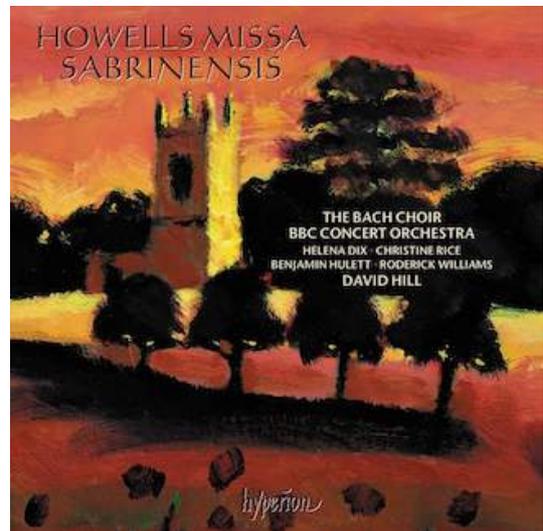


HOWELLS

Missa Sabrinensis

The Bach Choir
BBC Concert Orchestra
David Hill conductor

HYPERION CDA68294



Herbert Howells (1892-1983) like his friend Vaughan Williams, was not a believer, yet he created a vast amount of religious music for the Anglican church, seeing in the text architecture of 'immemorial prose'. David Willcocks commissioned the *Missa Sabrinensis* (*Mass of the Severn*) for the 1954 Worcester Three Choirs Festival.

After its premiere it had few performances until October 1982 when the Bach Choir performed it at the Royal Festival Hall in celebration of Howells's ninetieth birthday (available on YouTube).

Why this should be is a puzzle. It is a challenging work for performers with its complex contrapuntal textures, requiring artists of high calibre and adequate rehearsal time. But it is a masterpiece, one of the great works of 20th century choral music.

Although some portions of the work are reminiscent of Vaughan Williams, Holst and Walton that is only because their works are more familiar. Howells was his own man and there was a reason Bliss in his autobiography described Howells as 'the outstanding talent' of his generation.

In a letter to Walter Emery, Howells described his overall vision, 'Each [movement] builds itself in obedience not only to the text but to the logical sequence of purely musical ideas'. In this recording Mr Hill and his performers allow us to hear and appreciate Howells' magnificent detail in all its glory.

'The logical sequence of purely musical ideas...' is laid before us as impressive as a medieval cathedral; ornate, intricate and wholly satisfying as a work of art. The recording quality is superb as are all the performers, though Helena Dix stands out in her liquid navigation of the high soprano lines.

The disc finishes with a stirring arrangement of Howells hymn tune *Michael*.

PAUL RW JACKSON