Robert Simpson - Symphony No.11 - Variations On A Theme By Carl Nielsen (2004)



1 Symphony No 11 (1990) 28:56 2 Variations On A Theme By Nielsen (1983) 25:47 City Of London Sinfonia Nicholas Ward – leader Matthew Taylor – conductor

Alongside many other enterprising ventures, Hyperion have put us in their debt with their impressive Simpson series. As far as symphonies are concerned the present release completes the cycle. Moreover, the Variations on a theme by Nielsen, one of Simpson's most enjoyable and approachable works, have – at long last – found their way onto disc. (My fingers are still hurting for having been kept crossed for so many years!). I have long loved this marvellous work, and I cannot understand why it is not heard more often and why it has remained unrecorded for so many years. Now, here it is in a superb performance, carefully prepared, magnificently played and entirely convincing. Simpson's long-lasting affection for and understanding of Nielsen's music are well known, and his book (Carl Nielsen, Symphonist) remains indispensable reading for anyone interested in the Danish composer's work. Nielsen's shadow has loomed large over Simpson's symphonic output, more in spirit than in letter. However the Variations are the only work of his that pays a direct though entirely personal tribute to Nielsen. The theme chosen by Simpson comes from some incidental music written in 1925 for Bergstedt's play Ebbe Skammelsen, thus more or less contemporary with the enigmatic Sixth Symphony. Simpson alone could have lighted on that theme, for who else may have known that score? The theme is scored for wind instruments; and its jollity conceals some unexpected things, for each instrument or group of instruments goes on its own way, each in its own tonality, something that surely appealed to Simpson. The Variations, though they are played without a break, fall into two large sections of fairly equal length, viz. theme and nine variations and a long Finale. Moreover, the first part itself falls into four different sections: theme and variations I-III forming the introduction, variations IV-VI forming a Scherzo-like build-up to the climactic seventh variation, variation VIII being a quicksilver, humorous Scherzo leading into the ninth variation (the longest one) functioning as the slow movement. The whole set is then capped by the imposing Finale. This superb work is as intricately worked-out as anything else in Simpson's symphonic output, but the colourful scoring as well as the energy and humour displayed throughout make it one of Simpson's most endearing achievements.

The Symphony No.11 was written for Matthew Taylor after Simpson had heard him conduct a performance of his Seventh Symphony with a (mostly) student orchestra. So, no wonder that Taylor took over from Vernon Handley here, the more so that Taylor actually conducted the work's first performance. When compared to the monumental Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, the Eleventh Symphony is shorter and more economically scored, and – on the whole – rather more austere and restrained than any of its predecessors, although it too has its grand moments. It is in two movements of equal length, i.e. a long predominantly slow movement and an equally long and weighty Finale. The lighter, chamber-like textures emphasise the strictly contrapuntal writing of much of the music. This is particularly striking in the somewhat understated first movement. The Finale opens like a light-footed Scherzo à la Mendelssohn, but soon gathers considerable momentum, briefly relieved by more static episodes, finally reaching a towering climax punctuated by defiant, menacing timpani strokes, before dissolving into the ambiguous coda, "until the whole things ends with a flick of the wrist, as if dismissed" (thus Robert Simpson as quoted in Taylor's notes). Simpson's Eleventh Symphony, however, should not be regarded as a musical testament of some sort, but rather as a pointer towards new directions he might have followed. This is how I understand its somewhat inconclusive ending.

This release, appropriately dedicated to the late Ted Perry, is up to Hyperion's best. Performances and production are simply magnificent, so that this splendid disc is warmly and unreservedly recommended. My record of the month, for sure. Maybe Hyperion will now manage to record Simpson's concertos? ---Hubert Culot, musicweb-international.com

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