

Best of British

His third and final disc of Frank Bridge's complete works for piano marks Mark Bebbington out as an advocate for certain undervalued British composers



Bridging the gap:
Mark Bebbington

Mark Bebbington notes with delight that there are seven or eight works by Frank Bridge in the current Proms season. It is, Bebbington feels, a vindication of the musical quality underlying one of British music's bravest rebels.

Bridge is known as Britten's teacher, but once Bebbington began recording Bridge's solo piano music in a three-disc series just completed on the SOMM label, he realised there was an injustice to be rectified.

'It has been the most wonderful and far-reaching journey of any of the British music projects I have been involved in, and that has included the very rich pickings of John Ireland,' he says. 'The sheer richness of Bridge's musical journey, and in particular his harmonic journey, makes him possibly the

most significant British composer of the 20th century. And, dare I say it, I would include Britten in that.'

'In a way the work which intrigued me most, although it is under three minutes in length, is *Gargoyfe*, the last work. Anyone hearing it must find it difficult to find a historical niche for it. Maybe late Stravinsky, possibly Ravel's *Scarbo*. But to think that was the work that Bridge's publishers said they couldn't publish because it had no public!

'I can think of no other British composer who took on the challenges of the second Viennese school head-on, and it was that which did for him. Everything was hunky-dory while he was writing in the salon style, but once the piano sonata emerged, as far as the public, his publishers and the critics were concerned, Bridge was shunned.'

The crusade was undertaken by Bebbington with staunch support from SOMM's owner, Siva Oke.

'We decided to put the piano sonata on the first disc, as being the most important work. Such can be the precarious nature of ambitious projects, we weren't sure there would be a disc two and three. But fortunately we've been able to complete the cycle.'

What Bebbington has discovered along the way is 'an incredibly rounded composer, the most venturesome and far-ranging, with the most ambitious sweep in the range of works'.

Bebbington ranks him alongside Rachmaninov and Scriabin in terms of keyboard challenges. 'The capriccios are as virtuosic as anything you are going to get from mid-period Debussy or Ravel. And there is the luscious third movement of the suite, *Ecstasy*, straight from Scriabin yet something intrinsically Bridge as well.'

'The challenge is the mind-set, the moves from that to the kind of work that suggests Berg's *Opus 1* sonata.'

The series has led to Bebbington being categorised by many as a British music specialist: the John Ireland Trust turned to

him, and then there was Rawsthorne, whose first piano concerto he recorded with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra for a SOMM release in 2009. 'It becomes a self-perpetuating exploration of what I hope has been the best of 20th-century British piano music. There has been an awful lot I have been asked to do and chosen not to.'

He gives short shrift to the more extreme home supporters. 'The cries from the British music lobby that the music continues to be neglected I don't think has validity any more. If anything we have to be careful we don't bang the drum too loud. The best of British music must transcend its Britishness.'

As if to underline that, next up for Bebbington is a Rachmaninov cycle. 'I had the extreme good fortune of having lessons right at the end of her life with Phyllis Selick, who studied and knew very well Rachmaninov.' Bebbington also detects 'a nobility in the writing' which should mark out his recordings from the formidable array of rivals.

But due out in November is a recording of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia* for piano and orchestra, coupled with the Mathias concerto, performed with the Ulster Orchestra conducted by George Vass. Bebbington's attention was drawn to the *Fantasia* by a critic reviewing his recording of the Rawsthorne and Ferguson concertos. 'I'd never heard of it, even though it does appear in the standard catalogue of the composer's works.' On investigating the score in the British Library, he decided it was well worth recording.

He is also recording the Bliss concerto for SOMM and next year takes up the cudgels for John Joubert, recording his concerto for the composer's 85th birthday.

'British music is never far away,' Bebbington admits.

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