

Simon Heffer

Hinterland

Classical Music has become so marginalised in our culture that even great composers are little known

A century ago, a composer of Ian Venables's high calibre would have been widely known. Sadly, the decline in classical music's importance in our culture, and the cheapening of much of it, has helped ensure Venables, aged 67, remains undiscovered by too many. This is despite his prodigious oeuvre (particularly his English art songs), and the fact that – unlike rather too many of our current composers - he writes thoughtful and melodious music that people actually want to listen to.

A new song cycle, *Portraits of a Mind*, perhaps the best of the many Venables has written, may bring new converts. It was written to commemorate the 150th birthday last year of - Ralph Vaughan Williams and has been released on Albion Records, performed by the tenor Alessandro Fisher accompanied by William Vann, a major champion of English music, and the Navarra String Quartet.

Venables was born in Liverpool in 1955. He later studied music with two other underappreciated British composers: Richard Arnell at the Trinity College of Music and John Joubert at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. However, he has slotted into the strong tradition of music in the region served by the Three Choirs Festival, which rotates among the cathedrals of Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester: the birthplace of the likes of Edward Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Herbert Howells and Ivor Gurney (of whose society Venables is chairman).

Portraits of a Mind, which had its premiere at the Oxford Lieder Festival last October, is the setting of words by poets who inspired Vaughan Williams, beginning with George Meredith's *The Lark Ascending*. The other four songs are *Man Makes Delight His Own* (words by Ursula Vaughan Williams, the composer's second wife), *From a Railway Carriage* (Robert Louis Stevenson), *Echo* (Christina Rossetti) and *A Clear Midnight* (Walt Whitman). A new recording of Vaughan Williams's *On Wenlock Edge* is included on the disc, and Venables has purposely arranged his song cycle for the same forces of tenor, piano and string quartet. *Portraits of a Mind* confirms Venables's reputation as the finest writer of such songs today.

He has written and recorded other superb song cycles. They include *The Song of the Severn* and *The Pine Boughs Past Music*, both featured on a 2015 Signum album, sung by the peerless Roderick Williams and accompanied sensitively by pianist Graham J Lloyd and the Carducci String Quartet. The same accompanists also appear on another Signum album of Venables's songs and song cycles released in 2020, *Love Lives Beyond the Tomb*, sung immaculately by Mary Bevan and Allan Clayton. Like Gerald Finzi, in apostolic succession to whom Venables stands, the composer is extensively read in 20th-century English poetry, particularly the works of the poets of the Great War, and this has inspired his settings on this disc.

However, Venables's most exceptional work is his *Requiem*, which is now available in two forms. The recording of the original version is on Somm, sung by the Gloucester Cathedral

Choir, under Adrian Partington; and now the work has been orchestrated and recorded on Delphian, with the Oxford Contemporary Sinfonia and the Choir of Merton College: The work was impressive on first hearing with just voices and organ; with an orchestra it is fleshed out, seems even more substantial, and should become a fixture in our choral repertoire.

The orchestration of the *Requiem* raises an interesting question for Venables, who hitherto has produced just chamber, choral and vocal music. He really should move on to composing orchestral pieces, possibly even a symphony, because he lacks nothing in talent; and the orchestra is the perfect means to express his deeply English voice. Some critics have accused him of engaging in nostalgia in his compositional style. Why on earth shouldn't he? It seems as legitimate an inspiration as anything else. His voice is original and expressive: he may be inspired by the English masters, but he is not derivative of them. His best work is almost certainly ahead of him.

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