

BERNARD STEVENS

1916-1983

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Bernard Stevens: Chamber Music
Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble
Albany TROY 572

5 stars

Superb Chamber Music from a Virtually Unknown Composer

Bernard Steven (b. 1916) is a British composer I'd only heard of vaguely but this CD of his Music has led me to realize that he is a composer with his own voice who has written, on the basis of the violin-based chamber music on this disc, some scrumptious neoclassic music. It is no surprise that such a well-regarded group as the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble, who could have given us yet another CD of Brahms or Mozart, has undertaken to record this unfamiliar music. It is all top-drawer stuff. The instrumental star here is Kenneth Sillito, long-time leader (concertmaster) of ASMF and first violin of the Gabrieli String Quartet; he is featured as soloist in three of the five pieces: Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 1 (1940), Fantasia on a Theme of Dowland for Violin and Piano, Op. 23 (1953), and Improvisation for Solo Violin, Op. 48a (1973). The other pieces are the Piano Trio, Op. 3 (1942) and Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano, Op. 38 (1966). In the more than thirty years over which these pieces were written Stevens's own voice is consistently apparent. He writes in what I would call a sweetly neo-Baroque style, by which I mean that his forms and many of his procedures are Baroque in origin, but his harmonies, voice-leading and counterpoint are primarily Romantic; further he uses some of the metric irregularities made familiar by Stravinsky who, after all, more or less invented neo-classicism early last century. This makes for a clarity of form combined with absolutely lush melodies and harmonies, and with catchy rhythms. It is like a superbly cooked meal whose presentation is crisply unfussy yet sometimes surprising, a delight for both mind and heart.

The underlying impulse for Stevens seems to be melody. He writes some almost Bachian tunes, usually fairly short, often used as ostinatos that grow in importance and bury themselves in your subconscious so that when they reappear they impart that delicious 'shock of recognition.' In the Dowland piece he catches and expands on the pensiveness of that composer's sweet air (the galliard 'Can Shee Excuse') This 14-minute piece is a loose set of variations, or rather fantasies, that climax in three emotionally charged Adagios that become, consecutively, more and more like the original tune, so that the ending mirrors the simple beginning, with an overlay of gentle melancholy before a tentative attempt is made at jollity.

I'm not a great fan of the horn trio; it has always seemed to me that the timbre of the horn sticks out too much in the ensemble. Still, some amazing music has been written for the combination (think of the Brahms and Ligeti Horn Trios, say) and I believe Stevens's Horn Trio belongs in that company. It has three movements, all marked Adagio but with a good deal of tempo variation, and indeed the horn has rather a prominent role. It is here played marvelously by Timothy Brown; he is, if I'm not mistaken, a brother of the well-known violinist/conductor, Iona Brown. Some of the writing seems Brittenesque, probably because there are modal harmonies and some horn mordents are similar to those in Britten's immortal Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings. A striking piece,

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this, that rises now and again to dramatic climaxes only to fall back into a musing tone.

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My favorite pieces, by far, are the early Piano Trio and the Violin Sonata. The pianist here is Hamish Milne, well-known for his many recordings on Hyperion, and before that on Conifer and Chandos. The sonata was written while Stevens was still a student at the Royal College of Music. It is in a single 11-minute movement with three sections corresponding more or less to those of a classical sonata. At times it is intensely rhapsodic--it was, I believe, written as a love letter to the woman who became his wife--but the middle movement is faster and contains a number of contrapuntal areas, mostly canonic. The third section's coda returns to the A minor of the opening but then ends in a bright A major.

The Piano Trio, written two years after the Sonata, is probably Stevens's best-known chamber work, having been played numerous times in Britain. But I have no recollection of ever seeing it on a program here in the US. The first movement has one of those catchy ostinati mentioned above and it builds to several dramatic climaxes. There is considerable metric ingenuity in this movement (and also in the finale) and striking use is made of fanfare-like chords in the piano, later in double-stop violin and cello chords. The slow movement is a cantabile outpouring of string-song over throbbing sotto voce piano chords; it moves into the third movement without a break. The finale begins a merry variation of the first movement's main theme but then slips into a lyrical 2/4 theme against $\frac{3}{4}$ accompaniment. Then the main theme returns and all ends in a kind of brusque recapitulation as if to see 'that's all there is, there isn't any more.'

I have to say that this disc came as a distinct surprise and pleasure to me. I will now be on the lookout for more of Stevens's music. I see that there are CDs of an opera and of string quartets on Albany. He definitely deserves to be heard. His voice is his own, but if I were required to compare him to any of his contemporaries I would mention Rubbra.

Worth investigating.

TT=67:56

Scott Morrison

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BIRMINGHAM POST
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CULTURE

CD Reviews

Bernard Stevens: Chamber Music - Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble
(Abbey [sic] TROY 572)

If you have never heard of Bernard Stevens you are not alone. Even he described himself as one of an 'almost lost generation' of British composers.

Since his death 20 years ago there have been several CDs of Stevens' music, and this latest release is bound to fuel interest in his revival. True, the style is fairly traditional and even a little Conservative for a 20th century composer, but one cannot help be impressed by his fine craftsmanship, expressive fluency and sense of musical logic.

The most immediately attractive of the five works here is the *Fantasia on a Theme of Dowland* for violin and piano, played with spirited warmth by Kenneth Sillito and Hamish Milne. Equally accessible is the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* Stevens wrote while still a student at the Royal College of Music - a youthfully romantic and very assured piece. Better still, in terms of arresting themes, rhythmic interest and tight construction, is the *Piano Trio, Op.3*, the most compelling and excitingly driven work on the disc.

Performances throughout are excellent. Generally good, if somewhat over-resonant sound, although the piano is placed too far back on some tracks, resulting in a loss of detail.

Review by David Hart

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REVIEW ON MUSIC WEB

Bernard Stevens' representation on CD continues to unfold slowly but with satisfying thoroughness driven by his widow's indomitable commitment and the intrinsic worth of the music. The two concertos (violin, cello) and the two symphonies (No. 1, Liberation and No. 2) are on a pair of Meridian CDs (CDE84174, CDE84124). The Piano Concerto is on Marco Polo. Albany is the home of CDs of the extraordinarily powerful two String Quartets (TROY455), the opera *The Shadow of the Glen* (TROY418) as well as the present disc.

Stevens' music suffered the eclipse that was the fate of a tonal composer reaching maturity in the 1940s and 1950s. In the broadest sense he can be treated as a 'Cheltenham man' along with such diverse characters as Butterworth, Alwyn, Veale and Gardner at one melodic extreme and Frankel, Fricker (now there's a man who deserves a CPO intégrale!) and Searle at the atonal other with Rawsthorne somewhere in between.

The **Piano Trio**'s motoric rhythms touch on Bartók and Bloch giving way to an impassioned almost cinematic intensity in the slow movement. A chucklingly avuncular *allegro con brio* takes time to enjoy the scenery before returning to intimations of East European angst. A startlingly Howells-like passionate *cantabile* rounds off the work.

The **Violin Sonata** was written for and dedicated to 'the onlie begetter' of this disc, Bertha Stevens - the composer's widow. This looks back to the John Ireland Second Sonata and has those confidently hieratic sturdy piano statements we associate with Ireland. It dates from two years before the Piano Trio and lacks the East European-Hungarian tang of that work. The piece ends calmly musing. It was Bertha Stevens' playing of this fine and succinct work that attracted Max Rostal to commission the Violin Concerto.

Unsurprisingly the **Horn Trio** was written partially as a companion to the Brahms Trio. We are now almost thirty years on from the Violin Sonata and the subtlety of expression has deepened. Stevens uses an obsessive little four-note theme - like a bird-call and deploys this freely amongst the instruments. Its morose course tracks higher and higher until achieving the violin's high F which leads into the second movement (also an *adagio*). The movement is only 2.14 long. The trio play the four-note motif caringly and give it a mid-European folksy flavour which is picked up in the *allegro* finale.

The **Dowland Fantasia** was written ten years after the Piano Trio. It was written for and premiered by Suzanne Rozsa and Paul Hamburger. The theme is Dowland's galliard *Can Shee Excuse*. It nicely complements his *Fantasia on Farnaby's Dream*. The piece muses reflectively and also dances lightly on its Warlockian toes at 05.01 soon disporting in neo-Bachian finery but moving onwards to the more impassioned writing with which it closes.

The spare **Improvisation** for solo violin is ingenious, cheeky though perhaps inevitably predominantly serious. It began life as a work for solo viola composed in 1973 for his daughter Catherine. He wrote the present version for Erich Gruenberg. Both versions happily co-exist. There are plenty of Stevens works awaiting recording. The cantatas have been methodically neglected though they promise well going by a few off-air tapes I have heard. The range is wide:

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Harvest of Peace (Randall Swingler) for soprano, baritone, narrator, chorus and string orchestra and piano (1952), *Pilgrims of Hope* (William Morris) for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra

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(1956), *Thanksgiving* (Tagore) for SATB chorus and string orchestra (1965), *Et Resurrexit* (Ecclesiastes and Swingler) for alto, tenor, chorus and orchestra (1969), *Hymn to Light* (Tagore) for baritone, chorus, orchestra and piano (1971) and *The Turning World* (Swingler) for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra and piano (1971).

This Stevens collection is most engagingly documented by Malcolm Macdonald who also wrote the chapter on Stevens' chamber music in the Kahn & Averill symposium on 'Stevens and His Music' (1989, ISBN 1-871082-03-X).

Stevens was never a pastoralist but instead focused on traditional forms of absolute music working within the agreeable confines of tonality. He was not at all 'grey'; and there is not a trace of the neo-classical or the avant-garde. He perhaps can be seen as a British echo of the line established by Bloch and Rozsa - more the former than the latter. The Piano Trio and Violin Sonata catch him at his most instantly approachable without being in any way ingratiating. As ever Stevens impresses by his patent sincerity. You take him or you leave him. He wrote as he found ... you cannot ask more of a composer. Long may the Stevens Trust continue their valuable work. This disc, the Albany String Quartets and Meridian Violin Concerto are good places to start exploration of the Stevens legacy.

Rob Barnett

FROM GRAMOPHONE, AWARDS ISSUE 2003

B STEVENS

Albany F TROY572 (68 minutes: DDD)

Well-crafted chamber music from the British Shostakovich

Bernard Stevens belonged to the same generation as Britten, but he became a Communist, which brought him into contact with Alan Bush and gave them both some trouble with the establishment. Stevens read music at Cambridge then studied under RO Morris and Gordon Jacob at the RCM, where he later became a professor who was much valued by students and colleagues.

The Violin Sonata so impressed Max Rostal when a student took it to him in 1940 that he commissioned the Violin Concerto, recorded in a stunning performance by Ernst Kovacic (4/90). That student became Stevens' wife Bertha, whose activities since her husband's death in 1983 have kept his music alive. In 1989 she edited *Bernard Stevens and his Music: A Symposium* (Kahn & Averill), with an impressive list of contributors.

The music itself is invariably well crafted - the early influences of Bloch were productive and Stevens also admired Busoni. In some ways he emerges as a kind of British Shostakovich, living a less tortured existence, but somehow the personality which makes a Berkeley or a Rawsthorne immediately identifiable is missing. This could come with knowing the music better: it is obviously rewarding to play, as the high quality of these performances clearly shows.

The most substantial pieces are the remarkably mature Violin and Piano Sonata, his Op 1 and the Piano Trio, both from the war years when Stevens was in the army. There's little change when we come to the Horn Trio from the mid 1960s. By then Stevens had found his language; it was far from fashionable but, like Robert Simpson, he simply stuck to his guns. These chamber pieces fill a gap even if they lack the impact of the works on a larger scale.

Peter Dickinson.

From **International Record Review**, December 2003

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BERNARD STEVENS

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Stevens

Violin Sonata, Op.1, Piano Trio, Op.3, Fantasia on a Theme of Dowland, Op. 23, Horn Trio, Op.38, Improvisation, Op.38a

Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

Perhaps one day an enterprising television arts company will make a series of programmes on British composers whose music was sidelined, or even deliberately ignored, owing to their political views which proved unacceptable to the Establishment. Whereas Tippett, Rawsthorne and Britten came, to a greater or lesser degree, to be counted as major players in music's politicised great and good, somewhat more unyielding left-wing political supporters such as Bernard Stevens, Alan Bush and even Christian Darnton, alongside other gifted musicians, suffered artistically for their social beliefs, their music pointedly ignored.

They're mostly dead now, along with Communism, but their artistic work, and the people they taught, survive and - untrammelled by having to mind our aesthetic 'p's and 'q's (a different generation today, but it's the same difference) - we can examine their legacy in our own unhurried time.

This disc demonstrates, for those who do not know his music, that Stevens was a superb composer. The Piano Trio is a compact (15-minute, three-movement) work of utterly genuine artistic compulsion. There is an inherent sense of momentum in this score which is most impressive - the more so as this quality is rarely encountered in twentieth-century music (it dates from 1942). It receives a wonderful performance, as does the slightly earlier Violin sonata in one movement. Indeed all the works on the CD are very well played by these gifted and highly regarded musicians. Kenneth Sillito, who is heard in all of these pieces, also took the fine photograph which adorns the CD cover. What is so remarkable about this music is that the composer had barely got going (the Sonata is Op.1, the Trio Op.3) yet we encounter a real creative force with something worthwhile to say in his own voice -and the later works are just as compelling.

Stevens is a serious composer, but his music is not without lightness of touch when called for, nor does it lack the occasional trace of musical humour: the Dowland Fantasia, for example, is a delight. Malcolm MacDonald's booklet notes are excellent, as is the recording quality. This is, therefore, a splendid record of some superb music which is all too little known. It is comprehensively recommended.

Robert Matthew-Walker

Bernard Stevens – Chamber Music (Albany)

Bernard Stevens (1916-1983) sometimes spoke of himself as being part of an "almost lost generation" of British composers. With a distinguished training at Cambridge and at the Royal College of Music, whose staff he later joined, he came to some

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prominence with the composition of *A Symphony of Liberation* in 1946, commendably non-jingoistic, but his affiliation with the Communist Party would have done little to endorse him to the British Musical Establishment.

A reluctant promoter of his own works, it has fallen to others to ensure that Stevens's name is not forgotten; his posthumous reputation has grown steadily. There is now a modest discography of Stevens's music, and this present Albany release addresses the medium to which he was repeatedly drawn – that of chamber music.

The Piano Trio (1942), which opens the programme, immediately makes the quality of his music clear. Terse ideas, with contrapuntal devices put to effective use, launch an urgent first movement. The craftsmanship of Steven's writing for his chosen instruments is impeccable, and the interplay between them is supremely well judged. A more songful slow movement, with some poignant melodic writing – beautifully played – leads to a dynamic finale where a major-key resolution of sorts is finally achieved. The compact design of this trio – three movements equally balanced – reveals a telling care for overall design, and the work as a whole makes an instant impression, with its alternation of tempestuous and more wistful ideas.

The Violin Sonata, dating from 1940, is a student work, but no allowances need be made for any youthful shortcomings. On the contrary, this sonata is extremely well wrought, with, once again, the balance between the instruments enabling a judicious sense of dialogue. The piano is no mere accompaniment; its biting harmonies offset some of the more lyrical melodies from the violin. The composer's future wife, Bertha, was the dedicatee of the sonata, and her playing of it led directly to a commission from Max Rostal for a Violin Concerto, which I should now very much like to hear. It is available on Meridian CDE 84174.

Around eight minutes into the one-movement sonata are ghostly musings, which seem to be being re-visited in the opening section of the Horn Trio of 1966, where a similarly chilling, if not unearthly, atmosphere is evoked. I can think of very little English music of this intensity. Rather, I was put in mind of Shostakovich, albeit in mood rather than for any direct musical allusion. There is a somewhat brooding character to this piece, with a particularly striking passage for violin solo, later joined by the horn, at the start of the second movement. Sprung rhythms make for a more impetuous conclusion, but one does not sense that the fretful aura has been entirely dispelled.

The Fantasia on a Theme of Dowland, composed in 1953, is a product of Stevens's interest in Elizabethan music. Indeed, there are four 'Fantasia' works, composed between 1949 and 1953. But the freedom implied by the title does not extend to any meandering music from Stevens's pen; there is the same rigorous control exerted over the material as there is in the other music on this disc. The Dowland Fantasia does not focus exclusively on John Dowland's melancholia; indeed there are moments of comparative high spirits and an exultant coda, which are well-captured by Hamish Milne and Kenneth Sillito.

The Improvisation for Solo Violin, which concludes this CD, exists in two versions – for violin, written in 1973, and for viola, made subsequently for the composer's daughter Catherine in 1978. We return, essentially, to a mood of introspection, though this is offset by more animated passages, with careful exploration of themes, rather belying the 'improvisation' of the title.

The performances on this CD demonstrate affinity and confidence – one or two brief faltering moments from the violin in the sonata and horn trio do not detract. Indeed, the highest compliment one can pay is that this well-recorded disc encourages one to further explore the still-neglected output of Bernard Stevens.

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