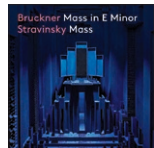


Bruckner • Stravinsky

Bruckner: Mass No. 2 in E minor;
Stravinsky: Mass

Berlin Radio Choir; Members of the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra/
Gijs Leenaars

Pentatone PTC 5186 774 53:10 mins



It's a splendid coupling; these are the two most original mass-settings since Beethoven's

Missa solemnis, both making strikingly un-Romantic use of a wind ensemble. The Berlin Radio Choir are thoroughbreds, and to hear them tackling Bruckner's high soprano writing and sustained *fortissimo* declamations, to say nothing of Stravinsky's ear-testing harmonic twists, is to marvel that it can be all brought off with so little apparent effort. Not only so, but director Gijs Leenaars, his singers and his musicians, all have a remarkably strong sense of line. You're never in any doubt about where the music is going. The superb opening crescendo of Bruckner's Sanctus, the sinuous polyphony of Stravinsky's Gloria, both seem to emerge in one beautifully controlled phrase. When it comes to structural and technical command this beats just about all the rivals I can think of.

I like the contained expression too – most of the time. Yes, grand operatic emoting would ruin both these pieces, but there have been performances of Bruckner's Agnus Dei that convey more awe and pathos, and renditions of Stravinsky's Credo with more delicate rhythmic bounce. Nor does it feel quite right that Bruckner's exquisite twofold genuflection to the Blessed Virgin in his Credo should flow by so smoothly. The recordings are very good in terms of atmosphere and clarity, but the perspective on the wind instruments feels slightly more intimate than that on the singers which, once you've noticed it, is a tiny bit distracting. If anything, shouldn't it be the other way around? *Stephen Johnson*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Michael Daugherty

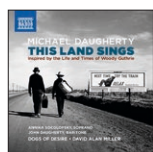
This Land Sings

Annika Socolofsky (soprano), John Daugherty (baritone); Dogs of Desire/
David Alan Miller

Naxos 8.559889 66:44 mins



Clear command: baritone Ashley Riches leads the way with John Gardner



'Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple,' said the American

folk musician Woody Guthrie. A classical take on the life of this iconic musician is a risky undertaking, not least because the deceptively simple output of the 'Dust Bowl troubadour' is so complete in itself. Yet composer Michael Daugherty has succeeded in creating something wholly engaging and original without tampering with Guthrie's own musical legacy.

This Land Sings: Inspired by the Life and Times of Woody Guthrie (2016) is an arresting tribute to Guthrie that evokes the themes of his work and landscapes of his travels with wit and imagination. Scored for soprano, baritone and chamber ensemble, the piece is divided into 17 short 'numbers', some vocal, some instrumental, in homage to radio shows of the 1940s and '50s that Guthrie so often played on. Daugherty's agile score fizzles with colour to explore the character and preoccupations of Guthrie with both courage and sensitivity. Amid the recast folk tunes and rich evocations of landscape are flashes of activism, including 'This Trombone Kills Fascists', a dynamic duet for trombone and percussion that is a witty play on the slogan Woody painted on his guitar: 'This Machine Kills Fascists'.

The Tulsa Camerata bring a luminous clarity to the score while

vocalist Annika Socolofsky sings with raw beauty, albeit occasionally struggling with the more operatic corners of the work. Skilfully scored and performed with exuberance, this excellent release offers a fitting celebration of the inimitable Woody Guthrie's life and work.

Kate Wakeling

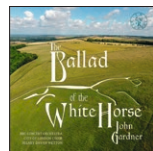
PERFORMANCE ★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

J Gardner

The Ballad of the White Horse; An English Ballad

Ashley Riches (baritone); Paulina Voices; City of London Choir; BBC Concert Orchestra/
Hilary Davan Wetton

EM Records EMRCD057 64:30 mins



EM Records' second disc devoted to John Gardner is dominated by *The Ballad of the White Horse*, a 50-minute cantata in eight movements first heard in 1959. Drawing on Chesterton's epic poem of the same name for its text, it putatively tells the story of King Alfred and the Danes. The title refers to the Uffington horse, which Chesterton and Gardner use as a barometer of England's ethical purity, both then and in modern times. Unlike Gardner's earlier works, *The Ballad of the White Horse* is self-consciously conservative in style, reminiscent of the less abrasive aspects of Britten, Vaughan Williams or Walton.

An attractive and well-crafted work, it is easy to understand why Gardner regarded it as his most successful cantata, especially in a performance as committed as this. Ashley Riches is a commanding soloist, his diction never losing clarity in the various places where he moves the story on, such as at the heart of the longest movement, 'The Harp of Alfred'. The City of London Choir and Paulina Voices sing with rousing gusto in the more rambunctious passages, such as 'The Battle of Ethandune', yet with control and hush in the numerous mysterious or poetic moments, such as the barely accompanied opening of 'The baptism of Guthrun'. Both here and in the purely instrumental and charmingly quirky *An English Ballad* (1969), the BBC Concert Orchestra is typically assured and nuanced, while Hilary Davan Wetton paces the performances adroitly. *Christopher Dingle*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Gray • Parry • Stanford • Wood

Gray: Magnificat & Nunc dimittis in F minor*; **Stanford:** Three Latin Motets; Magnificat in B flat;

Parry: Songs of Farewell;

Wood: Nunc dimittis in B flat

*George Purves (treble); Westminster Abbey Choir/James O'Donnell
Hyperion CDA68301 64:03 mins



The masterpiece here is Parry's *Songs of Farewell*, the set of six motets he began in 1906 and

completed during World War I. This opens with 'My Soul, there is a country', whose dance-like four-part polyphony seems to take flight before arriving with a perfect sense of timing at its assured punchline. Although deceptively easy to sing, it needs every singer to be able to listen and balance with their colleagues. Alas, it is at this point that Westminster Abbey Choir crashes the jump.

Under James O'Donnell the Abbey Choir made a very fine album of Elgar motets and anthems some 13 years ago, albeit with a choir of 19 choristers balanced by 19 Lay Vicars. The present recording fields 21 choristers, scarcely balanced by 12 Lay Vicars. Against such odds and faced with rather over-enthusiastic trebles at *forte*, the poor gentlemen