

## Gerald Finzi - Clarinet Concerto & Cello Concerto (2007)

Written by bluesever

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Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra, op. 31 (1949) [29'19] 01. - 1. *Allegro Vigoroso* 8:51 02. - 2. *Adagio Ma Senza Rigore* 11:52 03. - 3. *Allegro Giocoso* 8:36  
John Denman (clarinet) Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, op.40 (1955) [41'06]  
04. - 1. *Allegro Moderato* 16:52 05. - 2. *Andante Quieto* 14:38 06. - 3. *Adagio – Allegro Giocoso* 9:36  
Yo-Yo Ma (cello) Royal Philharmonic Orchestra Vernon Handley - conductor

There are listeners who swear cellist Yo-Yo Ma is at his best in the English repertoire. They may disregard his Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, and even dismiss his Haydn, Dvorák, and Shostakovich, but they'll solemnly declare Ma's recordings of Elgar, Walton, and Gerald Finzi as the best things he's ever done. To listeners who know Ma only as the big-toned, sweet-hearted super-virtuoso who recorded *Appalachia Waltz*, *Silk Road Journeys*, and *Obrigado Brazil*, the notion that he ever even recorded Finzi's Cello Concerto will be news. Yet, as this Lyrita disc proves, way back in 1979 Ma did indeed record the work with Vernon Handley and the Royal Philharmonic.

And it is a honey of a performance. Ma's in top form -- he never misses a note and his tone is ravishing -- he's hungry -- he never misses a chance to make the most of every opportunity for demonstrating his prowess -- but best of all he's dedicated -- listen to him dig into the opening *Allegro moderato's* coda, or soar with the central *Andante quieto's* big tunes, or swing into the closing *Allegro giocoso's* rollicking rhythms. Combined with the deeply idiomatic and supremely soulful accompaniment of Handley and the RPO, Ma's performance makes a powerful case for Finzi's concerto ranking with Elgar and Walton's as the peaks of the English repertoire. Anyone who likes English music or Ma should hear this disc.

As a generous coupling to Finzi's 41-minute long Cello Concerto, Lyrita has included Finzi's

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29-minute-long Clarinet Concerto recorded in 1977 by soloist John Denman with the New Philharmonia Orchestra led by Bernard Partridge. Another essentially lyrical three-movement work with a particularly expansive central Adagio, Finzi's Clarinet Concerto is easily in the same league as his Cello Concerto and Denman makes as persuasive a case for it as Ma does with the Cello Concerto. Lyrita's late stereo recording is warm, cool, deep, and colorful. ---James Leonard, Rovi

Gerald Finzi's Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra was written with clarinetist Pauline Juler in mind, but in the end received its premiere at the Hereford Three Choirs Festival of 1949 with Frederick Thurston as soloist. The strength of this work's musical ideas, its classically powerful string writing – no doubt partly the result of Finzi's experience as conductor of the Newbury String Players – have made it one of the composer's enduring masterpieces.

Soloist John Denman was born in London into a musical family and attended the Royal Military School of Music, serving as solo clarinet in the Band of the Life Guards, part of the Royal Escort. After leaving the service, he embarked upon a distinguished musical career, playing Principal Clarinet for most of London's major orchestras, performing as concerto soloist and recitalist and broadcasting for the BBC. His discovery and subsequent recording of the second Clarinet Concerto of Louis Spohr established him as one of the leading virtuoso players of the day, while his recording of the Finzi Clarinet Concerto showcases his limpid lyrical playing. I was reminded of Benny Goodman's lovely supple tone while listening to the concerto, and it turns out that Denman went into the American jazz scene after emigrating in 1976. The little touches of vibrato and wonderful sense of phrasing and timing make this performance a delight for the listener right from the start.

There are a few alternatives for this work in the current catalogue, but as luck would have it the only one I have to hand is unlikely to be found in the shops: Michael Collins with the City of London Sinfonia under Richard Hickox on Virgin Classics (VC 7 90718-2). I've been a fan of Collins ever since he came and did a gig at what was later to become my sixth-form college, but I have to admit that I much prefer the characterful playing of Denman. I also prefer the richer Lyrita string sound. The whole thing is like a warm musical bath in which you wish you could wallow all weekend.

The Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, Finzi's last work for substantial forces, is played by a

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very young Yo-Yo Ma, who at this point in his career had not long graduated from Harvard University. It must be one of his very first concerto recordings, but is unacknowledged on his website. Vernon Handley has recorded this concerto as recently as 2001 with Raphael Wallfisch on the Chandos label. I must admit that this is the first time I've come across this work, and can say that the combination of Ma's mature playing and Handley's sensitive orchestral accompaniment make for a moving experience. There is a touching anecdote re-told in Diana McVeagh's comprehensive notes for this Lyrta CD. A little over a year after the work's premiere in July 1955 it was the last music that Finzi heard, on a broadcast that happened to be given on the evening before he died.

Although the music has elements which might be interpreted as nostalgic and expressive of the finality of Finzi's predicament, there is no way this monumental 40 minute work could be heard as the work of a dying man if you didn't know this to be the case. Much of the music has a pithy energy and inner drive which has impact from the start, and resolves in a final movement full of rousing cheer after a remarkable opening of wide pizzicati from the soloist and a pastoral Adagio introduction. The central Andante quieto carries a great deal of the emotional weight of the concerto, with a singing opening theme over an often descending bass line. The music never lapses into soft sentimentality however, and retains a restless character even where the flow is at its most juicily romantic. The climax is hard-won, but worth every minute.

Lyrta's analogue recording is, as one might expect, to a very high standard on this release. Potential purchasers need have no qualms about having to compromise with the analogue taping, there being a distinct lack of tape hiss but bags of detail, spacious stereo and oodles of bass wallop. These recordings are to be welcomed most warmly, and should be part of the beating heart of any collection seeking to contain some of the best of British music. ---Dominy Clements, musicweb-international.com

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