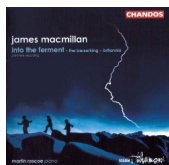


James MacMillan – Into The Ferment (2003)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Britannia* (1994) 12:42 *The Beserking* (1989) - A Concerto For Piano And Orchestra (31:22) 2 = 140+ *Energico* - 9:10 3 = 60 - 12:52 4 = 104 9:20 Into The Ferment (1988 revised 2002) - For Ensemble And Orchestra (23:27) 5 *The Storm* 1:43 6 *Here Are We Met, Three Merry Boys* 2:26 7 *In Dispraise Of Whisky* 1:56 8 *We Are Na' Fou'!* 3:03 9 *It Is The Moon, I Ken Her Horn* 2:57 10 *Three Merry Boys Again (Sometime Later)* 2:25 11 *Wha' First Shall Rise To Gang Awa'* 2:58 12 *Man To Man...Shall Brithers Be...* 3:41 13 *Finale* 2:18 Martin Roscoe - piano (tracks: 2 to 4) BBC Philharmonic Yuri Torchinsky - conductor

The MacMillan discography continues to grow, with BIS and Chandos slugging it out to put his big orchestral compositions on record. This Chandos series has the benefit of the composer's not inconsiderable skills as a conductor in its favour, and this attractively programmed disc will almost certainly win many friends.

In actual fact, most of the music here comes from quite early on in Macmillan's career. The most substantial item is his Piano Concerto from 1989, so pre-dating the work that catapulted him to fame, *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*. The rather quirky title was originally inspired by the Viking 'Berserkers', warriors who plunged themselves headlong into battle, often suicidally. MacMillan saw in this a bizarre correlation with Scottish sport and politics. Attending a Celtic football match, the composer became aware that his team 'turned in a characteristically passionate, frenzied, but ultimately futile display', and that this summed up the 'Scots' seeming facility for shooting themselves in the foot in political and, for that matter, sporting endeavours'. So what is the musical illustration of this? Well, one can follow the gradual build up, where the orchestral players resort to clicking the keys and valves of wind and brass, tapping and slapping the string instruments in a rhythmic, carefully controlled crescendo to the first big outburst. The piano's role in this first movement tends to be textural, with cascading figurations and rippling arpeggios that reminded me of the gamelan sounds in the Tippett Piano Concerto. It has an

energy that we now hear as typical of its composer, helped by responsive and alert playing from the excellent BBC orchestra. The slow section brings the lyrical side of the piano to the fore and we hear almost improvisatory musings on Celtic folk melodies, again typical MacMillan. The finale is characterised by a potent mixture of extreme violence and, ultimately, childlike simplicity. Roscoe's playing has a real muscularity to it, but does not completely eclipse memories of his friend and regular duet partner, Peter Donohoe, who made the premiere recording for RCA in 1995.

That disc also included another item on this new Chandos release, Britannia, a wild and wacky collage that pays homage to Charles Ives. Here the political dimension is rather rammed home, with crude references to God Save the Queen (particularly the line Send Her Victorious), Knees Up Mother Brown and a yobbish, strutting version of the main march theme from Elgar's Cockaigne. All this is 'glued' together by a string threnody straight out of Vaughan Williams, and the whole thing has a subversive black humour that makes it fun to experience but probably not to return to all that often.

Into the Ferment, here receiving its first recording, was written for a school ensemble and similarly mixes riotous high jinxes with elements of folk song and Burnsian poetry. As Stephen Johnson's excellent note tells us, the opening storm music bears more than a passing resemblance to Arnold's Tam O'Shanter, but the whole piece has a raw but vital eclecticism that is infectious and hugely enjoyable.

Recording quality is well up to house standards, and the orchestra is on excellent form. Whilst not erasing memories of the earlier disc, with its new item this Chandos offering will make a strong claim on those collectors who enjoy exploring the contemporary British music scene. ---Tony Haywood, musicweb-international.com

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