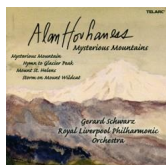


Alan Hovhaness - Mysterious Mountains (2003)

Written by bluesever (Bogdan Marszałkowski)
Wednesday, 15 July 2020 19:43 -

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Symphony No. 2, Mysterious Mountain, Op. 132 1 I. Andante 7:42 2 II. Double Fugue – Moderato Maestoso 5:50 3 III. Andante Espressivo 5:51 *Symphony No. 66, Hymn To Glacier Peak, Op. 428* 4 I. Andante Maestoso 9:07 5 II. Love Song To Hinako – Andante Espressivo 2:47 6 III. Prelude And Fugue – Largo Maestoso 6:44 *Symphony No. 50, Mount St. Helens, Op. 360* 7 I. Andante, Grazioso 10:01 8 II. Spirit Lake – Allegro 7:42 9 III. Volcano – Adagio-Allegro-Adagio 11:33 *Storm On Mount Wildcat, Op. 2, No. 2* 10 Lento Tempestoso 3:37 Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra Gerard Schwarz - conductor

The Hovhaness musical legacy is numerous and still largely inaccessible. There are more symphonies unrecorded than there are recorded ... although that margin is narrowing.

Hovhaness's catalogue is littered with references to mountains. Examples abound: Symphony No. 46 To Green Mountains (recorded on Koch by Vakhtang Jordania), Symphony No. 13 Holy Mountain, Symphony No. 57 Cold Mountain, Mountains and Rivers Without End and the various piano solos including the Mount Katahdin sonata. Indeed the symphony which brought him a major recording contract has a title which combines two potent elements in the Hovhaness vocabulary; mountains and mystery. The work was commissioned by Stokowski after his success with the First Symphony The Exile. Reiner recorded it with the Chicago orchestra. Amongst modern recordings the competition includes an earlier version in which Schwarz conducts the Seattle Symphony (Delos DE 3157). You might also come across the Musicmasters CD on which Dennis Russell Davies directs the American Composers Orchestra. The latter was made in 1988: the Delos Schwarz in 1993.

The Musicmasters disc is forwardly recorded but the strings have a thin edginess that sits uncomfortably with this music of exaltation. The Delos sounds ample, close and luxurious by comparison. Silky textured it may be but not sybaritic. On Telarc Schwarz, a decade after the

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Delos sessions in the presence of the composer, takes almost two minutes more in the first movement *andante con moto* than on the Delos disc. The other two movements are about the same time - well maybe a second or five longer with the RLPO. If the issue was only Mysterious Mountain I would recommend the Delos disc where the music of the first movement is more in touch with the '*con moto*' marking.

Mysterious Mountain is smoothly contoured. There are no horrors or chasms; no nightmares or jagged cliffs. The music proceeds with liquid flow, like some beneficent answer to prayer, a benediction in comfort, a balm and healing. This is all articulated from the vantage point of Vaughan Williams' Tallis Fantasia. There is no 'barkbrod' in this music, no saltpetre or bile. Schwarz communicates this more directly in 1993 (Delos) than he does in 2003 and the Seattle players sound velvety - a most refined yet powerful recording. Nothing serious amiss with the Telarc and glowingly representative of the work. It is just that the Delos sounds that much better.

Hymn to Glacier Peak is his last but one symphony. Initially this sounds similar to Mysterious Mountain but seraphic birdsong intervenes contrasting with the leathery nightmare chorus to be heard in Symphony No. 23 Ani. Birdsong also sings through the Love Song to Hinako middle movement. This echoes the coloratura voice of his wife Hinako Fujihara well known from recordings of earlier works. A dissonant chime sequence, oft repeated, appears in the final movement along with a 'sword wind' fugue typical from the Ninth Symphony (St Vartan) onwards. The music has the powerful surging ebb and flow of Vaughan Williams' Concerto Grosso for massed strings.

The Mount St Helens symphony dates from 1982, two years after the most photographed eruption of all time. This is another flowing work but with very strong melodic interest especially for the woodwind. The second movement, Spirit Lake is alive with the chime of bells suggestive of worship and praise, together with his trademark pizzicato delicacy. There is also strong melodic material as in the oboe song at 1.22. The 'eruption' when it comes is groaned out by percussion and shuddering strings (2.19) with braying, snaking and somersaulting trombones (2.46) straight out of the phantasms of Symphony No. 19 Vishnu.

Storm on Mount Wildcat is a rare survival from the 1930s. The composer had destroyed most of his work from that era in a bonfire of manuscripts. This survived. The noisier parts of it remind me of two orchestral preludes to The Tempest: Sibelius's and, a step or two closer to onomatopoeia, Gösta Nystroem's. The element of aural naturalism is offset by a weaving temple dance.

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The composer's widow, Hinako Fujihara, has done much to promote the composer's music, singing in Celestial Canticle, Presentiment, Kanuko, Mysterious Harp, arias from the opera Pericles, the Sonata for soprano and harp, Symphony No. 38 and others. Mention of Fujihara and her aspiring celestial coloratura reminds me that two LP recordings from the 1980s appear never to have been reissued on CD. One involves Fujihara's singing. It was the Symphony No. 47 titled Walla Walla played by the Walla Walla Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ray Lee Fiese. Fujihara was the singer. This, and another Hovhaness symphony LP, also from the Fujihara Record Company, seem never to have been reissued on CD. I do hope that someone will return to these recordings and make them available again.

While some find Hovhaness unvarying others will sense considerable healing in the spiritual wings of these works. This Telarc disc is a generous way of experiencing his approach to the symphony, recorded and played magnificently 'just down the road' from this reviewer's home. I wish I had known when the sessions were taking place. ---Rob Barnett

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