

CD Reviews Sawyers Cello Concerto

"Having a work written for you is surely the ultimate compliment. I imagine that was how the Serbian-French cellist Maja Bogdanovic felt when British composer Philip Sawyers wrote his concerto for her following a commission by the Sydenham International Music Festival in 2010. It is said that what goes around comes around and after a period back in the 1950s and 1960s when to write tunes was considered out of favour composers can again give vent to melody. This **Cello Concerto** opens with an extremely memorable tune that dominates the first movement with the orchestra taking it up from the cello with which it then duets. It is a full-blooded piece in the romantic tradition with echoes of several of the great cello concertos of the past. Booklet writer and conductor Kenneth Woods cites Schumann, Dvořák, Elgar and Walton to which list I would also add Miaskovsky. The second movement is equally beautiful with another extremely attractive tune taking centre-stage. Throughout the concerto the cello is given a truly singing role. The finale is quite different in character to its predecessors with a mercurially whimsical nature that dances around in a much more carefree atmosphere than before. Until one's heard the concerto a few times this movement may strike one as being at odds with the rest of the concerto, as if it came from a completely different era. Only after repeated listening does it seem to fit more happily into the whole and once it has done the entire jigsaw reveals itself as equally *echt* as it is engaging.

Maja Bogdanovic shows herself entirely deserving of Sawyers' attention as dedicatee of the concerto. With her rich tone the Cello Concerto surely has the very best chance of finding a permanent place in the repertoire of many cellists."

Steve Arloff - Musicweb international

"The Cello Concerto opens with a memorable, singing tune reminiscent of the Moeran Cello Concerto and the Walton Violin Concerto. This tune is the basis for a movement that is contrapuntal in nature and structurally satisfying. The hushed introduction to the slow movement leads to another superb melody, given to the oboe and then the cello. In order to describe what the music actually sounds I think that the corresponding movement of the Barber Violin Concerto is pretty close. There is a violent central section where the brass section rudely interrupts the flow but then we are return to the repose of the opening oboe theme. The finale is based on a 12 tone row but there's no need to run for cover if you aren't a disciple of the Second Viennese School. The playful music to be heard here is more Walton than Webern. This is a concerto in the great English tradition and the performance given here by Maja Bogdanovic is superb. The repertoire isn't exactly awash with great cello concertos. This one deserves to join their ranks."

John Whitmore - Musicweb international

Sawyers' **Cello Concerto (2010)** was commissioned by the Sydenham International Music Festival, England and written for cellist Maja Bogdanovic www.majabogdanovic.com, the soloist on this recording. The opening *Allegro* commences with the cello and orchestra in a mellifluous, flowing melody that immediately sticks in the mind. The music soon becomes increasingly passionate but, when the music drops away again there are some lovely varied textures for the cello. The music picks up more rapidly and somewhat anxiously before again falling to a quieter section, pointed up by short, rapid phrases for cello. Eventually a more impassioned orchestral passage arrives that sweeps ahead, leading to sharp staccato phrases when the cello joins for the cadenza. When the orchestra rejoins, it manages to quell the agitated cello to lead it into the gentle melody of the opening.

Higher strings open the *Adagio*, soon joined by horns, then oboe, as the lovely falling melody is revealed. The cello enters taking up the melody, briefly taken by a horn before continuing with a soft and gentle string accompaniment. The cello slowly works up a passionate edge to the music with the various instrumental sections adding individual textural touches. Soon the music suddenly becomes more dramatic with an orchestral passage brass. The cello joins in this dramatic section leading the way before quietening and becoming more reflective, the cello taking the melody against a melancholy orchestral accompaniment. Nevertheless, the cello leads the impassioned music back before dropping to a beautifully hushed coda.

The concerto concludes with a lively *Allegro* where the cello seems to have a dialogue with the orchestra before the orchestra take over. The cello returns as the music falls quieter but no less agitated. Soon a more flowing melody arrives for cello and orchestra but it is interrupted by little rhythmic motifs. The music rises up to become more lively with the orchestra forcing the pace ahead but the cello returns with moments of introspection. However, overall the mood is vibrant with broad sweeps of orchestral sound before, with the cello, it rushes ahead to the coda.

There is terrific playing from cellist, Maja Bogdanovic as well as the Orchestra of the San under Kenneth Woods.

The classical reviewer

The latest work on this CD was also commissioned by the Sydenham International Music Festival for their 2010 event. It was written for the present soloist, the Serbian-French cellist Maja Bogdanovic. The composer has suggested that although the concerto has some 'technically demanding passages' the intention was not to write a virtuosic showpiece; more to reflect on what the 'cello means to me and convey the moods and nuances of expression that I find most appealing in the instrument.'

This is an approachable work that makes an impact on first hearing. The liner-notes mention a critical Sawyers' fingerprint already noted above; the ability to move easily between 'quite traditional chords and a highly chromatic, freely dissonant harmonic vocabulary'. Added to this is the wayward 'interplay' of emotions – at one moment lyrical, then spirited, sometimes

ironic and occasionally ferocious. Yet these are not musical clichés that are strung together: they evolve and develop one to another.

The Cello Concerto is an extremely satisfying representative of a genre that is relatively uncommon in British music. If I was pressed, I would say that a 'finger in the air' comparison would be 'Finzi meets Searle' and discuss Schumann but this is facile. Philip Sawyer's Cello Concerto is unique and will reveal itself in repeated hearings: if it is given the chance.

The notes are excellent - and the print is not too small. They offer an exploration of these three pieces by the present Principal Guest Conductor of the Swan Orchestra, Kenneth Woods. These are interpolated with notes by the composer. Included are biographical details about the performers and the Orchestra of the Swan which is based in Stratford-upon-Avon.

I consider that the performances is exemplary and display the orchestra's skill and enthusiasm. The soloist is clearly impressive in the interpretation of this music.

John France - Musicweb international

Sawyers's Cello Concerto (2010) was written for Maja Bogdanovic, and is also eminently serious and immensely impressive. From the first bars, the listener's attention is gripped as one follows the argument, growing from the beautiful initial theme; the second movement is further proof of this composer's quality – it is contemplative, but possessing a genuine sense of inner momentum: this is not one idea following another, but revealing a flow such as one finds in the slow movements of Brahms's larger structures. It leads to a central faster section full of "anger and tension" (as Woods well says) but handled with complete assurance as the music returns to the mood of the opening, subsumed and at peace. The somewhat unpredictable finale sheds fresh light on this composer's outlook: "I've come to absolutely love it", says Woods – and one hopes that many more will share the experience.

The performance is totally committed and the recording quality is really fine. This is the kind of music that gives one hope for the future of our art.

Robert Matthew-Walker - Classicalsource