

## HOWELLS MISSA SABRINENSIS

The Bach Choir

Director: David Hill

Soli: Helena Dix, Christine Rice, Benjamin Hulett, Roderick Williams

*Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei; Fanfare on 'Michael' (hymn tune).*

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Every reader of this magazine will know that Howells is revered for his anthems, service settings and organ music, much of which is firmly anchored in the repertoire. Important as these works are, though, there is so much more to this composer. His orchestral music includes the glorious *Elegy* for viola, string quartet and string orchestra, a wonderful concerto for string orchestra, the still neglected large-scale cello concerto, and important chamber works which include violin sonatas, string quartets and lovely oboe and clarinet sonatas.

And then there are the three large-scale masterpieces for soloists, chorus and orchestra, *Hymnus Paradisi* and this *Missa Sabrinensis* from the early 1950s, and the *Stabat Mater* from 1965. The *Missa Sabrinensis* was, indeed, a direct result of the success of *Hymnus Paradisi*, having been commissioned by David Willcocks for the 1954 Three Choirs Festival following performances of the earlier work at the Festivals of 1950, 1951 and 1952. After early performances, the work entered a period of neglect; it remained unrevived until a performance in 1982, conducted by David Willcocks in honour of the composer's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Maybe this neglect was due to its unfashionable style, or maybe to its (not undeserved) reputation for extreme difficulty; this is only its second recording.

It certainly is a monumental work of exceptional power and complexity. It grabs the listener and demands attention. Sweeping choral and orchestral lines intertwine, soloists weave and soar around them, the whole texture a glittering, ever-changing panorama. Much is loud or very loud, but there are moments of exceptional beauty too, especially in the 'Benedictus' and 'Agnus Dei'.

David Hill, his four soloists, the Bach Choir, and the BBC Concert Orchestra all know this style inside out, and are alive to every nuance. The performance achieves astonishing power, but not at the expense of clarity nor, where necessary, tenderness. It is a multi-faceted account in which the burning integrity of the composer's vision is faithfully communicated, it is hard to imagine that it could soon be superseded.

*Christopher Barton*