

Howells: Missa Sabrinensis (BBC Concert Orchestra, Bach Choir, David Hill)

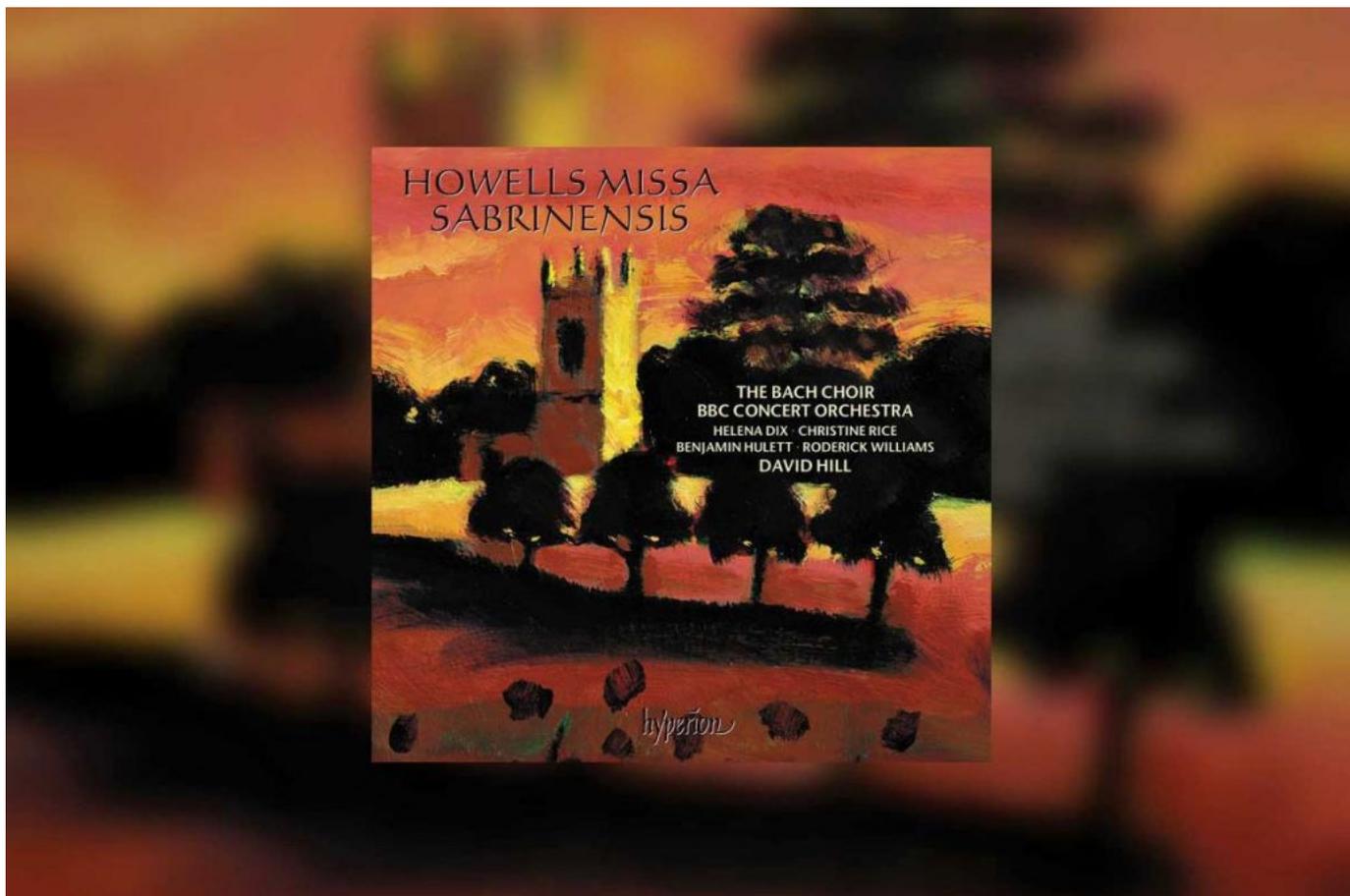
Howells' hidden masterpiece is rescued from obscurity.

Reviewed on August 27, 2020

by [Tony Way](#) on August 28, 2020



Those who think that Herbert Howells is strictly for Anglican church music buffs may have their assumptions challenged by this superb disc. *Missa Sabrinensis* was commissioned by David Willcocks (of King's College fame) for the 1954 Three Choirs Festival in Worcester and forms a companion piece with the better known *Hymnus Paradisi*, also commissioned for the festival.



Missa Sabrinensis (Mass of the Severn) takes its inspiration from the Severn River (Sabrina in Latin) that flows through country that was familiar to Howells. Massive in conception and in the forces required for its performance, this “concert” Mass could be said to be a highly perfumed score, but the perfume is definitely not that of incense. The voluptuous chromatic harmonies, sinuous vocal lines and vibrant orchestral palette evoke a far more exotic aroma. From the opening *Kyrie* embark on a highly charged emotional journey that reaches its high point in the *Sanctus* before the music’s intensity ebbs into a final plea for peace in the *Agnus Dei*.

There is a strong sense throughout this work that Howells is liberated from all sorts of constraints. The strictures and expectations of liturgical brevity, ecclesiastical style and musical resources are all lifted, allowing him to draw on a wide variety of musical influences to produce an entirely unique creation. Psychologically, there is also a shift. While he would understandably remain deeply affected by the death of his son, Michael for the rest of his life, this score also contains moments of great joy, such as the exuberant outburst opening the Gloria.

Its extreme difficulty, especially for the singers and the fact that the parts were handwritten until it was edited for this recording, have prevented the work from being better known. The redoubtable David Hill has seen to both of these hurdles; preparing his Bach Choir with meticulous attention to detail and editing the score and parts in conjunction with Howells scholar, Paul Spicer.

The resulting recording is nothing short of extraordinary. It is hard not to be moved by this music. Apart from the excellence of choir and orchestra, the well-chosen soloists deserve special mention. Australian-born soprano Helena Dix enters into the music’s rapture while tenor Benjamin Hulett has just the right sort of straight English tone that can morph into something more operatic when required. Mezzo Christine Rice and baritone Roderick Williams are also wonderfully expressive.

Missa Sabrinensis has been a hidden masterpiece that has now come to light, thanks to this landmark performance. It undoubtedly puts Howells in a different light. Be borne away on its powerful tide.