A Symphonic Mass

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Short Description

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Brighton Festival Chorus

Conducted by George Lloyd
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Notes:

"Some 15 years ago," says George Lloyd, "I wanted to write a Te Deum by way of saying thank you, but parts of the text (the bits about cherubim and seraphim) I felt unable to comprehend, so I wrote a violin concerto instead. A pity, because although I no longer attend any church I am very much a believer. In 1990 I conducted by Twelfth Symphony for a Three Choirs Festival concert at Worcester; as I waited, in the garden of the East End, for my turn, the choir was singing some Delius. The sounds seemed to float from nowhere and blended with a most perfect summer evening; it was a magical moment and I felt that I must try some time to write a choral work with religious overtones. After much searching I fell back on the text of the Mass. I enjoy setting Latin; it is useful for a composer not only because of the fine sounds but because the words can be repeated a dozen times without anyone

noticing. There were still a few difficulties for me but I managed to square these with my own beliefs and I called the result *A Symphonic Mass* to denote that it is non-liturgical."

This disc won a coveted rosette, and is *** recommended by the *Penguin Guide to Compact Discs.*

It was Editor's Choice in ***Gramophone,*** Disc of the Month in ***CD Review,*** and remained in the HMV Top Ten for 8 weeks.

Reviews:

...Writing which is real and genuinely inspired...the music is immediately communicative, deeply felt and without a single facile bar....This, in my view, is one of the finest pieces of English choral writing of the twentieth century. ***Gramophone***

...Critical acclaim has already been lavished on the work, and if any score will unquestionably establish Lloyd as one of the finest English composers of our time, it will be this immediately attractive and dramatic Mass. It is quite superbly recorded. ***Yorkshire Post***

Reviewed in Gramophone: I has the stimulating experience of attending the première of this work at the Brighton Festival earlier in the year, so its principal melodic ideas, warmly recognisable, were firmly in my head when I began listening to this magnificent recording.

It is a joy to come across such a powerful expression of faith - in humanity as well as God - written in our own time that utterly eschews barbed wire and avant-garde self-consciousness, producing writing which is real and genuinely inspired. The music is immediately communicative, deeply felt and without a singe facile bar. Although, of

course, there is much else besides, the structure has at its core a principal motif, a real tune, which continually re-creates itself throughout the work at key moments. The first three minutes of the Kyrie should convince anyone of the dazzling power of Lloyd's inspiration. It bubbles with creative energy as the cry "Kyrie" is heard again and again, the setting constantly changing in harmony, colour and texture. The lyrical melodic germ of the work is instantly apparent when it appears (3'42") sotto voce, to the words "Christe eleison", a moment to send a shiver down the spine.

Lloyd has told us that he chose the piece's title carefully, for while he uses the Latin text of the Mass, his working is designedly non-liturgical in conception: thus, he was able to "square" his own beliefs with his textual sources. The Gloria opens radiantly but is seemingly distanced, decorated with flutes, with the female voices leaping up in their opening phrase and glowingly but gently stimulating a heavenly host. A lovely warm melody appears as the men enter for the 'Laudamus te' and the writing gains amplitude - as if a human chorus has joined the angels - while the brass exuberantly underlines the meaning of the words, uplifting the spirit. The fiery energy now abates and the mood is rendered austere by the woodwind: alternating bare statements of "Qui tollis, peccata mundi" (5'13"), first by male and then by female voices, each subtly changing in colour, are very touching. With "Cum Sancto Spiritu" the female voices take over with a light-hearted feeling (9'32") bringing an engaging sense of optimism, then the Gloria itself returns triumphantly (9'56") to cap the movement. A slow decrescendo follows and the soft horn colouring (11'00) adds to the sense of peace at the close.

A Credo opens boldly with a powerful affirmation from the brass (with perhaps a little questioning from the angular woodwind, followed by the choir reiterating the word "Credo" less strongly). Lloyd's main theme now returns (1'38") to give the simple statement of the Christian belief a humanist warmth: "I believe in one God". There is a frisson-creating moment as the brass join in (2'46") and at the words "Deum de Deo" the music explodes in a great climax. The part of the Creed dealing with the Holy Ghost, the Virgin Mary (a shivery moment). Crucifixion and Resurrection is set with real imaginative power and an enormous climax is reached (9'00"), when the words "Et in Spiritum Sanctum" (And I believe in the Holy Ghost...) bring a bold, confident declaration against a cacophonous mêlée of percussion, led by energetic side-drum snares and a rattling wooden block, punctuated with the tamtam, as if the gates of heaven and hell were opening simultaneously; after that the tempest subsides. Called by the solo horn, the choir return (10'53") to restate the Creed to a heart-warming, glorious new version of the main theme, with the brass entering triumphantly at the peak (11'53"). Followed by yet another percussive cataclysm and a strident "Amen", the clenched-fist tension evaporates and the movement ends gently. A much needed orchestral interlude, provided by the three-minute "Offertorium" follows, the horns remember the main idea and then, as Lloyd himself says "a solo violin and solo cello talk to each other". We take a deep breath. The tremendous climax of the whole work is the combined Sanctus and

Benedictus (nearly 13 minutes long), with the latter framed centrally. The choir first intone quietly, with ethereal violins leading to a pure, flowing flute idea derived from the main motif (1'01"). The repeated word "Sanctus" dominates the movement lyrically and dramatically, while the word "Osanna" swiftly generates a brilliant fantasia (2'33") and at the great statement "Osanna in excelsis" (3'14"), underpinned by bass drum and brass, there is a momentary reminder of Walton. By placing the Benedictus centrally within the Sanctus, Lloyd can end that movement with this heart-rending cry of anguish, thus leaving the Agnus Dei to resolve the drama.

The only fault is this plan is that the communicative force of that climax is so great that it makes the closing Agnus Dei come almost as an anticlimax. I felt this at the live performance and also the first time I heard the recording, but now I am sure Lloyd knew just what he was about. Certainly he keeps up the concentration in his performance here. Introduced by a brief flute chorale, the Agnus Dei opens austerely and proceeds as a melancholy little march. But human warmth is never really far away and the spartan mood is relieved a little by the words "Miserere nobis", and finally lightened at the "Donna nobis pacem", which almost develops the feeling of graceful dance. Then against distant bells the "Miserere nobis" gathers pace and fervour. At 5'38" the Agnus Dei begins floating forward in a vein of warm, purposeful lyricism, doubts seemingly almost resolved in a surge of intense feeling. This is followed by an arresting solo trumpet (7'30" - the last trump?) which leads to the reprise of the words "Donna nobis pacem" (Grant us Thy peace).

Lloyd tells us this became unbearably poignant for him while composing the Mass, and the music at last finds peace in a gentle diminuendo into silence. This, in my view, is one of the finest pieces of English choral writing of the twentieth century. Listening to it in the composer's electrically intense performance, so realistically reproduced, is a very moving experience. I do hope that I have said enough to convince readers how instantly rewarding this Mass is, and how readily it grows on one with familiarity. After one or two hearings you won't be able to stop humming that main theme. I hope choral societies will take it up too, and we certainly need to have it at next year's Proms. ***Ivan March***

A Symphonic Mass ...an undoubted masterpiece in the British tradition of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst, Bliss and Britten, Lloyd's latest opus is joyous, dramatic, tuneful, and quite overwhelming...the choral writing...is deceptively simple...the orchestral backcloth is something else: fanfares, highly motivated rhythms and sequences of riotous colour...the whole thing has enormous popular appeal. On top of all this, Albany's sound from the Guildhall, Southampton is in demonstration class.Bill Newman This may well be George Lloyd's masterpiece...consistently inspired...when the Mass's main theme is given its final full-throated statement in the 'Sanctus' you want to

stand up and sing with it**.** The work concludes with the 'Agnus Dei', a beautiful, poignant scaling down to a reflective, thoughtful conclusion. Throughout the hour, Lloyd manages a huge range of expression...a highly organised, deeply felt piece that may well be one of the great works to come out of the estimable English Choral tradition...the performance is splendid...the recorded sound is warm and naturally balanced...urgently recommended... ***Fanfare***

A Symphonic Mass is his most impressive work to date...listeners and critics...received Lloyd's Mass with great admiration...it is almost unbelievable that a piece of contemporary work could demonstrate such powerful inspiration and melodic richness...captivating...this disc is effusively recommended, above all to those who continue to believe that beauty is essential to art. ***Correo Musical Argentino***

This mass is a powerful and moving piece. I would venture to say that it is his greatest work to date and one of the best British choral pieces of this century. Bauman American Record Guide ...a moving, innovative work...it brought the house down. ***Brighton & Hove Leader***

From the first swelling chords of the opening Kyrie Eleison through the Credo and Gloria to the haunting Agnus Dei the audience was spellbound...this hour long work is full of energy and colour, lush orchestration, and, as one chorister told me, "music which is exciting to sing" ***Musical Opinion***

...on my left an elderly man in tweeds shouted " a masterpiece" and sprang to his feet...on my right a Scots lass exclaimed "I'll certainly be buying a CD of that"...not often does new music have this effect. ***The Times***

...colourful, romantic musical language...an appealing aspect of the piece was precisely the way unfamiliar responses were brought to familiar words...the most powerful message was quintessentially static: distant drums, wailing cor anglais and snatches of shimmering flute arabesque in the Credo suggesting the *mysterious terror of the*

*Incarnation.**The Independent**.*

..a well deserved standing ovation...this is a mass in the great tradition of masses and its message of hope, salvation and final peace is clearly heard in the wonderful melodies of George Lloyd...Lloyd has created an individual work that is uplifting and life-celebrating... ***Brighton Evening Argus***

Critical acclaim has already been lavished on the work, and if any score will unquestionably establish Lloyd as one of the finest English composers of our time, it will be this immediately attractive and dramatic Mass. It is quite superbly recorded.. ***Yorkshire Post***

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