

This disc is one of a series which highlights the works of forgotten British composers. The composer, Cowen, was a principal conductor to the London Philharmonic, Hallé and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestras. To me it seems ludicrous that British CD companies and those British orchestras associated with Cowen continue to turn their backs on interesting music that is part of a British heritage. They are instead shown a direction by Central European orchestras, as here, the one providing this recording.

This CD is a most enjoyable find and confirms that Cowen is worth investigating further.

Frederic Cowen, used to be a popular composer in Britain when a considerable amount of his music was put into print in the early 20th Century. As many readers will be unaware of Cowen something about his background might be interesting.

As a child protégé, he had written a piano trio by the time he was thirteen that was performed alongside Joachim and cellist, Pezze. He had been a student of Goss and Benedict, teachers who paved the way for him to go to Leipzig Conservatoire where he was tutored by Moscheles, Reinecke and Richter. He moved briefly to Berlin as a pupil of Kiel at the Stern Conservatory before returning to London where he began to regularly perform at concerts as a pianist.

His first important recognition as a composer came in 1869 with performances of his First Symphony and his Piano Concerto. Cowen wrote six symphonies in all, works that he considered his most satisfying achievement. He provided an abundance of choral music (mainly for the festivals he was associated with), operas that enjoyed some contemporary success, and around 300 songs, many of which have retained a continuing place in popular repertoire.

It has been suggested that, like Sullivan, his gift lay rather in the composition of light music. The symphonies, at least, would suggest a more substantial talent. Indeed, the Vienna critic Eduard Hanslick, who counted Cowen among the amiable and cultivated gentlemen dominating music in London, found that his works showed good schooling, a lively sense of tone painting and much skill in orchestration, although not striking in originality. He went on to suggest that the more concise forms of instrumental music and serious choral works might be the field best suited to his gifts.

When embarking on his professional career, Cowen was first employed as an accompanist for James Henry Mapleson's opera company, under conductor, Sir Michael Costa (of Covent Garden fame) at Her Majesty's Theatre. Costa arranged a commission from the Birmingham Festival that brought in the same year the cantata *The Corsair*, based on Byron's poem of that name. It was, however, the *Scandinavian Symphony*, first

performed at St. James's Hall in December 1880, that established Cowen as a composer of importance in English musical life.

In 1888 Cowen followed Sullivan as permanent conductor of the London Philharmonic Society, interrupting his tenure for a lucrative visit to Melbourne for the Australian Centennial Exhibition to conduct daily concerts. From 1896 until 1899 he was conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, employed, some suggested, as a temporary substitute for Hans Richter. At the same time he held an appointment with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, which he relinquished in 1913. In Bradford Cowen was conductor of the Festival Choral Society and its permanent orchestra and for ten years (from 1900). He had much affection for Glasgow as conductor of the Scottish Orchestra. Other engagements included the direction of the Cardiff Festival from 1902 until 1910 and the direction of the triennial Handel festivals, starting in 1903. He was knighted in 1911 and received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Cambridge and Edinburgh. (I mention his connection with Britain's leading orchestras because it is strange to discover none have honoured Cowen in their recordings: this cannot be due to reservations of his skills as a composer.) So where is he now? Obviously pushed aside by the movement within certain colleges, which promoted the continental masters and only British composers post Elgar.

The **Symphony No. 3 'Scandinavian'** was inspired from a tour of Scandinavia as accompanist to the French contralto Zéfla Trebelli, prima donna in a number of seasons with Mapleson's company. The work won remarkable popularity at home and abroad. The symphony is a robust work that contains some pleasant and unusual orchestral effects which must be far from easy for musicians to handle.

In the first movement a delightful theme is introduced following an opening by the wind section (clarinets and bassoons) which is interrupted by arresting Beethovenian chords on the strings. A flowing melody is then developed to provide an appealing movement.

The Scandinavian colour is provided by off-stage horns in the second movement. A romantic theme returns to an initial horn theme and this eventually dies away. A second romantic theme with Mahlerian overtones and delicately rippling string accompaniment reminds us of the Scandinavian landscape. (Try tk.7 from 5'22" in.)

Cowen is at his most inventive in the third movement. The violas/cellos provide a catchy repetitive motif (not easy to maintain) that enhances the bright and chirpy theme floating on top. (Listen to tk.6 for the first 1' 45" to show what I mean.)

The fourth robust movement is probably the least satisfactory of the symphony: it has a distinctly Arabian, rather than Scandinavian feel and reinforces my belief that Cowen rarely researched the music of other countries. A main motif comes across as crude but this may be due to the

poor recording balance (see below). The movement has violent mood swings and in parts is somewhat disjointed, until recapitulation of the earlier romantic themes takes place. All becomes resolved and we are subjected to an enjoyable ending.

The concert overture, *The Butterfly's Ball*, written in 1901, is a well-crafted work, making delicate use of a large orchestra. It is descriptive and frothy, has comic overtones, and in passages provides a hint of *Der Rosenkavalier*. While not a particularly substantial composition, the overture shows Cowen's facility in handling the orchestra and his gift for pleasing melody, the whole suggesting the ephemeral Cinderella existence of the butterfly, fated to enjoy only one day of life. It is dedicated to the Queen's Hall Orchestra, managed and later financed by Robert Newman. In 1895, six years previously, the first promenade concerts had been given at the Hall, under the direction of Henry Wood (who was to continue the concert series until 1940).

The *Indian Rhapsody* makes me wonder if Cowen ever travelled: the colours and themes are more Oriental than Indian and it might have been better entitled, 'A Chinese Market'. We are presented with good orchestral textures and the whole piece holds together well. The work dedicated to Cowen's 'Scottish Orchestra', an orchestra established in Glasgow to supersede the Choral Union Orchestra. *Indian Rhapsody* was first performed at the Three Choirs Festival in Hereford the same year.

The performance has been recorded with the string sections too closely miked, The particularly dry acoustics, slightly reminiscent of early post-war recordings, is unusual in Marco Polo and does little justice to the excellent orchestral playing under Adrian Leaper's direction or qualities of the Kosice Hall where recorded. This tends to subconsciously affect the listener's judgement of Cowen, which shouldn't be the case. If this disc is being considered for reissue on the Naxos label then the addition of some artificial reverberation could enhance the 'boxy' string sections and give the performance ambience a new lease of life.

The notes are ample, but are provided only in English.

Raymond J Walker