

MUSIC &  
VISION  
classical  
music  
newsletter



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*A view from the pit — Issue 104, 1 December 2016*

**Alice McVeigh:** 'First, I must in all honesty admit to being — long prior to his opera *Jane Eyre* — a passionate John Joubert fan. I attended his cello concerto premiere (performed so eloquently by Raphael Wallfisch): I have often performed his elegant unaccompanied work for cello (*Divisions on a Ground*). I own many CDs of his music, both instrumental and choral. His professional cellist daughter Anna has long been one of my closest friends — as far back as 1987, when I first auditioned for the English Symphony Orchestra.

'Anna accompanied her father to the beginning of the project — she should have been playing on first desk instead of me, but John's in a wheelchair, these days, and she wanted to be able to be his right hand, if necessary. It was wonderful to see her, though I felt a strange mixture of tiredness and buoyancy. The tiredness was probably the driving — I'd hit the M25 around 5.30am; the buoyed-up-itude — if this is a word, which I personally doubt — was certainly the music. I'd felt excited when asked to play the Joubert. I'd felt excited when first practising the cello part, perhaps a week before heading up to Birmingham. But nothing had prepared me for the rich complexity and vivid emotional thrust of actually playing Joubert's *Jane Eyre*.

'From Kenneth Woods' first downbeat I felt intuitively that Joubert, as opera composer, was at the peak of his considerable powers. Moments of almost unbearable poignancy I had expected, along with daring orchestration, cleverly conceived textural interplay and nobly crafted themes — some of the latter used in a few of Joubert's other works. What I hadn't anticipated was the emotional truth of the characterisations, the tumultuous surging fervour of the key scenes — or the terror of making the slightest noise when turning pages, not merely because we were being recorded, but for fear of breaking into

something almost frighteningly, sometimes even harshly, beautiful.

'In short, I knew it would be good, but even I was shocked by just *how* good the music was.' [Read more ...](#)

## SPONSORED FEATURES

Alice McVeigh's John Joubert feature above was recently sponsored by the Jane Eyre Consortium, consisting of the [English Symphony Orchestra](#), [SOMM Recordings](#) and their funding partners.

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**Roderic Dunnett:** 'Gustav Holst (1874-1934) composed around thirty works that declare his interest in oriental, and especially Hindu, culture and religion, and texts written in Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language that was cousin to Greek and Latin. The interest extended to opera: *Sita* was a large scale three-act opera of Wagnerian descent (compare Joseph Holbrooke's *The Cauldron of Annwn* trilogy of broadly the same period, based on the Celtic *Mabinogion*) that languishes unperformed; *Savitri* (1908-9), his one-acter based on the Hindu *Mabharata*, for three solo voices, concealed female choir, three wind and eight strings, has enjoyed better fortune since its premiere in 1916. His all-female voice *Hymns from the Rig Veda* (four groups, revealing elements of a new harmonic exploration, the first three reaching publication in 1911), spanned the years 1908-14.



Matthew Willis

'However the work that Holst firmly believed his best in the overall "Eastern" genre was the last one he composed, *The Cloud Messenger*, for mezzo-soprano solo, chorus and orchestra. Its failure on its weak first performance in 1913, which he conducted, caused the composer much distress: it seemed like a rejection of all he strove for. One later critic dubbed it an accumulation "of desultory incidents, dramatic episodes and ecstatic outpourings": although this seems as much directed at the text and its rather fey dramatic impact as at the music itself.

'It's not a view I can concur with. Having just heard this rare work live for the first time —



its first performance in concert, I gather, since around 1982 — presented by the committed and musically astute Tonbridge Philharmonic Society (founded in 1946, so this year celebrating in style its seventieth anniversary), which deploys its own magnificent full-sized orchestra as well as a substantial, keenly attentive, well-tuned chorus, under their music director Matthew Willis, I found this beautiful and alluring fantasy to be a work whose narrative is in fact remarkably cogent (albeit visionary and imaginary), and whose music shifts convincingly, or mostly so, from moments of high passion to other sequences of appealing gracefulness.' [Read more ...](#)

**Maria Nockin:** 'On 11 November 2016, San Francisco Opera presented Giuseppe Verdi's grand opera *Aida* in a dark-hued but visually interesting production by Francesca Zambello. Michael Yeargan's sets, which are based on designs by RETNA (Marquis Duriel Lewis), combined hieroglyphics and street art with elements of Arabic and Hebrew calligraphy. Many of the props, standards for parades, and ceremonial swords were topped with hieroglyphic cutouts. RETNA and Yeargan presented the audience with a fascinating *mélange* of scripts, but their images were not as bright and colorful as those seen in more traditional *Aidas* of the past. Zambello's production is also being seen at the major opera houses in Minneapolis, Seattle and Washington DC.

'Because Zambello updated the setting to modern times, costume designer Anita Yavich dressed Radames and the other soldiers in military uniforms: beige with a touch of red for Egypt and dull green for Ethiopia. She dressed the women with more color but only Amneris wore luxurious light blue and bright yellow finely embroidered gowns. Aida's dresses were plain and dark because she was a servant. Raymond Aceto as Ramfis and his fellow priests wore transparent black cassocks over uniforms.



Glitter falls on the Triumphal Scene of Verdi's *Aida* at San Francisco Opera. Photo © 2016 Cory Weaver

'Soprano Leah Crocetto and tenor Brian Jagde are former San Francisco Adler Fellows.

They sang the supporting roles of The Priestess and The Messenger in performances of *Aida* during the 2010-2011 season. In 2016, they are singing the leading roles of Aida and Radames. Crocetto's huge talent has equipped her for both the *fortes* and the *pianissimos* of this treacherous role. Her "Ritorna Vincitor" was as well sung as any I have heard. Her glinting high notes soared easily over the entire group in the Triumphal Scene and she demonstrated a tapestry of chest tones as well. Despite a hesitant note at the beginning of "O patria mia", Crocetto's high phrases were pure silver. A golden age soprano once said she often sang Aida ... but never in the ensembles. Crocetto sang all the ensembles and her distinctive voice could always be heard above the fray.'

[Read more ...](#)

**Mike Wheeler:** 'In Opera North's new co-production, with Nederlandse Reisopera, of Britten's *Billy Budd* (Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 16 November 2016), Leslie Travers' ingenious three-level set presents HMS Indomitable as a literal triple-decker universe, but one in which, in Orpha Phela's production, heaven and hell continually invade each other's spaces.'



Members of the cast and the Chorus of Opera North in Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd*. Photo © 2016 Clive Barda

'Captain Vere sings his prologue and epilogue, looking back on events, in front of the interior wall of an obviously once grand building, whose decay echoes similar design features in Opera North's concurrent production of *Der Rosenkavalier*. It then lifts to reveal the ship and crew.'

'Alan Oke's lyrically-phrased Vere is a figure of real humanity, caught in the dilemma of a man who simply wants to do the right thing but is hemmed in by circumstances. (The ship itself is surrounded by walls similar to that of the prologue, adding to the claustrophobic atmosphere.) It is easy to believe in him as a captain who has the respect of his crew.'

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Mike also reviews Opera North's *Rosenkavalier*, listens to Derby Choral Union's all-Mozart evening, to guitarist Craig Ogden, pianists Isata Kanneh-Mason and Richard Uttley, to Sinfonia Viva conducted by Duncan Ward and to Vilde Frang playing Korngold's Violin Concerto with Nicholas Collon and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

**Giuseppe Pennisi:** 'The production is the outcome of very close work between conductor Daniele Gatti and director Pierre Audi and his creative team — Willem Bruls for dramaturgy, Christof Hetzer for sets and costumes, Jean Kalman for lighting and Anna Bertsch for video. It is a highly abstract and symbolic production: the costumes, rather poor, are timeless, the sets just suggestions with fragments of Isolde's ship in the first act, a garden without flowers but with whale bones and teeth in the second act, and rocks in the third. However, the sea is always present at the back of the stage and, in the third act, a mummy set on a scaffold — a frequent African symbol — shows the thrust for real love only after death. Indeed, during the "action" in three acts (as Wagner called it), the two lovers touch each other only for a few seconds. The abstraction is fascinating and fully in tune with Gatti's expanded tempos. The Teatro dell'Opera orchestra was up to the challenge, especially some soloists, for example the clarinet. In short, it provided the right atmosphere and colors for the performance.' [Read more ...](#)



A scene from Act III of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. Photo © 2016 Yasuko Kageyama

Giuseppe also listens to the St Paul Chamber Orchestra's only concert in Rome whilst on tour in Europe, to music by the almost forgotten Francesca Caccini, to the first performance in modern times of Bellini's *Adelson e Salvini* and to the first performance of Filippo Perocco's opera *Aquagranda*.

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## FLYING SOLO – CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS



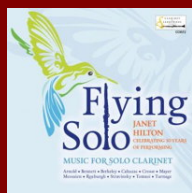
Niklas Hoffmann.  
Photo ©  
Gertrud Ohse

German conductor Niklas Benjamin Hoffmann has won the fourteenth Donatella Flick Conducting Competition.

New York Metropolitan Opera is releasing a twenty-two CD compilation of historic performances from the 1966-7 season, distributed through Warner Classics. Somm Recordings is to release the first ever recording of the Complete Piano Music of Vaughan Williams, including several first performances. Mark Bebbington plays the solo works, joined by Rebeca Omordia for four hand works. Cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason signs a record deal with Decca Classics.



Sheku  
Kanneh-Mason



Janet Hilton -  
Flying Solo

Janet Hilton's latest CD, *Flying Solo*, will be released on Clarinet Classics on 2 December 2016.

Myriad and conductor David Todd mark the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of London 1666, with a choral concert including a rare performance of John Tavener's *The World is Burning*.



Russell Oberlin  
(1928-2016)

We mark the passing of Mark Taimanov, Russell Oberlin, Alexander Yossifov, Pauline Oliveros, Jean-Claude Risset, Ida Levin, Jules Eskin and Zoltán Kocsis.

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## A WEALTH OF PLEASURE – CD REVIEWS



'... beautifully shaped in both the renaissance and contemporary repertoire ...'

**Gerald Fenech:** 'Advent has, for many centuries, always been regarded as a period with its own distinctive words and music and its own very singular liturgical celebrations. And for nearly a thousand years the Catholic Church has always encouraged the custom of the singing of Latin antiphons, all this in the final seven days before Christmas in preparation for the coming of the Saviour on 25 December. These old antiphons, if modest in length, are subtle and powerful, and with their concentrated musical and literary structure they are vehicles of an almost mystic mood of expectation. Indeed, they have come to be known as the "Great O Antiphons".

'Well, this CD is a different bag, for although the spiritual message is the same, its sound world is different. To start with, of the fourteen composers that make up the programme, only four belong to the old school: Pierre Certon (1510-1572), Antoine de Mornable (1530-1553), Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) and Josquin des Prez (1450-1521). The remaining nine were all born in the twentieth century, and all are still alive and kicking. I must admit that apart from Judith Weir, the rest of the bunch are new to me; but the music

certainly does not lack inspiration, and each piece has its own inimitable allure and expressive fervour. Still, what makes this issue so attractive is the inclusion of the saxophone, an instrument that is so akin to the human voice.

'This is Siglo de Oro's first commercial recording, and it is a smash hit on all counts. The singing is beautifully shaped in both the renaissance and contemporary repertoire, and although the singers constantly gravitate towards a slightly robust style, their acuteness of observation is a constant delight.' (Delphian *DCD34184*)

Gerald also listens to orchestral music by Stravinsky (BIS *BIS-2211* SACD), band music by Thomas Coates (MSR Classics *MS 1556*), Schubert songs performed by Florian Boesch and Malcolm Martineau (Onyx Classics *ONYX 4149*), music by Einojuhani Rautavaara (Ondine *ODE 1274-2*), Leonid Sabaneyev's piano music (Toccata Classics *TOCC 0308*), Caroline Howald and Ensemble Isabella d'Este (paraty *PARATY 415133*) and Baltic reflections from Mr McFall's Chamber (Delphian *DCD34156*).

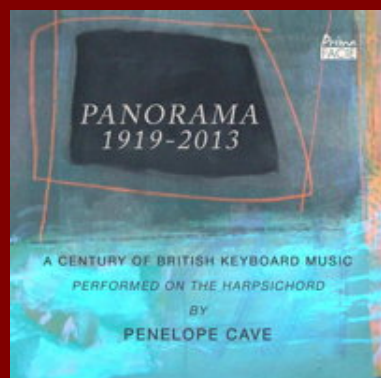
**Roderic Dunnett:** 'The Danish National Radio Choir, under Stefan Parkman, was one of the treasures of the Chandos label's choral output some time ago. The present ensemble first saw light of day in 2007 as the National Vocal Ensemble, and has already been picked up by Naxos. Their singing has been described as transparent, bright and pure, and highly applauded for its remarkable technical precision.



'The singing throughout is of a high quality ...'

'While there are numerous discs of Christmas carols to be explored, the difference here with *Let The Angels Sing* is the freshness of the new arrangements, made by the group's conductor, Michael Bojesen. In particular, he has imported a recorder, here the utterly delightful, expressive virtuoso performer Michala Petri.

'The overall result is a medieval feeling throughout, most especially when the recorder is given an exposed solo passage, as at the opening, in *Infant Holy*, and midway through *Angelus ad Virginem*.' (OUR Recordings *6.220615*)



'... succeeds utterly, as does the immaculately sensitive [Penelope] Cave.'

**Alice McVeigh:** 'This is a fantastic collection of little-known gems, selected, performed (and in one case actually dedicated to) British harpsichordist Penelope Cave.

'It ranges from a Delius work written in 1919 to the ravishing *Le Panorama en Rondeau* (2013) by Raymond Head. The works are presented in order of composition, but — and I found this strange — the CD doesn't feel "bitty" — not at all — indeed, it has a wonderful ebb and flow, either because of the pieces chosen, or because of the marvellous variety Cave brings to them, or both. It's a lovely CD just to put on and let wash over you.

'However, the works, as well as the soloist, deserve consideration in greater detail.



'Starting with Delius' piquant *Dance for Harpsichord*, we then have a first recording, of a *morceau* by Holst (*A Piece for Yvonne*) in 7/4 time. This is followed by four selections from Herbert Howells' delightful *Lambert's Clavichord*. According to Cave's lively programme notes, Howells apparently said, 'Ralph Vaughan Williams had a theory that I was the reincarnation of one of the lesser Tudor luminaries' and — if true — then R V W at that point rang the bell, entitling himself to cigar or coconut, according to choice ... Particularly notable here are overtones of Tudor lutes. The harmonies are affectionately archaic and quirky, while Cave's performance is so effervescent that one can almost imagine Anne Boleyn at Hever, dancing.' (Prima Facie, *PFCD048*)

**Paul Sarcich:** 'One does not normally associate brass bands with concept albums but here we have a double concept — pieces in memoriam to both World Wars and to Benjamin Britten, whose pacificism is stated in the booklet notes as the link. A somewhat tenuous link perhaps, especially as Britten was never a brass band composer, but it has produced a thoughtful program, carried out by the Tredegar Town Band under Ian Porthouse and the Cory Band under Philip Harper and Robert Childs.



'... the bands are the best of Wales and play demanding music with utter professionalism.'

'An effective transcription by Paul Hindmarsh of Britten's *Occasional Overture* is the curtain-raiser, a piece Britten wrote for the launching of the BBC Third Program in 1946, without seemingly devoting much time to it, nor being happy with the first performance. It contains a lot of heraldings and rushing around, sudden changes of mood and texture, and many unsettled ideas. It is not always celebratory in mood and does not have the "big tune" so *de rigueur* in British overtures of the time, so as colourful as it is, it is difficult to see it taking a place in either orchestral or brass band repertoire.

'The first of Robin Holloway's two *War Memorials*, subtitled *Men Marching*, opens as a sombre march, then conjours up something of the sentimental nature of WW1 songs without quotation or becoming sentimental itself. Snappier muted episodes and faster sections when competing voices scream for attention remind us of what these young men were marching towards. Holloway's changes of mood from ear-sweetening to more acerbic harmonies neatly catch the duality of cheerful young men marching off to slaughter. Brass bands are excellent media for extreme changes of texture and Holloway exploits this capability to the full.' (NMC Recordings *NMC D226*)



'... the players show a superb understanding of the melodic line and harmonic structure ...'

**Geoff Pearce:** 'Bohuslav Martinu (1890-1959) is one of my very favourite composers. He wrote this lovely Sonatina for two violins and piano in 1930 but the sleeve notes are incorrect in stating that the music was written at the same time as the opera *Julietta*, which was actually written seven years later, along with the other works mentioned in the sleeve notes.

'The first movement, lively and incisive, suits this ensemble well, but the second movement (as is often the case with Martinu) is where the jewel lies. It was played at the composer's funeral in 1959. The sections where the two violins work together against measured piano chords is absolutely magical. This

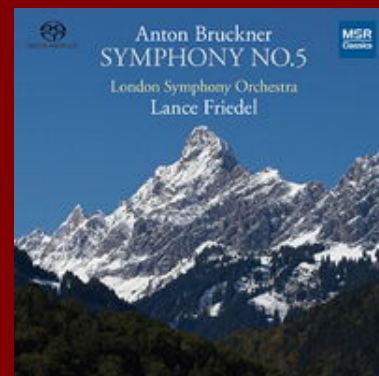
violin work together against measured piano chords is absolutely magical. This



composer can easily bring me to tears.

'In the brilliant *Scherzo*, full of good humour and energy, the three players chase each other all over their instruments. This is followed by the fast last movement, restless and exciting, which acts, as it were, as the icing on the cake, and keeps the players on their toes right up to the last note — a lovely way to end the disc.' (Etcetera *KTC 1543*)

**Stephen Francis Vasta:** 'The Fifth is one of Bruckner's more intricate and ambitious symphonies, not least because of the extended fugue that occupies a big chunk of the *Finale*. By choosing this daunting score for his first recorded Bruckner, Lance Friedel is, effectively, diving into the deep end of the musical pool: he could as easily have opted for the user-friendly if overexposed Seventh, or the still-underrated and -underplayed Second. Still, the choice suggests a willingness to take risks, which is hardly bad; and Friedel rises to at least some of the score's challenges with aplomb.



'The final perorations are resplendent ...'

'The start is a bit clumsy: the sustained strings, entering in turn over the walking *pizzicatos*, "speak" late, as can happen with conductors who were pianists.

'But there are no other such problems, even when the same material returns in the *Finale*. In fact, Friedel displays a fine feeling for orchestral sonority, playing off solo instruments and choirs against each other to create multilayered, appropriately organlike textures, which enhances the interplay of melodic lines. Coupled with springy dotted rhythms and crisp articulation, it also makes the *Finale*'s fugue sound unusually active, while retaining a clear, "open" sound — clearer, in fact, than in Wand's Berlin Philharmonic version (RCA), where the textures thicken as they fill out. The final perorations are resplendent, though they park at one unvaried level.' (MSR Classics *MS 1600*)

The late **Howard Smith** listened to Robert Meyer playing the double bass (6 21365 11542 2) - a companion disc to the book review published last month.

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## ASK ALICE — A SERIOUS MESSAGE ABOUT THE USA

**Alice McVeigh:** 'As friends of mine in the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia orchestras strike — and as even musicians' outcries of support here in the UK are subtly muted, due to the fact that both orchestras' musicians earn well over *double* what they would be earning in the UK — I feel that I ought to write about this.

'But I can't.

'Consider it written, if you don't mind: the whole bit.

'The USA's richest historic endowments of the arts, the UK government's increasing miserliness (not only relating to music, but with regard to all the arts and indeed towards anything not STEM-based), the gradual lack of classical music's grip on contemporary culture, the short-sightedness of countries without the faintest interest in promoting kids' sense of mastery and cognitive development etc.' [Read more ...](#)

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Cartoon of Alice McVeigh.  
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This newsletter, edited by Keith Bramich, is a monthly taster for Basil Ramsey's high quality and colourful online classical music magazine, published every day since January 1999.

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