

MUSICWEB (re diversions ddv24149 – Erik Chisholm Piano Music volume 6):

Volume six in this series has one especially important collection, Night Songs of the Bards – Six Nocturnes and a series of engaging though lesser works that still repay listening. Written between 1944 and 1951 Night Songs of the Bards embraces a wide range of rhythmic, textual and colouristic influences - Raga, Szymanowski and Sorabji among them. The second Nocturne, the 'Second Bard' opens with driving Lisztian declamation before slowly resolving itself to quietude and reflection. A ghostly patina haunts No.3, where the impress of Szymanowski can perhaps be felt at its most explicit, whilst No.5 is limpid and reflective. No.6 represents the Chieftain, and with its steady, measured, harp-like accompaniment, it evokes a determined narrative with huge authority and a gripping narrative sense.

The writing in these six songful Nocturnes marries virtuosity with rhythmic complexity and lyric introspection. They sound complex both to assimilate and play, but unfold in their own good time, powerfully bardic but sufficiently contrast-conscious always to be involving and thematically interesting, indeed exciting. The writing is often tempestuous, often driven, but always intense, whether at fierce tempi or slow ones.

The Ceol Mor Dances, of which there are six, were written in 1943. There's an imposing pentatonic start, whilst No.2, an Andante moderato, does indeed, as the notes suggest, hint at Satie in the opening bars. The fourth dance has exciting and full textures, whilst the fifth is a brisk, perky little march, and the sixth ends in a splendid flourish. The Dunedin Suite consists of five brief movements that, in their counterpoint, hint at baroque influence, both in nomenclature and ethos. There's an especially wistful melancholy in the Sarabande whilst the Strathspey dissolves quietly by the end of its run course. The nine Scottish Airs are very brief – all under ninety-two seconds – but richly characterised nonetheless; listen to the powerful Bardic splendour of the sixth, for example, or the fulsome culminatory Jig. The Wisdom Book – eleven pieces lasting four and a half minutes – was written for children and the cheery miniatures sound delightful. Chisholm called Dance of the Princess Jaschya-Sheena his 'pot-boiler' but it's surely better than that and very attractive.

Murray McLachlan, as ever, is the conduit through which Chisholm's music flows. His technical armoury and ear for colour are both impeccable and he brings these pieces to life with tremendous intensity and panache, or – when necessary, as in the children's pieces – unpretentious simplicity. With a good recording and booklet notes, those who have been following this series will eagerly wish to acquaint themselves with this release. Start with those Nocturnes.

Jonathan Woolf