

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: SYMPHONIES 1–3; GERALD BARRY: *BEETHOVEN*, PIANO CONCERTO, NICOLAS HODGES, MARK STONE, BRITTEN SINFONIA CONDUCTED BY THOMAS ADÈS, Signum Classics (2020), (CD) SIGCD616.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: SYMPHONIES 4–6; GERALD BARRY: VIOLA CONCERTO, *THE CONQUEST OF IRELAND*, LAWRENCE POWER, JOSHUA BLOOM, BRITTEN SINFONIA CONDUCTED BY THOMAS ADÈS, Signum Classics (2020), (CD) SIGCD639.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: SYMPHONIES 7–9; GERALD BARRY: *THE ETERNAL RECURRENCE*, JENNIFER FRANCE, CHRISTIANNE STOTJIN, ED LYON, MATTHEW ROSE, BRITTEN SINFONIA CONDUCTED BY THOMAS ADÈS, Signum Classics (2021), (CD) SIGCD659.

Since 2000, when he conducted the premiere of *Wiener Blut* at Aldeburgh, Thomas Adès has been a remarkable advocate for the music of Gerald Barry. He has subsequently directed multiple performances of *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* and the first performances of Barry's most recent operas (*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Alice's Adventures Underground*), while Dublin audiences may recall Adès's mesmerising performance of the solo piano part of *Lisbon* as part of the Adès–Barry festival in 2017. What Adès brings to his performances of the twentieth-century and contemporary music that he loves is a keen ear for texture, a complete understanding of the shape and direction of the material, and a total absence of routine.

The six CDs released on the Signum Classics label stem from a series of live performances given between 2017 and 2019 in which a group of pieces by Barry were performed in conjunction with the nine symphonies of Beethoven. The Beethoven symphonies were performed in chronological sequence and each concert contained works by both composers. In 2017 the first and second symphonies were coupled with Barry's *Beethoven* and the third with *Chevaux-de-frise*. The following year the fourth and fifth were coupled with the piano concerto and the sixth with *The Conquest of Ireland*. Originally the seventh and eight were to be performed in 2019 with *Dead March* but this piece was replaced with the premiere of the less substantial viola concerto. To conclude the series, the ninth was juxtaposed with *The Eternal Recurrence*. Sadly, although *Chevaux-de-frise* is one of Barry's most brilliant compositions, for some reason it does not appear on any of the CDs, even though there would have been room for it on the set with a little rearrangement of the works across the six discs. However, enterprising collectors may be able to track down the National Symphony Orchestra's performance from 1996 under Robert Houlihan or the blistering unattributed Adès

performance that was briefly available with the Irish Museum of Modern Art's journal *Boulevard Magenta*.¹

The five Barry pieces that appear on these CDs form a brief overview of Barry's stylistic development from the mid 90s to the present day and all but one of the pieces is here receiving its first commercial recording. The earliest and, in some ways, the most impressive of the five pieces is *The Conquest of Ireland* from 1995. Taking its text from the racist twelfth-century account by Giraldus Cambrensis of the Irish conquest, Barry begins with Giraldus's comical defence of his writing style before focusing almost entirely on the bizarre physical descriptions of the various soldiers, ranging from the 'feminine' Richard to the 'hairy and sinewy' Hugh.² It concludes with a long description of Hervey who 'considered lawful any act which others wished to perform on him or he wished to perform on others involving lust in all its forms'. This homoerotic flesh parade is interrupted at its central point by a brief description of the timorous and 'barbarous' Irish. Originally composed for the bass Stephen Richardson, Barry took full advantage of his huge range and virtuosity as well as his ability to whistle and to colour the text with the necessary lubricious undertow. Like most of his music from the early 90s, the work is made up of a series of short contrasting sections and the texture is at some points derived via canonic replication of the material. The piece is bursting with exuberant melodies which can be put through the canonic mill (for instance when the bass states that he has chosen a popular style of writing 'decked out with ornaments that are peculiarly mine'), which can be brutally pulverized (during the orchestral interjection after the falsetto description of Hugh) or which can suddenly switch to a mood of withdrawn pathos (when Barry returns to the earlier canonic material at the close of the piece). Joshua Bloom's voice is not as large as Richardson's and his second bout of whistling is reinforced by members of the orchestra. However, his vocal performance delivers a higher level of accuracy and he fearlessly surmounts the ferocious difficulties that are recklessly strewn throughout the twenty-minute piece. Both as a composition and as a performance, this is an extraordinary tour de force.

¹ Gerald Barry, *Orchestral Works*, performed by National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland conducted by Robert Houlihan, Marco Polo, (1997), (CD) 8.225006. Track listing: *Of Queens' Gardens, Chevaux-de-frise, Flamboys, Sur les pointes, Hard D, Diner. Boulevard Magenta*, 2 (2009). The accompanying CD contains unattributed performances of *Chevaux-de-frise, L'Agitation des observateurs, Le Tremblement des voyeurs* and *Kitty Lie Over Across from the Wall*.

² Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Conquest of Ireland*, A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin (eds and trans) (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978).

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By 1999 when Barry composed *The Eternal Recurrence*, he had turned his back on this type of sectional construction and in this work, in the contemporaneous *1998*, and in *Wiener Blut*, he explored different ways of creating larger structures with fewer changes of material. Setting the most famous part of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Barry described the work at the time as being the result of a determination to write a piece in C major.³ Needless to say, Barry does not take a traditional, rational approach to this task and instead *The Eternal Recurrence* consists of a constantly rotating group of shards of tonal sounding material that circle around C and its closest relative pitches. With its rapid-fire soprano writing and frequent recourse to 'ordinary' arpeggios and garish brassy marches the work paved the way (as Jo Kirkbride's liner notes observe) for his next opera *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (2001–05). When I first received the disc and saw a running length of under twelve minutes I thought I was about to hear a performance at super-human speed. However, instead it transpires that an orchestral passage totalling over 170 bars out of the total of 644 bars has been omitted; there is no note on the disc to indicate whether this is a new definitive revision of the work or if the cut was made to accommodate the performance or perhaps even the recording (the disc juxtaposing the piece with Beethoven's ninth runs to over seventy-six minutes). The cuts do not make any discernible difference to the structure of the piece as despite all the frenetic surface activity this is essentially a highly static composition, something which is perhaps less noticeable in this version due to the constant presence of the acrobatic vocal line. Jennifer France tosses off the daunting series of high Cs and Ds with the necessary sense of possessed brilliance, seemingly undaunted by the fact that the large cut means there is no substantial rest for the singer at any point of the work.

Beethoven from 2008 gives us a glimpse of one of the more intriguing might-have-beens of Irish composition. During this period Barry was considering the possibility of writing an opera about Beethoven but fate intervened and he was commissioned to write *The Importance of Being Earnest* which has set him on a very different creative path leading to *Alice's Adventures Underground* with its heavy reliance on extra-musical theatrical effects. *Beethoven* sets the 'Immortal Beloved' letter, which Maynard Solomon suggests was written to Antonie Brentano in July 1812, and gives us a sense

³ Gerald Barry, introduction to the broadcast of *The Eternal Recurrence*, first broadcast 16 June 2000, BBC Radio 3.

of what his Beethoven opera might have been like.⁴ Clearly Barry was drawn to the extraordinary mixture of the mundane (such as the references to the vagaries of the postal system) and the heartfelt, not to mention the ecstatic musings on God, the universe, and the nature of love. Underpinning it all is the way in which this declaration of love is also simultaneously a deliberate withdrawal from any form of intimacy. Musically the work veers from neoclassical simplicity to rambunctious dissonance while the second letter creates an extraordinary intensity through the constant repetition of a gradually rising melodic line. The biggest surprise is reserved for the final letter, the text of which is delivered against an achingly slow and sensuous account of *Adeste Fidelis*. The whole work hovers on a knife-edge between comedy and the tragically poignant. Composed with Stephen Richardson's voice in mind, the bass part is not quite as technically virtuosic as *The Conquest of Ireland* (though it requires the singer to veer from a low D to high falsetto) but perhaps makes more interpretative demands on singer and conductor.

The performance by Mark Stone can be compared with an earlier recording by Richardson, with the Crash Ensemble directed by Paul Hillier, which is available on Orchid Classics, coupled with Barry's other major Beethoven composition, *Schott & Sons, Mainz* (2009).⁵ Comparison of the two soloists is a matter of swings and roundabouts. Richardson has the bigger, fruitier voice and can switch rapidly from intense barking about Esterhazy's eight horses to the queasy colouring of 'I got some pleasure out of it' while by the end of the piece he seems to be channelling Churchill as he states 'No one else can ever possess my heart – never – never'. However, he no longer has the fearless falsetto that can be heard in his recordings of *The Intelligence Park* and *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit*, and a number of passages notated in the treble clef, most notably in the second letter, are transposed down to a more manageable register. Stone has clearer diction (assisted by the clearer acoustic), though his care over words sometimes comes at a slight cost to the legato tone, with which Richardson can bring greater intensity to the slowly rising lines in the second letter. Stone is also more precise about the details of the score and includes all but one of the treble clef passages.⁶ However, the passages in the second letter below the bass stave

⁴ Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, 2nd edition (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2001), 207–47.

⁵ Gerald Barry, *Barry meets Beethoven*, performed by Stephen Richardson, Chamber Choir Ireland, Crash Ensemble conducted by Paul Hillier, Orchid Classics (2016), (CD) ORC 1000055. Track listing: *Beethoven, Oh Lord how vain, The Coming of Winter, First Sorrow, Long Time, Schott & Sons, Mainz*.

⁶ A note in the study score indicates that the work may have been revised since 2015 when it was issued, which may explain this deviation from the printed text. Gerald Barry, *Beethoven* (Mainz: Schott Music Ltd., 2015).

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(a string of repeated Ds and various rising lines) are out of his vocal range and are transposed upwards, sometimes becoming falsetto shrieks, and this necessitates various other bits of transposition in both directions. In short, with their different voice types, both singers provide compelling depictions of the vacillating composer. However, the accompaniment from Adès and the Britten Sinfonia is in a completely different league to Hillier and the Crash Ensemble. Adès brings far more imagination to the piece and from the very opening revels in the colours of the score. Details that are inaudible in the Crash performance, like the rasping low trombone part in the opening section, spring out of the texture; while the swimmy acoustic in the Crash performance makes it hard to hear things clearly, it sounds as if the trombone actually omits all the lower notes. When the music suddenly veers into atonal territory as Beethoven describes a nightmarish nocturnal journey, Hillier plods through the passage with no clear shaping of the phrases, whereas Adès knows exactly how each part combines to create a coherent musical line. Passages such as the orchestral interlude after the second letter at figure J sound tentative in the studio recording, whereas the live Adès performance dances along with light rhythmic pointing. He also brings greater intensity to the rising chromatic line in the second letter and begins the third letter at a slower pace, relishing the composed rubato in each phrase. Combined with Richardson's more stilted delivery of this final letter (somewhat in the manner of Barry's *Lady Bracknell*), Hillier's stiffer approach means this does not have the same impact as in the Adès performance. All in all, the contrast in performances is a telling illustration of why Barry places such a high value on Adès's interpretations of his work.

The piano concerto (2012) is the first and, by some distance, the most demanding and impressive of a series of concerti Barry has embarked on in recent years.⁷ Kirkbride's liner notes mention that Barry has stated (mischievously, one guesses) that the concerto is more akin 'to a play or opera'. Indeed. To be more precise it is related to *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* from which all the musical material stems. However, this is not the sort of direct and literal transferring of material from one piece to another which one finds in some of Barry's other work. Instead, it is as if the opera has been thrown into a shredder and a new piece has been quarried from the shattered remains. This is a more challenging work for the listener to grapple with than the other

⁷ Apart from the piano and viola concerti featured on these discs, this group of compositions also includes an organ concerto (2017) and a cello concerto (2019).

Barry pieces in the collection. At first one can easily be bewildered by the way in which multiple slivers of material are ruminated on or pushed about by the soloist or different orchestral groupings (particularly the brass). It seems as if there is no relationship between soloist and orchestra and no discernible logic to the way the piece unfolds. But over the course of the twenty-three minutes the work begins to cohere and the piece builds, becoming increasingly dramatic in the exchanges between these different orchestral 'characters'. After an enormous outburst from the entire forces, the end of the piece creates a strangely haunting atmosphere with quiet, diminished seventh arpeggios on the piano accompanied by the sound of two wind machines sounding like some strange remnant of the past that has somehow survived in a hostile environment. The searing performances from soloist Nicolas Hodges, and in particular the brass of the Britten Sinfonia, make listening to the work an enthralling experience.

The viola concerto (2019) is described by the composer as a paean to the joys of technical exercises, and after a striking opening for brass and percussion there follows over ten minutes of almost constant quavers, mainly in 4/4 time, very much in the mode of exercises based on repeated interval patterns. Much of the viola part is written at a sadistically high register, which Laurence Power negotiates with great beauty of tone; this is particularly noticeable when the orchestral violas have to repeat some of the higher phrases immediately after him with decidedly mixed results. After much unison writing for the orchestra with instruments pushed into extreme registers, the work breaks off and finishes with a short melody played meltingly by Power accompanied by bassoons, after which he whistles it unaccompanied. As a whole the fifteen-minute work has a fragmentary, unfinished feel to it, stopping just at a point when one feels something might be about to be done with the various aimless lines of quavers.

In the not insubstantial coupling of the complete Beethoven symphonies, Adès brings some of the same qualities found in his Barry performances; a strong sense of colour, attention to each of the contrapuntal lines of a texture, high energy levels and scrupulous observance of the metronome marks. Repeats are all observed, with the exception of the long repeat of the scherzo in the fifth symphony and the repeats in the return of the tempo di menuetto in the eighth symphony. More unusually, in the return of the scherzo after the trio in the second movement of the ninth, he repeats the first half of the scherzo (though not the second part) whereas other performances I am familiar with (and the Bärenreiter Urtext Edition) omit both repeats in the return of the

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scherzo.⁸ Use of vibrato is kept to a minimum. Dynamic markings are carefully followed and accents and staccato marks are sharply observed, though the tendency to clip the longer notes found in the earlier symphonies is not as evident in the later ones. The first two symphonies were recorded in the extremely dry acoustic of the Theatre Royal in Brighton which tends to emphasize the sharp articulation. All the other works were recorded in the Barbican and while that hall has never been noted for its acoustic properties, there is more space around the sound than in the Brighton recordings. The orchestral balance remains consistent across the first eight symphonies. Although all the solo work can be clearly heard and the individual contrapuntal lines are all clearly delineated, the woodwind tend to get obscured in tutti passages; this is particularly noticeable if you compare the recordings with the classic Harnoncourt–Chamber Orchestra of Europe performances, given with similar chamber forces on modern instruments, where the wind instruments are far more consistently prominent.⁹ Possibly due to the presence of the chorus on stage, the balance in the ninth seems subtly different with the wind not quite as recessed, though oddly the first cello entry in the second movement and in each repeat is either inaudible or barely present. On the plus side, violins are seated antiphonally, which pays huge dividends from the *Eroica* onwards. Climaxes are unerringly placed, and in those symphonies which end in long stretches of tonic chords or repeated cadences, there is never a sense of an endless procession of undifferentiated loud bars, but rather, due to careful shaping, the final bar is a clear point of destination. Although the performances are influenced by historically informed practice, Adès is not above making the odd minor adjustment to the text such as the long silent pause in the last movement of the second symphony or transposing the bass part down an octave at bar 153 in the second movement of the *Eroica*. More notable than these is the addition of the piccolo to the third movement of the *Pastoral*, which gives the music a more rustic quality though it could be seen to undermine Beethoven's decision to reserve this colour for the storm section.

As often happens with complete cycles, the results are something of a mixed bag and some symphonies seem to draw a more personal response from Adès than others. The first two symphonies receive the least interesting performances. They are both

⁸ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony no 9 in D minor op. 125*. ed. Jonathan Del Mar (Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1999).

⁹ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphonies 1–9*, performed by Chamber Orchestra of Europe conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Teldec Classics (1991, rereleased 2003), (CD) 0927 49769-2.

efficiently delivered at high speed but there is little sense of give in the phrasing, particularly in the first symphony. Only the finale of the second seems to really take wing, its structural playfulness clearly grabbing Adès's imagination. The *Eroica* draws a more engaged performance, albeit one that again favours forward propulsion. However, in many ways the symphony benefits from a performance that avoids the sort of overwrought monumentalising the piece often receives. The first movement in particular gets a riveting performance, in which Adès is able, at appropriate moments, to unleash playing of remarkable ferocity. While the second movement might dismay traditionalists due to the straight approach taken, the fourth has a dancelike element that brings the symphony to an exuberant close. Only if you require that sense of the transcendent that some conductors bring to the concluding sections of the work will you be disappointed with this performance.

The fourth symphony, recorded the following year, brings a decisive shift in interpretation with much more flexibility than was evident in the earlier symphonies (and the second movement is one of the few movements notably slower than the metronome mark). This is also evident in the fifth which receives a strong performance and while the energy levels are not quite maintained through the entirety of the final movement, the entry of trombones and piccolo is treated as a real event, their rasping and skirling very much to the forefront. The first half of the sixth seems less convincing; it sometimes sounds as if the orchestra is trying to pull back the tempo while Adès keeps chivvying them brusquely onwards. However, from the third movement onwards the performance becomes much more engaged, culminating in a vivid storm which sets the final thanksgiving in relief.

The seventh lends itself naturally to the type of rhythmic buoyancy and propulsion that underpin Adès's interpretations and it is not surprising that this performance from the last year of the concert cycle is one of the successes of the set. He manages to make light work of all the repeats in the scherzo and the furious tempo of the finale makes for an exhilarating experience. However, the performance of the eighth is even more impressive with a real feeling of freshness and excitement. The first movement builds to an extraordinary climax while the inner movements are beautifully characterized thanks to close attention to detail such as the *sforzando* double bass notes in the trio of the third movement. The shaping of the finale is masterly with a wonderful build to the sudden and unexpected return of the tonic after the F sharp minor detour, sounding like someone unexpectedly emerging triumphant (if somewhat battered) after undergoing all sorts of indignities. The ninth begins with a taut and dramatic first movement. The third movement is presented as an interlude after the relentless second movement, the calm surface of which is not really disturbed by the dark interjections between bars 120 and 136. In the final movement the somewhat deliberate pace of bars 654ff stifles to a degree the general exuberance of the

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performance but it regains its spirit in the final sections. The soloists are made up of a gleaming soprano, rich mezzo, characterful bass and the usual strained tenor.

Throughout the cycle, as in the Barry works, the Britten Sinfonia provide high class performances and seem unfazed by the demands placed upon them. Although all performances are live, there are few examples of uncoordinated ensemble or garbled articulation. Wind solos are generally delivered with imagination while the brass deserve plaudits for their sterling work in the Barry pieces. Throughout there is a sense of enjoyment in the music making and despite the highly energetic approach there is a complete absence of the hectoring tone that mars some other historically informed performances (notably John Eliot Gardiner's 1994 set).¹⁰ For some people there will be a sense that while Adès may contemplate the starry firmament, his feet remain firmly on the ground and this is a staunchly rational approach rather than a transcendently mystical one. However, for other tastes, the excitement and liveliness of the performances coupled with an intelligent negotiation of the structures may be enough.

The Britten Sinfonia demonstrated great artistic vision and ambition in mounting this three year cycle and Signum Classics is also to be highly commended for having the imagination to issue the results. Full texts for the vocal works are provided in the accompanying booklets. Barry is extremely lucky to receive the advocacy of so musical an interpreter. At a time when so many orchestral performances of contemporary works are little more than dutiful run-throughs, it is a pleasure to hear recordings that are actually carefully honed and loving interpretations of the individual works. The set is clearly essential for anyone interested in the development of Barry's work, while the Beethoven component will appeal strongly to anyone who wants a set performed à la mode on modern instruments by a conductor with a clear structural understanding of the work, who can bring out interesting textual detail without losing sight of where the music is heading at any point.

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¹⁰ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphonies 1–9*, performed by Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique conducted by John Eliot Gardiner, Deutsche Grammophon (1994), (CD) 439 900 2.