

Walton - Belshazzar's Feast □ Violin Concerto □ Coronation Te Deum (2010)



Belshazzar's Feast 1 *Thus Spake Isaiah* 6:03 2 *If I Forget Thee* 5:45 3 *Babylon Was A Great City* 1:17 4 *In Babylon Belshazzar The King* 3:11 5 *Praise Ye The God Of Gold* 4:45 6 *Thus In Babylon, The Mighty City* 3:03 7 *And in That Same hour* 2:08 8 *Then Sing Aloud To God Our Strength* 4:25 9 *The Trumpeters And Pipers* 1:39 10 *Then Sing Aloud To God Our Strength* 4:15
Concerto for Violin in B minor 11 *I Andante tranquillo* 11:19 12 *II Presto capricciosa alla napolitana* 6:39 13 *III Vivace* 12:49 14 *Coronation Te Deum* 10:54

Benjamin Luxon - Baritone Ralph Downes - Organ London Philharmonic Orchestra & Chorus
Sir Georg Solti - Conductor (1-10) Kyung-Wha Chung - Violin London Symphony Orchestra
André Previn - Conductor (11-13) Winchester Cathedral Choir Salisbury Cathedral Choir
London Philharmonic Orchestra Ralph Downes - Organ Sir Georg Solti - Conductor (14)

Solti gives a distinctive performance, sharply focused to give one a uniquely refreshing view of Belshazzar's Feast, Chung gets to the heart of the Violin Concerto, demonstrating its toughness as well as its soul-searching lyrical warmth.

Latterly Sir William Walton has suggested that Belshazzar's Feast, usually described as an oratorio if a very compressed one, is in reality a choral symphony. Whether or not Sir Georg Solti was aware of that obiter dictum, he directs a performance which clearly brings out that symphonic basis, concentrating on musical incisiveness. Though the demands of atmosphere and story-telling are not neglected, they are relatively of less importance. Fresh, scintillating and spiky, it is a performance which gives off electric sparks in every direction, not quite idiomatic in some ways but immensely invigorating.

In that it reflects the live performance at the Royal Festival Hall which Solti directed last March just before Sir William's 75th birthday, using substantially the same forces as here. But where at

the live performance I was concerned that the final "Alleluias", exhilarating as they were, came over a little hectically, that is a reservation which has completely disappeared from my book. The tempi for the final section of thanksgiving remain unusually fast, but there is no hint of breathlessness, and one benefit of Solti's tempi is that the hushed section "While the kings of the earth" (during which fast movement continues on the upper strings) requires hardly any edging of the speed forward but remains almost exactly a tempo. After that the hush of "The trumpeters and pipers are silent" is the more effective for its straightness and hint of detachment.

...[T]he Coronation Te Deum...makes an excellent coupling..., with Solti emphasizing crispness and clarity, [Alexander] Gibson bringing out the urgency at faster tempi. Though the sopranos of the Scottish National Chorus [Gibson] sing with fresh tone, they cannot in the atmospheric semi-chorus passages match the boys from cathedral choirs in the Solti version...

...Walton's own reading [of Belshazzar] still remains unrivalled in the rightness of its tempi and in the choral singing, and the recording sounds amazingly good, better balanced than the new RCA. Previn, a degree more expansive and wonderfully dramatic in the story-telling, is equally idiomatic and the recording is the richest of all, while Gibson's faster tempi make for a performance, joyful above all, which never flags for a moment. Solti gives the most distinctive performance, sharply focused to give one a uniquely refreshing view, helped by recording of superb clarity and brilliance.

Let me confess at once that for me Walton's Violin Concerto is desert-island music, a work I would make sure of keeping by me even if (horrible thought) I had to sacrifice the other great violin concertos of this century, even the two Prokofievs and the Elgar. It was written for Heifetz in 1939 and to my mind the first wartime recording made by Heifetz in Cincinnati has never since been snatched on grounds of performance. Here at last is a modern recording that delves similarly deep into Walton's haunted romanticism. Kyung-Wha Chung may not everywhere quite match Heifetz's incomparable bravura, but far more affectingly than her rivals today and maybe more than Heifetz himself, she gets to the heart of this music, demonstrates its toughness as well as its soul-searching lyrical warmth.

The opening theme still seems to me (as it did when I first heard it as an openmouthed 12-year-old) one of the most ravishingly beautiful melodies written this century, and Kyung-Wha Chung brings to it an agonised intensity that relies not on broad expressive gestures (as Francescatti's fine, red-blooded performance does) but on an inner, brooding manner. So plainly in this playing depths of feeling are implied well below the surface. Menuhin was also inspired by the melody to playing of highly individual insight, but Kyung-Wha Chung's smokey

half-tone is both subtler and firmer than Menuhin's.

I could similarly describe the many wonderful lyrical moments which draw from Chung her special brand of romantic warmth—the second subject of the finale brings a melody at least as ravishing—but her affinity with the music lies not simply with its expressiveness but with its fierceness too. Her incisive double-stopping throughout the performance is a joy to the ear (something one cannot regularly count on), and the toughness of her playing is matched by Previn and the LSO, particularly in the brief tuttis that flash out from time to time in each movement. The same orchestra with the composer conducting provided the accompaniment for the Menuhin performance, but the results were not quite so incisive, and the recording this time, in range of response, inner clarity, and balance with the soloist, outshines the EMI version. Even in authenticity the new version can match the old, when Walton himself was present throughout the Kingsway Hall sessions, usually in the control room, as a sympathetic adviser.

Chung's incisiveness compasses the fearsome virtuoso writing of the Scherzo not just with assurance but with wit and obvious enjoyment in display. My one tiny criticism is that the grace notes before the two longheld high Cs just before fig. 40 are masked. The finale too inspires Chung on both fronts, with swaggering bravura and dreamily beautiful lyricism, and the staccato writing of the difficult coda makes its point here thanks to the seemingly spontaneous rhythmic ebb and flow and the degree of reverberation which adds to the sense of propulsion as well as to the weight. Here in sum is a great, deeply involving performance of a work still not fully recognised in the world repertory. I am glad that Chung over the last eighteen months has been giving performances all over Europe and America. Her understanding of the music as revealed on record has obviously been deepened by the experience. ...[T]he Walton which stamps this as an exceptionally satisfying new issue. ---Edward Greenfield, Gramophone, arkivmusic.com

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Piątek, 07 Wrzesień 2018 13:04 -
