Glories from the Victorian Era
David Temple conducts Parry and Elgar
Charles Hubert Parry: De profundis – God is our hope and strength
Edward Elgar: From the Bavarian Highlands, Op. 27 – The Snow, Op. 26 No. 1

Sophie Bevan (soprano), Dominic Sedgwick (baritone)
Hertfordshire Chorus
London Mozart Players
David Temple (conductor)
Signum Classics SIGCD1005 (1 CD)

The 129th Psalm (or, with the alternative numbering, the 130th) has inspired composers remarkably strongly over the centuries. Josquin des Prez turned to *De profundis*, as did Orlando di Lasso, Schütz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Zelenka, Charpentier (several times!), Mendelssohn, Raff, Lili Boulanger, Schoenberg, Pärt and Howard Goodall. There are, in fact, countless large-scale and small-scale musical settings of this Psalm, and even Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, left a setting of the text before his untimely death.

This sequence is continued by the English composer Sir Charles Hubert Parry, whose contribution was commissioned by the English Three Choirs Festival for 1891. The first performance was a success, and a number of leading figures in the English musical world—including Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gerald Finzi and Sir Adrian Boult—regarded it, even with hindsight, as Parry's finest work. The fact that it is in many ways a remarkable composition is demonstrated by this recording - the first ever - made under the direction of David Temple with the Hertfordshire Chorus and the London Mozart Players.

On the one hand there is the large-scale scoring, requiring three four-part choirs, which makes it far from easy for ensembles of average size to programme the work. But on the other is the highly individual character of the work. While many settings of this Psalm focus on a human being suffering existentially and burdened by guilt, leading to the realisation that liberation and forgiveness are found with God, and present this as a powerful emotional development, this view is hardly to be found in Parry.

Admittedly, the work begins somewhat in the shadows, perhaps even broodily. But nobody here is standing on the edge of an abyss. the chorus strikes up with the words *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine* (Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord), in a less-than-contrite major key, and a hymn-like, enthusiastic atmosphere quickly unfolds; one might initially find this irritating.

The following cantilena for solo soprano—beautifully lyrical late Romanticism in the tradition of Mendelssohn—contains the crucial textual key to understanding Parry's approach: *Quia apud te propitiatio est* (For with you there is forgiveness).

Parry does not question this at all. It is precisely this unshakeable certainty that God will ultimately grant forgiveness, which determines the tone of the entire composition and permeates it from the first bar to the last. This results—and whether one regards this as something to criticise the composer for is a matter of opinion—in a certain uniformity. The composition deliberately avoids tracing the development described by the Psalm.

That is not to say that engagement with this work is not rewarding. Not for nothing did it attract so much attention at its first performance. The listener encounters an extremely beautiful-sounding, well-proportioned and effective piece of British choral symphonic music lasting around 25 minutes. It is an excellent representative of the great British choral tradition of the late nineteenth century.

Sophie Bevan performs the two soprano cantilenas with an almost ideal tone, making listening a pure pleasure. But naturally the centrepiece is the large and demanding choral part, which David Temple has prepared superbly with the Hertfordshire Chorus under his direction. The choir is convincing with its beautiful, rich choral sound where neither male or female voices dominate, and particularly with its tremendous dynamic flexibility and its feeling for an inspiring presentation of this opulent score.

The same is true of the London Mozart Players, who perform throughout with intelligence and sensitivity, always maintaining differentiation and an appropriately balanced partnership with the choir. Temple conducts confidently and with a keen sense of both large and small Romantic gestures and dramatic effect.

The same applies to the second composition by Parry on this album, also the first-ever recording of the piece: Psalm 46, *God is our hope and strength*. However this work possesses something that *De profundis* lacks: variety of colour and a coherent dramatic flow.

The somewhat more vivid imagery of the Psalm text evidently inspired Parry even more, although the two texts are related in content. Parry wonderfully creates an ecstatic hymn out of darkness—magical in its sound and possessing *at once* that overwhelming force of conviction of the greatness and power of God which *De Profundis* needs to develop as the piece progresses.

The work (about 13-minutes long) is immediately compelling in this performance by Temple and that of his musicians. The listener is immediately struck by the performers' obvious joy to be performing a work that must rank among Parry's greatest achievements. It is an almost cathartic experience.

Also highly convincing is the powerful yet vocally elegant baritone Dominic Sedgwick, who performs the work's brief solo passage: *O come hither, and behold the works of the Lord.*

Once again, it becomes clear that Parry—like a number of other English composers—is, essentially, absent from German concert halls. David Temple and the forces assembled here provide eloquent testimony to what a loss this represents. It is wonderful that productions such as this allow us to discover this repertoire.

The two choral-symphonic works are accompanied on the CD by two more intimate compositions by Edward Elgar.

The first is the early choral song cycle *From the Bavarian Highlands, Op. 27*. It is often pointed out that this is both a musical and textual panorama reflecting the happy period the Elgars spent in Bavaria at the end of the nineteenth century. That is, of course, true. Alice (and Edward) worked on the texts together, and Elgar set them to music.

They pretended that these were texts based on Bavarian folk songs and Schnadahüpfl—short Bavarian folk verses—which Alice had adapted. This should be taken with a pinch of salt...

What Mr and Mrs Elgar actually created, however, is a small cycle of nature-romantic songs taking up very typical themes of German Romanticism: the dance of life, false love, the lullaby, the love song, prayer and the hunt.

It has almost become conventional to criticise Alice's verses (including ones Elgar set elsewhere) as rather mediocre. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that they capture extremely well the folksong style which is required here.

Elgar set the texts for choir and piano, and later also orchestrated them. In doing so he produced a work that fitted wonderfully into the vibrant tradition of English choral societies and was well received. There are consequently already a number of recordings of the work, to which David Temple, the Hertfordshire Chorus and Rufus Frowde at the piano have now added their interpretation.

It is an exceptionally beautiful and nuanced performance of the individual songs, which present a broad spectrum of moods. There is essentially nothing left to be desired. Clarity of the text, dynamic flexibility, and enormous precision in following Elgar's detailed performance instructions—all of this is exemplary in every respect.

The real hidden highlight of this CD, however, is the performance of Elgar's early part-song The Snow, Op. 26 No. 1. This text also comes from Alice Elgar. Using the metaphor of snow, it explores the contrast between the coldness of the world surrounding human beings and the warmth of the heart and soul.

Elgar originally composed the work in 1894 for three-part women's choir, two violins and piano. David Temple, however, decided to record the inspired four-part choral arrangement by John Pointer, a composer and editor at Elgar's publishing house, Novello.

The result is a gem.

Rebecca Turner and Richard Smith on violins, Rufus Frowde at the piano, the choir and Temple turn this song into a genuine event in late-Victorian choral music, demonstrating the expressiveness that placed Elgar ahead of many of his contemporaries.

All in all, a highly recommended production.

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