

Robert Plane and
the BBC Scottish
Symphony Orchestra

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The clarinettist Robert Plane has made it a long-term project to perform and record the British repertoire for his instrument. His latest disc, available in July, includes lost works by Iain Hamilton and Richard H Walthew, plus a new orchestration of a familiar piece by John Ireland. He tells us more here

British clarinet music has held a special fascination for me for as long as I can remember. Studying with Thea King and Angela Malsbury enabled this passion to blossom, and for over 25 years I've done my utmost to programme not only the classics of our native repertoire but also to rediscover and celebrate those that have been neglected and, in many cases, lost entirely. Recording is the most effective way to introduce these discoveries to a new audience, and to date I've rediscovered works by Bax, Cyril Scott, Robin Milford and Josef Holbrooke, giving them a new life on disc, as well as recording the established works of Finzi, Ireland, York Bowen, Stanford, Alwyn and Howells.

During my research I was surprised by the number of references I found online to the clarinet concerto by Iain Hamilton. Winner of the Royal Philharmonic Society prize for composition in 1951, this work, so acclaimed in its own time, had totally disappeared from the repertoire in a way that seemed extraordinary to me. Dedicated to John Davies and premiered by Frederick Thurston with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, my curiosity for a work written for such luminaries grew and grew. The concerto was listed as available for hire from Schott, but when I contacted them for a perusal score I was told that, while I could have a copy of the poor-quality hand-written score, the orchestral parts were missing from the hire library and had disappeared without a trace. I did, however, track down a recording of a broadcast given in 1973 by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and their principal clarinettist Henry Morrison, held in the archives of the Scottish Music Information Centre.

I was immediately struck by the power, grit and luminous beauty of what was clearly a major discovery. I knew instantly this was to be my next, and probably most significant, revival.

Hamilton is a master of mystery and suspense in this early work. Cast in three large-scale movements, the clarinet's opening statement is in fact the beginning of an accompanied cadenza, a rhythmically energetic motif that unfurls over a bed of suspended orchestral sound, eventually becoming a

dominating fanfare figure. The pulsating energy and piquant harmonies of the main body Allegro are often Walton-esque in feel, marking this out as a truly unique British work for clarinet. The Adagio is serene and of searing beauty and intensity, while virtuosity is to the fore in a rollicking 6/8 finale, which again features a Walton-esque second subject and some terrifyingly challenging passagework.

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I approached David and Mary Bowerman at Champs Hill Records with the idea of recording this mighty work. As I'd hoped, they were delighted to help revive this piece of neglected British repertoire, as much a passion for them as it is for me. Huge thanks go to Schott for typesetting a whole new score and set of parts. I was thrilled when the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, great champions of Hamilton's music, came on board.

The conductor Martyn Brabbins, who had premiered Hamilton's *The Transit of Jupiter* with the BBC SSO towards the end of the composer's life, was similarly keen to be involved.

Finalising the rest of the disc's repertoire was a question of researching faint memories of concertos I'd heard mention of over my years of delving into lost works. I'm indebted to Michael Bryant and his incomparable knowledge of British clarinet works for his help in getting hold of the manuscripts of the clarinet concertos by Ruth Gipps and Richard H Walthew. I had high hopes for the Gipps, married as

she was to the then CBSO clarinettist Robert Baker. I'd also recently recorded two of her fascinating symphonies with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

Her clarinet concerto more than lived up to my expectations. In particular, the hauntingly tender slow movement, with its evocative modal harmonies, is worthy of her great mentor Vaughan Williams. Gipps herself was an oboist, and the tender duet for oboe and solo clarinet that opens the slow movement underlines just how personal a work this was for the young composer. Gipps' son Lance Baker and daughter-in-law Victoria Rowe were a huge help in getting scans of the original parts and score to me. Thanks too go to Peter Cigleris for the use of his set of edited orchestral parts.

I initially made contact with Richard H Walthew's grandson, John Walthew, in July 2015. Walthew wrote prolifically for the clarinet, in part because the principal clarinet in the Clapham Symphony Orchestra, of which he was honorary conductor, was to become his father-in-law. His son, Richard Sydney Walthew, also became a distinguished clarinettist, and Richard's son John, my initial contact, was an enthusiastic amateur clarinettist in Devon, keen to help revive interest in his grandfather's concerto.

A major stumbling block was the fact that the composer didn't get round to orchestrating the concerto, although it existed in a beautifully neat 1902 autograph score in piano reduction form. Such was John's belief in the piece that he funded and commissioned an orchestration from Alfie Pugh. Many CASSGB members will know Alfie from his arrangements and compositions for clarinet choir and other wind ensembles. He has made a highly characteristic orchestration of what can now finally be heard as a classic Edwardian concerto, of which Walthew's teacher, Hubert Parry, would have been proud. The work is wonderfully melodic, sunny and fleet-footed.

John Walthew would have been so pleased to hear the final result of this revival but tragically died six months before the recording took place. Even in the late stages of his illness he was ensuring that hand-delivered copies of the manuscript reached my home in Cardiff so that I had all the available material for the recording itself. John's brother Richard (another clarinettist!) was able to come to the recording sessions in City Halls, Glasgow, to make this revival all the more poignant.

Ruth Gipps and
Robert Baker

PHOTO: JACK FREEDMAN

Completing the CD programme is a new version of John Ireland's *Fantasy-Sonata* for clarinet and strings. The John Ireland Trust had recently commissioned a very successful transcription of Ireland's Cello Sonata and they wondered if I thought the *Fantasy-Sonata* would respond equally well to an arrangement of this sort. I'm delighted to report that, in the masterful hands of Ireland expert Graham Parlett, it does indeed. What a luxury it is to play the rather terrifying opening clarinet statement over a rich bed of string sound!

I'm grateful to Creative Scotland, RVW Trust, a research award from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and the John Ireland Trust – in addition to the composers' family members mentioned above – for their support of this major project. The results of three happy days recording in the company of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Martyn Brabbins and the wonderful team of producer Matthew Bennett and engineer Dave Rowell will be out on the Champs Hill Records Label in July 2020, dedicated to the memory of John Walthew. ■

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