

# Too many records

Too many records? Well, an instinctive answer is probably no – but then, I grew up during the era of the CD revolution in the early 1980s when the supremacy of the vinyl disc was just about to give way to the ‘new’ technologies. I remember buying my first CDs in the mid-1980s and vividly recall feeling a new sense of ‘permanence’ about these recordings – performances almost set in stone, if you like – with an *in memoriam* feel to them, even! Perhaps there was a nagging feeling at that time, though, that many of these discs were the end-product of multinational labels keen to promote their stellar artists, rather than the results of purely musical considerations.

How things have developed and changed in those intervening years. The acquiring of a ‘calling-card’ promotional CD is now the minimum requirement of all fledgling soloists and chamber groups – and the CD market, as we all know, has witnessed an explosion of artists and repertoire. This is all very positive, but is there not a real danger, in the light of this massive saturation, that a young artist may find it difficult to carve out his or her recording identity? Damned in some quarters for challenging the Great Performers in the area of central, core repertoire and questioned elsewhere for exploring and recording more neglected – some might say ‘lesser’ – repertoire.

I think it’s this word ‘lesser’ that brings contention with it. I write as a pianist, who, over recent years, has become involved in many recordings and performances of twentieth-century British piano music. I must confess, though, to being both a recent and also a slightly cautious convert, which is not without its advantages, I think. Perhaps nothing is more potentially detrimental to the advocacy of music – and especially British music – than an over-zealous enthusiasm which can fail to distinguish the good and first-rate works from the more mundane and middling ... and surely there’s a danger of overusing that much quoted word ‘masterpiece’.

I recently attended a concert of British choral works which included a personal favourite – Herbert Howells’s *Hymnus Paradisi*. The composer’s matchless word-setting and spiritual aspirations really elevate this piece onto an altogether special level of achievement and yet in this concert its impact was diminished by being programmed alongside some frankly less than first-rate choral works by, well, some less than great British composers.

We need constantly to evaluate, I think, and that’s where the beauty of my working



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with a label such as Somm comes into its own. Somm is owned and managed by Keith and Siva Oke and their professional integrity is equalled by a canny instinct for separating the British music wheat from the chaff. It is entirely thanks to Siva that our series of complete Bridge and Ireland piano works has come to fruition (notwithstanding the huge support of the John Ireland Trust), together with so many other artistically rewarding projects that would have frightened the horses of many a less artistically emboldened label.

It’s been so enjoyable and (needless to say) enormous hard work both performing and recording many of these less traversed areas of the British repertoire – and I hope Siva and I have always retained a sense of perspective. Take Benjamin Dale’s highly innovative, late-romantic Piano Sonata in D minor (1902-05) which was released on Somm last year. Although it may fail to qualify as a masterpiece on account of its occasional *longueurs* of structure, it is an amazingly rich and assured piece of writing from the hand of a seventeen-year-old! This is a work that used to be performed by a glittering array of pianists, including Moiseiwitsch, Myra Hess, Clifford Curzon and Moura Lympny. Revivals of the sonata have been very rare over the last 40 years or so and yet its inclusion in my own recital programmes last year demonstrates what an audience winner it remains.

Our series of CDs devoted to Bridge’s piano music is now drawing to its conclusion and what unjustly neglected riches have been

mined along the way. His Piano Sonata from 1921-24 is probably the most important single large-scale solo piano work by any composer from these shores in the last century and it seems nothing short of scandalous that this masterpiece – a work which can stand shoulder to shoulder alongside any twentieth-century European piano sonata – should be so largely neglected today, both on disc and in the concert-hall.

Ireland does seem to have fared rather better on CD, dating back to the pioneering Lyrita piano recordings of Alan Rowlands, who knew and worked with Ireland in the 1960s. Today, modern versions of his piano music from John Lenehan on Naxos and my own Somm series testify to Ireland’s enduring legacy, but one still struggles to see Ireland represented on piano recital programmes. The best of his piano output – the *Ballade* and *Sarnia*, for example – is never

less than superb, and his combination of memorable melodies, subtle harmonic colourings and an ability to exploit the physical resources of the instrument for maximum dramatic effect are, I think, very special. Ireland’s music, too, has the advantage of appealing to pianists of all levels: a concert work of the complexity of, say, the Piano Sonata sits happily alongside an evocative miniature such as *The Darkened Valley*.

Surely Ireland’s lovely Piano Concerto of 1930 still merits a place in the repertoire. Although not entirely neglected on disc, the relative paucity of versions in the catalogue doesn’t seem to do justice to its musical status. Following the success of its première by Ireland’s pupil Helen Perkin, it was subsequently included in 15 Proms seasons, including performances from leading British and international pianists – Arthur Schnabel (making his Proms début in 1936), Louis Kentner, Eileen Joyce, Lympny, Kendall Taylor. Yet it has not been heard at the Proms since a performance in 1979 with soloist Philip Fowke and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Simon Rattle. During his Birmingham tenure with the CBSO, Rattle expressed his admiration for the work, with its ‘heady mix of late-romanticism and jazz inflections’. Could the Ireland Piano Concerto receive a call from Berlin?

So, too many records ... or should that be too few performances? Maybe that’s nearer the mark.

Mark Bebbington