the hall today makes you wonder at how there was room for the stage and performers, let alone an audience. Boughton actually did have a site just outside the town identified, and with a blueprint in place, for his own Wagner-style Opera House, but his currency dissipated before the plans could come to fruition.

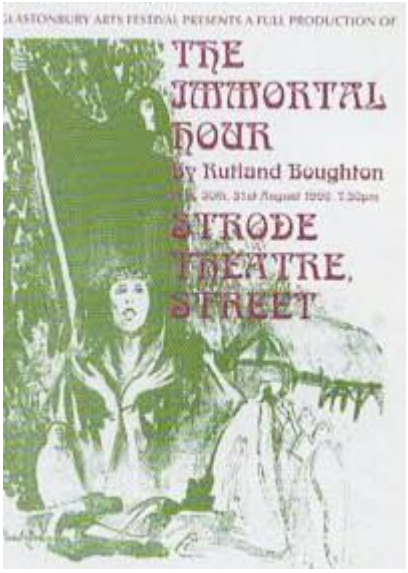
His pedigree was sound – he had studied with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College and apparently had then proved a gifted teacher from 1905 until 1911 at what is now Birmingham Conservatoire, before moving to Glastonbury to live in an unprepossessing house in Bere Lane (Bere – pronounced as in the beverage! - being one of the early Abbots) with a view of the Tor.



Rutland Boughton with friends, Bere Lane Glastonbury c.1925

While he composed in many genres including symphonies, concertos, chamber works and song, his magnum opus was a suitably mystic opera, *The Immortal Hour*, premiered in Glastonbury even as World War 1 broke out in August 1914, reappearing in Glastonbury until 1926, and spreading more widely to national acclaim, a London production still holding the record, it seems, for the longest consecutive run of any opera anywhere – well over 200 performances. Spellbound devotees were known to attend regularly dozens of times, rather as some were to do some 40 years later with the film of *The Sound of Music*.

The opera, with a libretto by Boughton himself adapted from a play by Fiona McLeod, a pseudonym for the Scottish writer William Sharp, imagines a Celtic Twilight-style world in which 'faeries' in anthropomorphic form interact and fall in love with humans, but of course in a much darker world than, for example, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*.



Glastonbury Arts Production of The Immortal Hour

The casts in Glastonbury and subsequently were an amalgam of professionals and local, homespun performers, and musically the work itself was admired hugely by both Elgar and Vaughan Williams, Sir Thomas Beecham and the finest female operatic composer of the day, Ethel Smyth. As the faerie heroine Etain in revivals in London the actress Gwen Ffrangcon Davies attracted the admiration of no less a luminary than John Gielgud, who later cast her regularly. She was to become a Dame in 1991 at the age of 100!

Boughton was eventually to fall victim to his socialist leanings in the mid-1920s when, in London and in sympathy with the General Strike of 1926, he caused something of an outrage by setting his nativity opera *Bethlehem* in a miner's cottage rather than a stable. He was to continue composing until his death in 1960, including his five Arthurian operas, which he envisaged as a Wagnerian cycle of operas in the Glastonbury Opera House to rival *The Ring*.

I'm grateful to Ian Boughton for two photographs, one of Rutland outside the Assembly Rooms in Glastonbury, c.1923. The other, c.1925, was taken in the back garden at No 3 Bere Lane, his home until 1927, with some of his local cast**;** standing next to Rutland is Christina Walshe, his artistic adviser, and those seated at the table include his daughter Ruby and Mrs Buckley, whose husband Reginald had been a strong influence in infusing Rutland with the area's Arthurian legends.



The Immortal Hour 1996 – Raimund Herincx as Dalua

At the end of May this year I happened to pick up a copy of the June issue of the BBC Music Magazine and found an excellent centenary article by Andrew Green in collaboration with the composer's grandson Ian about the original Festival and the subsequent fate of *The Immortal Hour* and Rutland Boughton himself—which I imagine you might easily obtain online together with a great deal more fascinating detail than I have room to reproduce here.

Chronicling the fairly sparse more recent history of the opera, Mr Green mentioned in passing 'reportedly successful performances' of *The Immortal Hour* in 1996 in Street, a couple of miles down the road from Glastonbury, so I decided to write to the magazine to fill in some more detail and my letter was published in the July issue.

Long-standing subscribers to this Newsletter may well recall the name of Brendan Sadler, who I believe was a FRMS Committee member for many years, and who ran the local Recorded Music Group here in Street and Glastonbury which is now presided-over by FRMS national secretary, Adele Wills—and it was Adele who suggested that I perhaps expand my letter into an article for this Autumn Newsletter.

By the mid-1990s Brendan had created a reputation in the area over nearly 30 years as founder musical director of high-quality local amateur company Strode Opera, not just as a conductor but also as an irrepressible enthusiast and fount of musical knowledge, only too aware of the legacy Rutland Boughton had left in Glastonbury, of which many musicians in the area remained oblivious.

In 1996 he and Paul Branson, a distinguished local professional artist and designer, were determined to found a resurgence of the original festival, the centrepiece in the inaugural year being what appeared to be the first live-staged performances of *The Immortal Hour* since the Sadlers Wells revival in 1953.

They set about curating a number of musical events that summer to surround the central event, including lunchtime drop-in concerts and even a talk by Prokofiev's son Oleg, himself a professional artist, but also of course full of fascinating stories about his father and his interactions with Stalin's regime, which were only a little less extreme than those of Shostakovich.

For the Opera, just as Boughton's performers and backstagers had been a judicious mix of professionals and local amateurs, Brendan and Paul put together a team in the same mould; several of the main cast were professional singing teachers from the area, some of whom had already sung with Strode Opera. Ever one for the main chance, for the central role of dark spirit Dalua, Brendan also managed to draw out of his local retirement bass-baritone Raimund Herincx, who had been a hugely distinguished recording artist. Boughton himself, it seems, sang this role in the inaugural production in 1914, deputising for an indisposed colleague.

The chorus—who of course were to sing what had been the one extract from the opera which became well-known more widely over the years, the 'Faery Song' 'How beautiful they are, the lordly ones'—were Brendan's Strode Opera stalwarts, augmented by one or two of his usual principals. Choreography was by Brendan's daughter Helen, a professional dance

teacher, and the design and direction by a local artist with directing experience.

Orchestrally the opera was demanding, including the requirement for a virtuoso solo flautist, the search for whom caused Brendan no little difficulty. Having led Brendan's opera orchestra in two productions a year for some fifteen years, I was privileged not only to fix the strings but to lead the orchestra for the performances—and to spend some time on the tortuous violin solo from the storm scene at the end of Act 1!

We gave three very-well-attended performances at the end of August at the Strode Theatre in Street, some two miles from Glastonbury, a professionally-appointed venue which had been originally endowed in the 1960s by the famous Quaker C&J Clark shoe-making firm whose headquarters were, and are, in Street, and for which one imagines Rutland himself would have given his eye-teeth in 1914, even if only for its size and technical facilities.

Brendan and Paul had been very successful in publicising the production far and wide and we were visited by the broadsheet press, who were largely positive in their reviews, together with members of the worldwide Boughton family, including his grandson Ian, the composer's biographer Michael Hurd and distinguished Elgarian Jerrold Northrop-Moore.

The Torbay Musical Weekend 2026

The details of this weekend, which runs from 13th to 15th November 2026, can be found on their website https://www.torbaymusicalweekend.co.uk

Events will include Richard Hughes and Susanne Stanzeleit of Meridian Records describing the process of recording, editing and producing a CD; Stephen Stirling talking about and playing the French Horn, also joining the Primrose Trio to play Brahms' Piano Trio; and John Mills and Cobie Smit playing the guitar.

Committee members of the FRMS attend these weekends and find them very enjoyable.

Articles for Newsletters

The next newsletter should be published in March 2027. Please send any society news or articles by 1st February to the Chairman at the email address shown below. Any contributions would be welcome, such as an article about your society.

Current and past newsletters can be downloaded at:
http://www.thefrms.co.uk

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