

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Dona nobis pacem; Sancta Civitas

Christina Pier (soprano), Andrew Staples (tenor), Matthew Brook (baritone); Bach Choir;
Winchester Cathedral Choristers; Winchester College Quiristers; Bournemouth SO / David Hill

Naxos 8.572424 64:39 mins

BBC Music Direct £5.99

Vaughan Williams's two most consistently powerful and original large choral works make a natural coupling. They also draw together two of the most important strands in his thinking: the attempt to make sense of first-hand experience of the horror of war, and what a friend called his 'Christian agnosticism' – belief that there was some kind of transcendent meaning in religious writing, even if it wasn't the dogmatic truth the churches claimed for it.

Sancta Civitas (1923-5) is a deeply uncomfortable work, using some of the horrific imagery of the biblical Book of Revelation to confront the still-recent horrors of World War I. It contains some of Vaughan Williams's finest music – especially the gripping opening. *Dona nobis pacem* (1936) is certainly the more compassionate of the two works – surely by this date Vaughan Williams did have sense of what was on the horizon? But it's the sense of foreboding that lingers here: the prayer for peace is impassioned enough, but whether consolation prevails in the end remains an open question. David Hill directs both these works with a strong sense of their overall shape. Dramatic as they are, it's the sense of each as a symphonic journey that emerges most strongly, and convincingly.

Anyone coming to these works for the first time through these recordings is unlikely to be disappointed. The only let-down for me is that the soloists, good as they are, don't match up to Richard Hickox's superb team on his outstanding version: Yvonne Kenny, a top-form Bryn Terfel and a tiny but telling contribution from the late and very much lamented Philip Langridge. In the end that disc remains top recommendation.

Stephen Johnson

Performance ★★★★★

Recording ★★★★★