

Lloyd-Jones - Naxos Symphony Reviews (2006-2007)

Sir Charles Villiers STANFORD (1852-1924) - MusicWeb - No. 1

Symphony No. 1 in B flat major (1876) [48:36]

Clarinet Concerto Op.80 (1903) [22:03]

Robert Plane (clarinet)

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/David Lloyd-Jones

rec. Concert Hall. Lighthouse, Poole, Dorset, UK, 19-20 June 2007. DDD

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford: Symphonies - Volume 4

NAXOS 8.570356 [70:39]

This release might be said to be a case of "In my beginning is my end" for the Naxos Stanford symphony cycle concludes with his First Symphony.

Written in 1876 and entered for a competition – in which it won second prize – the symphony was not performed until 1879. But this three-year wait was as nothing: in his notes accompanying the Vernon Handley cycle (Chandos) Lewis Foreman says that the work was then forgotten until the Handley recording was made in 1991.

The symphony is on a pretty ambitious scale for a first attempt in the genre; cast in the classic four movements and playing for just over three quarters of an hour. Certainly Stanford did not lack confidence! The substantial first movement is prefaced by an expansive introduction, expressively unfolded by David Lloyd-Jones, after which an energetic *allegro vivace* is unfurled (4:33). The influences on Stanford's music of German romantics – Brahms, Mendelssohn and, in particular, Schumann – are often cited. This *allegro* is a prime example and, to be honest, if I'd heard this music 'blind' and been asked to name the composer I'm sure the name of Schumann would have sprung readily to mind. It's lively, enjoyable music and the performance is similarly lively.

The second movement is an affectionate *ländler*, sporting two contrasting trios. Lloyd-Jones ensures that the music flows easily and naturally. He leads a fine account of the slow movement, which features some especially pleasing string passages. To wrap things up Stanford provides a vigorous, confident finale. This bracing music finds the Bournemouth orchestra in sprightly form. The symphony is an assured and enjoyable start to Stanford's career as a symphonist. The present performance can also be described as assured and enjoyable and, as such, it's on

a par with the previous issues in this series and a fitting culmination to this Naxos cycle.

Stanford's Clarinet Concerto is probably his best-known orchestral work and it makes an appropriate choice to fill out this CD and round off the series, especially as its first performance took place in Bournemouth. Stanford wrote it and initially dedicated it to Richard Mühlfeld, the inspiration behind the clarinet chamber music of Brahms. However, Mühlfeld rejected the work. Like so many other of Stanford's orchestral compositions the concerto fell into neglect after its debut but it was rescued from obscurity by Frederick Thurston and here we have a direct line, as it were, through the late Dame Thea King, pupil and wife of Thurston, to the soloist on this present recording. Robert Plane, the current principal clarinet of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, was a pupil of Dame Thea, who made a celebrated recording of this very concerto, (see [review](#)). He gracefully dedicates his own recording of it to her memory.

It's a fine concerto, in which Stanford writes effectively for the solo instrument. He exploits the athletic potential of the clarinet but, above all, he relishes its woody melodic capabilities. At the heart of the concerto – accounting for nearly half of its length – is the lovely *Andante con moto*. Robert Plane phrases the music sensitively and evocatively and he receives excellent support from the orchestra. I feel sure that Thea King would have delighted in his lyrical account of this movement and that she would have appreciated his sprightly playing in the outer movements. This is a splendid performance and it makes a welcome appendage to the symphony cycle.

It's been a delight to appraise this cycle of the Stanford symphonies. They are not top-drawer works of blazing genius in the manner of the symphonies of Elgar or the best of the Vaughan Williams cycle: in the last analysis the music isn't on the same plane of achievement, nor is it as consistently memorable. However, they are far from negligible and their neglect is as regrettable as it is unjustified. The fine recordings by Vernon Handley are far from displaced in my view but this cycle by David Lloyd-Jones complements the Handley recordings very nicely. It is a cause for celebration that we have not one recorded cycle of the Stanford symphonies available but two. And for me one of the key things is that at the advantageous Naxos price music-lovers will be tempted, I hope, to give these symphonies a try and in that way the audience for them should be expanded.

Anyone coming new to these symphonies can invest with confidence in this disc or in any of its predecessors. As is so often the case with Naxos, the price may be low but the quality of the product is most certainly not.

Naxos are to be thanked for and congratulated on their Stanford cycle. May we now hope that they will turn their attention to Parry's five fine symphonies and some of his other orchestral music, not least his masterly *Symphonic Variations*? I'd venture to suggest that in David Lloyd-Jones and the estimable Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra they have just the team for the job.

John Quinn

see also [Review by John France](#)

Previous releases in this series:

[Review](#) of Symphonies 2 & 5

[Review](#) of Symphonies 3 & 6

[Review](#) of Symphonies 4 & 7

Sir Charles Villiers STANFORD (1852-1924) - MusicWeb 2 & 5

Symphony No. 2 in D minor, '*Elegiac*' (1880) [34:46]

Symphony No. 5 in D major, '*L'Allegro ed il Penseroso*', Op. 56 (1894) [39:47]

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/David Lloyd-Jones

rec. The Concert Hall, Lighthouse, Poole, Dorset, UK, 29-30 June, 25-26 July 2006. DDD

NAXOS 8.570289 [74:33]

Hot on the heels of the first volume of the projected Naxos Stanford symphony cycle (see [review](#)) comes Volume Two, which again features David Lloyd-Jones at the helm of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

The Second symphony was premièred, under the composer's baton, in Cambridge in 1882 and there's a passing link with the subsequent première of the Fourth symphony in Berlin. In that latter concert Joseph Joachim was the soloist in Stanford's Suite for Violin and Orchestra. Joachim also participated in the Cambridge concert of 1882, playing the Brahms concerto on that occasion. Following the first performance in 1882 there was another airing of the Second symphony at the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival in the following year. However, in his notes for Vernon Handley's 1991 recording, Lewis Foreman states that he had been unable to trace any further performances until 1990, when the Ulster Orchestra gave it, presumably as a precursor to the Handley recording for Chandos.

The symphony bears the title '*Elegiac*' and Stanford prefaced the score with four stanzas from Tennyson's poem, *In Memoriam*. However, I'm bound to say that I find it hard to detect any elegiac tone in the music itself. The first movement is marked *Allegro appassionato*. It's a vigorous movement in which one feels the music is moving forward pretty constantly, culminating in a dramatic coda.

The main theme of the second movement, a *Largo espressivo*, is rightly described by annotator Richard Whitehouse, as "both graceful and expressive." This is rather lovely music, which consistently displays a singing quality. This is followed by a genuine scherzo. The outer sections of this quite short movement display a drive that is Beethoven-like. In between is encased a brief lyrical trio but it's noticeable that even here the timpani maintain the rhythmic pulse underneath the music,

albeit quietly, for much of the time.

The finale opens with an adagio introduction that has a decidedly Brahmsian feel. Once the main allegro is reached that section opens with some delightful wind writing after which the music surges along with no little purpose. This finale has genuine drive and momentum and it builds to a jubilant coda in which, once again, I hear the influence of Brahms.

The Fifth symphony dates from 1894 and Stanford drew his inspiration from two poems by John Milton (1608-1674). He inscribed several stanzas from each in the score and, helpfully, Naxos include these verses in the English version of the booklet notes.

The principal subject of the first movement, ushered in by the woodwind at 1:45, is rather jolly. However, there had been quite a degree of urgency to the brief introduction and this urgency remains as a kind of background presence underpinning the essential joviality of the movement as a whole. The music has constant vitality and is fresh and enjoyable to hear. For the second movement Stanford follows the precedent of Brahms by writing an intermezzo, which bears the Brahmsian indication *Allegretto grazioso*. Lewis Foreman described this movement in his note for the Chandos-Handley recording as "a gently pastoral minuet". That's not quite how it comes across in this present performance, however. Lloyd-Jones adopts a slightly faster speed than Handley – he takes 6:28 against Handley's 6:56 – and thereby gives the music quite a different character. I wouldn't presume to say which approach is better. To be truthful, I think both work in their own way though I have a marginal preference for the way the movement goes in Handley's hands. The bottom line is that both conductors are successful in bringing out the genial character of the music.

The third movement, *Andante molto tranquillo*, was inspired by *Il penseroso*. Richard Whitehouse describes this movement as "searching" and I agree. It begins with some fine, expansive string writing, which is gradually enriched by the addition of woodwind and horns. This is Stanford at his noble, expansive best. At 3:47 Stanford introduces new material, with flute and clarinet appropriately to the fore as he responds to Milton's lines about the nightingale, beginning "Sweet bird that shunn'st the noise of folly." This material is developed for a while until, after a majestic passage for brass (around 6:00) the opening lyrical material returns, but this time in even richer guise and it's with this that Stanford brings a most impressive movement to a close.

There's a strange opening to the finale, featuring quiet, stabbing chords. At 0:33 a restless melody in dotted rhythm appears, first on the strings and then taken up by the winds but the music doesn't really seem to get into its stride until about 1:20.

As the movement unfolds the tone becomes more assertive though those stabbing chords keep cropping up. The last of Milton's stanzas quoted by Stanford begins "There let the pealing organ blow" and Stanford does indeed add an organ to the orchestral palette (at 8:10) though its initial entry is quiet, just gently underpinning the orchestra. At 10:34 the full orchestra and organ intone a majestic chorale and one thinks that this is the Big Finish. Not so. The music winds down and Stanford brings the movement instead to a rich, luminous but quiet conclusion, which I find very satisfying and which aptly echoes Milton's words:

*Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all Heav'n before mine eyes.*

It's not easy to place these two symphonies. Neither is the equal of Elgar's symphonies but they are far from negligible and these admirable performances under the convincing leadership of David Lloyd-Jones confirm that they do not deserve the neglect into which they have fallen. Lloyd-Jones obtains fine playing from the Bournemouth orchestra and, as with the previous issue in this series, they have been accorded warm yet detailed sound.

This is another distinguished instalment in this Stanford cycle. Vernon Handley's pioneering set (Chandos) is most certainly not displaced but these Naxos recordings, and this latest one in particular, can stand proudly shoulder to shoulder beside them. Collectors who bought the earlier issue of the Fourth and Seventh symphonies should not hesitate to add this companion volume to their shelves. More please!

John Quinn

Sir Charles Villiers STANFORD (1852-1924) - MusicWeb 4 & 7

Symphony no.4 in F major, op.31 (1888) [42:49]

Symphony no.7 in D minor, op.124 (1911) [28:23]

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/David Lloyd-Jones

rec. 2-3 June 2006, The Concert Hall, Lighthouse, Poole, Dorset, UK

NAXOS 8.570285 [70:52]

Following its première in 1887, Stanford's Third Symphony, the "Irish", achieved an international success which is difficult even to imagine today, when anybody wishing to hear it has to hunt down one of the two recordings – soon to be joined by a third if no mishaps befall this new cycle. Its favourable reception in Germany led to Stanford's being invited to conduct a concert of his music with the Berlin Philharmonic in January 1889. The principal offering was his specially composed Fourth Symphony. So far as I am aware he remains the only British composer to

have conducted a one-man concert in Berlin. However, if he hoped it would become an annual event, this was not to be, though he returned in 1895 to conduct more British music, not all of it by himself. The Fourth Symphony was very warmly received. Nevertheless, for as long as a Stanford symphony remained in the international repertoire – at least until the First World War – it remained the “Irish”.

Though Stanford did not call the work his “German Symphony” he might well have done, for it contains some neatly inserted references to his hosts as well as a motto paraphrased from Goethe’s “Faust”: “Thro’ Youth to Strife, Thro’ Death to Life”. This motto aroused some perplexity as to how it actually fitted the music and Stanford later withdrew it. Strangely, the writer of the Naxos liner-notes, Richard Whitehouse, ignores the issue altogether.

Under the circumstances the clear reference in the opening theme to the F-A-F motto used by Brahms, most notably in his Third Symphony, can hardly be a coincidence, though no other commentator has ever pointed it out to my knowledge. It fits the programme too well: “Freie aber Frohe”, “Free but happy”, the motto of innocent youth. The resemblance of the second theme to the first of Brahms’s “Liebeslieder Walzer” op.52 has been remarked, but its significance becomes plain only in the light of the F-A-F motive; the young man’s freedom has to come to terms with the burgeoning of love. Treated now tenderly, now passionately, the love theme is often interrupted quite brutally by the F-A-F motive, until in a final accelerando the love music gets the better of it. All this is absorbed into a masterly use of classical form, making for a movement which sidles in with apparent innocence but proves to have considerable range.

Aside from the programmatic significance, the use of this theme may have been a sort of “thank you” gesture to his German hosts, since it was in Germany that Stanford had met Jennie Wetton, by now his wife. When he returned to Berlin in 1895 he brought with him his First Piano Concerto, which contained a further allusion to the “Liebeslieder Walzer” theme. It may seem curious, or even improbable, that Stanford should have gone to the trouble to insert in major works such cross-references, the definite interpretation of which he only knew himself. The nearest to a systematic discussion of Stanford’s use of quotation would appear to remain my own, [available](#) on this site, though more recent commentators such as Jeremy Dibble (“Charles Villiers Stanford: Man and Musician”, Oxford 2002) and Paul Rodmell (“Charles Villiers Stanford”, Ashgate 2002) have obviously remarked on the existence of a number of cases.

Vernon Handley’s pioneering recording (Chandos) and David Lloyd-Jones’s new one take very similar views of this movement, brisk but unhurried in the F-A-F-inspired theme, relaxing without indulgence in the love music. However, I find that Lloyd-Jones has a fraction more lift to the phrasing at the beginning and is a tiny bit more affectionate with the lyrical moments. Phrase by phrase there’s little in it, but over the span of the movement I find Lloyd-Jones more engaging. It also helps that he, or his engineers, avoid moments of brass-heaviness which sometimes

beset Handley. Much has been said about Chandos's love of reverberant, brassy sound, but I also sense that Lloyd-Jones himself is more cunning about giving the brass their head when they have thematic material but marking them down when they haven't.

The first part of the Intermezzo was lifted bodily from Stanford's recent incidental music for "Oedipus Tyrannus". To this he added a central trio, mostly for strings only, concluding with a revised and abbreviated version of the "Oedipus Tyrannus" music. We shall never know for sure whether this was a ploy to meet a deadline, but since the Intermezzo originally represented the moment when storm-clouds appeared on the horizon for the house of Oedipus it certainly fitted the programme. With its restless chromatic lines it is a haunting creation and it is understandable that the composer wished it to be heard more widely. Moreover, the Berlin concert also included the Prelude to "Oedipus" so Stanford may have had some further hidden agenda linking the works.

The performance of this movement brings a problem. The original Intermezzo was marked "Allegretto agitato" – the Naxos track-list erroneously has "Allegro" – to which Stanford added "(ma moderato in tempo)" in the Symphony. By no stretch of the imagination can Handley's performance be considered more than "Andante" and there is not a trace of agitation. The music simply sits there, stagnating. It is a tribute to its inherent strength that it still retains a modicum of sense.

Lloyd-Jones is fractionally faster – half a minute shorter overall – though in the trio his tempo sounds identical to Handley's. This is already enough to improve matters, and by digging into the viola counter-phrases at the beginning he allows a trace of agitation to ruffle the surface. Taken in isolation it is in fact very beautiful, with a sort of misty sadness. But you can't take a symphonic movement in isolation. There's a long slow movement to follow and the Symphony is made to have two slow movements. Not surprisingly Paul Rodmell, presumably basing himself on the Handley recording, has remarked that the Symphony "sags seriously in the middle". I am quite convinced it needn't do so. Unfortunately Lloyd-Jones, by marking Handley's "Andante" up to an "Andantino" – definitely no more than that – can only be said to have attenuated the results of a wrong decision. For what it's worth, I have taken the vocal score of "Oedipus" to the piano and played the Intermezzo at what might normally be considered an "Allegretto", and I have studied the orchestral score, and I see no reason why Stanford's clear directions cannot be followed. There was less personal interpretation of tempo markings in the 1880s than there is today; "Allegretto" meant for Stanford the same thing as it did for Brahms and I should be interested to hear Handley or Lloyd-Jones try to conduct the Intermezzo of Brahms's First Symphony at the "Allegretto" tempo they think right for Stanford.

Stanford's "Death" movement opens with what sounds like operatic recitative from the violins. Though it sounds very free it is actually worked out as a fugue. This leads to a funeral march which includes some notable proto-Elgarian phrases. In a major-key episode the recitative theme is transfigured to suggest a vision of the

after-life. There are some powerful climaxes and towards the end of this very fine movement there is a premonition of the rising motive which is to dominate the finale.

Both performances rise to the occasion. However, in the tranquil major-key episode Lloyd-Jones gives the wind-players more space to phrase with the result that the adaptation of the recitative theme sounds natural whereas with Handley it seems a little forced.

The finale undertakes the impossible task of depicting life after death. It caused some puzzlement with contemporary commentators and it is probably for this reason that Stanford preferred to suppress the programme. He would seem to have taken his cue from the final words of "Oedipus": "Therefore, while our eyes wait to see the destined final day, we must call no one happy who is of mortal race, until he hath cross'd life's border, free from pain". Thus the apparent happiness of youthful freedom, which opened the Symphony, is contrasted with the genuine happiness to be attained in the life to come. All very well in theory, but as interpreted by Handley and Lloyd-Jones – of which more below – Stanford's vision of the after-life seems a bit like the eighth square of "Though the Looking-Glass", "all feasting and fun".

There is a curious formal feature to this movement. Firstly – *pace* Lewis Foreman in the notes for the Chandos issue – it is no more a rondo than is the finale of Brahms's First Symphony. It is in sonata form but with the main theme repeated in the tonic at the start of the development. More importantly, Stanford uses a device he had already used in the finale of the "Irish". During the development a new theme is alluded to – here the baroque-like theme in dotted rhythm – which then returns in triumph at the end of the movement. Richard Whitehouse's notes ignore this theme.

I shall have to say at this point that I first studied this Symphony in score about ten years before the issue of the Handley recording. During those years the finale had stuck in my head at a slower pace – "Allegro non troppo" in fact, as written. A certain resemblance on paper – not a thematic similarity – to the great theme of the finale of Brahms's First Symphony seemed to suggest a fairly broad treatment, swinging rather than lolling as these performances do. At this tempo the dotted-rhythm theme would register more strongly and the "Maestoso" conclusion would have its due weight. I was quite aghast when the Handley recording came along and treated it as a sort of jolly dance. Lloyd-Jones takes exactly the same view. He does seem to have grasped the significance of the dotted-rhythm theme and manages to close the Symphony with a more effective "Maestoso" but, as in the second movement, I feel he has only attenuated the effects of a wrong decision.

However, I shall have to admit that when I had access to a score all those years ago I began to copy it out, but only got to the middle of the third movement. Thus, while I am sure of my ground when I speak of the second movement, in the case of the finale I have never been able to re-study it and try to decide if a broader

approach would really work. But I do remember feeling that, while I had no doubt of the quality of the first three movements, I wondered if the themes of the finale were strong enough to bear the weight Stanford placed on them. However, until we have a recording which gives the composer the benefit of the doubt and plays the music at the written tempo, we shall never know for sure whether it works or not. 1912 was the centenary year of the Philharmonic Society and both Stanford and Parry were commissioned to provide a work lasting about twenty minutes. In both cases this was achieved by means of formal innovation; Parry was even uncertain whether to call the result a symphony at all, initially describing it as "Symphonic Fantasia – 1912". Now known as his Fifth Symphony, it is widely considered his orchestral masterpiece.

Stanford seems purposely to have avoided the sort of weight of utterance which would suggest a summation of his symphonic career. A fleeting suggestion of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony at cadence points in the second movement – but nowhere else – may provide a hint that he was addressing the problem of how to write a work which had substance without attempting earth-shaking drama. So successful was he that a number of the work's most original features are barely noticeable. According to Dunhill, Stanford was particularly pleased that he had solved the problem of writing a full-scale symphony which played in under 25 minutes. The trouble is, both available recordings stretch to 28-and-a-half, so evidently some of the tempi are too slow.

Not the first movement, I think. All commentators have remarked on the generally contented, lovable nature of this movement. To achieve this character in the key of D minor is unusual to say the least, if we think of famous D minor symphonies by Beethoven, Schumann, Bruckner and Dvořák, or Brahms's First Piano Concerto. It was already evident from the much earlier Piano Quintet (available on Hyperion CDA67505), also in D minor, that Stanford's Celtic nature means that for him a minor key is not necessarily sad or tragic, nor a major key necessarily happy. He shows a certain ambivalence in this respect towards the accepted tenets of western music. The minor key does not prevent the opening from being one of the most serene symphonic openings in the literature.

A movement in D minor should by rights have its second subject in F major, but Stanford's slips in on the oboe in F *minor* before the strings take it up in the major. Again, its contented character seems impervious to whether it is in the major or the minor. The recapitulation brings a bewitching moment as a new phrase from the bassoon veers the music into D major and the first theme is therefore taken up in that key. However, after some moments of apparent indecision the music closes in the minor.

Although both themes are gentle and lyrical, the transitions and the development are extremely vigorous, resulting in a satisfyingly varied movement, controlled with the hand of a master. Furthermore, this major-minor ambivalence ultimately gives a somewhat unsettled feeling to its apparent contentment. All is not quite as meets the ear.

Both performances are very similar. As is his wont, Lloyd-Jones is a trace more affectionate in the lyrical moments, but in such a concisely argued movement there is much to be said for Handley's slightly greater urgency.

The second movement uses the backdrop of a set of variations to create a double minuet and trio where the reprises are varied so that the original stately opening develops into real scherzo material. Handley's performance sounds soggy at the beginning. It is a difficult opening since Stanford has provided nothing like a pizzicato bass which might immediately establish the minuet character, but I feel a slightly swifter tempo overall would give it more lift and, since the tempi are all interrelated, provide a more bubbling scherzo spirit later on. Lloyd-Jones begins fractionally faster, which already sounds better, but for much of the movement he seems almost identical to Handley, so there's not much in it really. I suggest that about half the excess timing is accounted for by this movement.

The slow movement and finale are linked. The former is another set of variations on a gentle theme which nonetheless produces the nearest Stanford comes in this symphony to anything at all dark or dramatic. Interestingly, the first of these darker variations (no.2) is in the major key and the second (no.4) soon leaves the minor. In between these is an exceptionally beautiful variation dominated by a clarinet solo. In view of Stanford's penchant for thematic cross-references, I wonder if there is any significance in the fact that variations 5 and 6 are dominated by a rising motive identical in its notes – though not its rhythm – to the principal theme of the finale of Symphony no. 4?

By the end of variation 6 the tempo has quickened and the finale bursts in with a blaze of D major glory. In one sense this is variation 7, but it is also a sonata movement in its own right, using the variation theme as its first subject and the clarinet theme from variation 3 as its second. Richard Whitehouse, by the way, seems unaware of these thematic connections and has counted only five variations.

The moment of D major glory is quickly sidestepped and is in fact never re-attained. The development section slips into D minor for an extended reminiscence of the theme from the first movement – again unremarked by Whitehouse. The variation theme then returns in D major, but it steals in calmly, as though the vision is far off. A crescendo does not lead to its triumphant restatement but gives way to the amiable second subject. Attempts by the brass – in distant keys – to suggest that a grandiose return of the principal theme is in the offing are brushed away by an accelerando and an exuberant coda. A brilliant ending which nevertheless leaves the impression that something higher and greater was unable to establish itself. So much for Edwardian self-confidence. In its quiet way this work contains more of the discomfort of great art than is immediately apparent.

Again, little difference between the performances. I suggest that the remainder of the excess timing is to be found in the variations. Both conductors are long-drawn and romantic, consistently with the modern tendency to take slow movements

slower than used to be the case. However, here I complain less since they arguably use the extra time to extract a greater degree of poetry. The Ulster clarinettist is a more expressive soloist in the glorious third variation and there are occasional hints that time was running out in Bournemouth. One or two solo phrases could profitably have been retaken. Just two days for two symphonies is cutting it fine.

Still, if there could be some reason to prefer Handley in no. 7, Lloyd-Jones is clearly preferable in no. 4. If this pattern continues it looks as though the Handley cycle will soon be superseded. Neither should be regarded as definitive, however. Having taken issue with Richard Whitehouse's rather superficial notes, I must conclude by doing so again. Firstly, I don't think anyone regarded Stanford as the "grand old man" of British music at the time of his death in 1924. He had made too many enemies for that and the honour went to Elgar, his own reputation now declining. Stanford and the still-surviving Mackenzie and Cowen were just considered yesterday's men.

More importantly, I don't think that Stanford's symphonies are "central" to his achievement and they certainly don't cover "the greater part of his career". At the time he completed his Seventh Symphony that career still had 13 years to go and only the first two of the six Irish Rhapsodies had appeared. So in terms of his orchestral output he gradually lost interest in the symphony in favour of the rhapsody. However, the symphonies are not really central to his output in the way this can be said of Brahms or even Tchaikovsky. Central to his achievement are the works involving the human voice, while the symphonies are offshoots of his capacity to be convincing in a wide range of forms.

Christopher Howell

Stanford: Symphonies Nos. 3 & 6 - ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 9 Sound Quality: 9*

It's strange that a country so unapologetic about its nationalist enthusiasms, particularly during the Victorian period when Britannia truly "ruled the waves" and was the greatest colonial power in the world, singularly failed to produce a distinctive musical style until Elgar, Holst, and Vaughan Williams really got going. Prior to 1900, and for many composers well past that date, the predominant quality ruling the English symphony was fear: of not following the rules, of not being as good as the Germans, of doing something too unique, or interesting, or surprising, or (God forbid) controversial. Now plenty of German composers fell into this category as well, but the English really had no excuse for working so hard to vanquish any vestige of originality from their music.

Stanford is a case in point. He was surely a talent: his concertos and non-

symphonic orchestral works are quite attractive. The Irish Rhapsodies are delightful. He could write excellent individual movements. For example, at 14 minutes the slow movement of the Sixth symphony seems out of proportion to its surroundings, and yet it contains by far the freshest and most memorable melodic inspiration in the entire work. There's no question as to Stanford's sincerity or depth of feeling, and it's beautifully played here. But his allegro opening movements and finales stubbornly fail to catch fire. Three out of four of them here are qualified with the term "moderato", and that is precisely the problem. Seldom has a genuinely talented composer worked so hard and determinedly to produce such tepid results.

That said, the "Irish" Symphony is by far Stanford's best, the charm of the tunes making up for the stiff handling of form and lack of drama. The same can't be said of the first movement and finale of the Sixth, despite the promising opening of the former, as well as its relative brevity. Certainly David Lloyd-Jones and his players offer committed performances, easily equal to the competition on Chandos, and the engineering is satisfyingly natural. If you're curious about Stanford's symphonic output, this is clearly the place to start. A nice, warm bath is relaxing now and then, even if most listeners will prefer something a little more bracing at both ends of the temperature spectrum. [8/12/2008]

Stanford: Symphonies 4 & 7 - ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 9* *Sound Quality: 9*

Music such as this—well crafted, tuneful, and beautifully scored—probably deserves more attention than it gets. The problem with these symphonies is their near total lack of passion, an accusation often leveled at Victorian English music, and with some justification. But this isn't entirely fair; the "gutless wimp" school of Romantic music originated in Germany with Mendelssohn, and infected scads of later German composers, including Reinecke, Bruch, Rheinberger, and countless others. The problem for England was that for several decades until Elgar came along this style had no serious competition from anyone other than Arthur Sullivan working with W.S. Gilbert. Germany at least had Wagner, Liszt, and in terms of emotional depth, Brahms.

And so we come to these charming works, composed between 1888 and 1911 but sounding as if they could have been written in 1858. Neither taxes the listener, and neither outstays its welcome (though at 42 minutes the Fourth Symphony comes closer than the pithy and crisp Seventh).

This disc is the first in a projected Stanford series, and the performances are certainly every bit as fine as Handley's on Chandos; indeed, the Bournemouth

Symphony is marginally the finer orchestra (Handley has Ulster), and the sonics are as fresh and pure as Stanford's scoring is lucid. I know the first paragraph of this review may sound harsh, but there's no point in gilding the lily. As long as you don't expect anything dramatic or strikingly original, there's plenty to enjoy here.
[5/29/2007]