

Contemporary

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Adès

Piano Concerto^a. Totentanz^b

^aKirill Gerstein *pf*

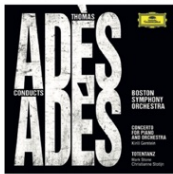
^bChristianne Stotijn *mez* ^bMark Stone *bar*

Boston Symphony Orchestra / Thomas Adès

DG © 483 7998GH (56' • DDD)

Recorded live at Symphony Hall, Boston,

^bNovember 2016, ^aMarch 2019



So is *this* the last Romantic piano concerto? It might well be; but the work's precursor *In Seven Days* – arguably a more focused masterpiece – shows that Adès can do more interesting things with form (and the fertility of a small motif) than when lifting a footprint from centuries ago. There are moments when his 2018 Concerto acknowledges the very precise rotational form of *In Seven Days*: the treatment of the motif in the first movement (though effect trumps genuine metamorphosis) and the central *Andante*'s winding-down in a mirror image of the other score's winding-up.

Otherwise we are in the footsteps of Rachmaninov, from the opening pounce to the moments of repose and loneliness, the virtuosity, the whimsical hand separation, the 'composed' rubato, the glitz and glamour, the sure-fire burning-out of the first movement (typical of Adès as well as of the Russian) and the slightly hollow hyperactivity of the last. It's not hard to hear how the work has already had 50 performances scheduled, as it demands that both soloist and orchestra thrill. Are there too many pastiches – the music about music Adès does so well but with an undeniable touch of gaucheness? Yes, but they never last long and the orchestration is beguiling. So sit back and enjoy the ride, the energy, the density of the conversation and the utter brilliance with which it is realised horizontally down the page.

Because anyway it might be *Totentanz* (2013) that's the true successor to *In Seven Days*. This proven masterpiece has inexplicably had to wait until now for the release of its first recording and is another work in which the composer rotates a motif (albeit a narrative one) multiple times and proves the fertility of his mind and architectural prowess in so doing. Gerstein

and the Boston Symphony pull the piano concerto off with flair but this performance is a cut above. The score – in which Mark Stone's death lures Christianne Stotijn's procession of 16 characters from pope to infant into the grave – has had something of a renaissance in the past few years, Adès conducting those soloists (as here) in performances around the world.

But it can hardly have sounded as focused or as forensically brilliant as in Boston, with the same structural nous, sustained tension (tempos and volume are expertly ratcheted) and pronounced undertow. The latter comes surely from Adès's understanding of his own use of cyclic structures, passacaglia and chord sequencing (a favourite one pops up in 'Der Tod zum Kardinal') but also from vivid characterisation and potent orchestral playing; the ferocity at the end of 'Der Tod zum König' is overwhelming. Christianne Stotijn dials down the lighting but not the intensity in 'Der Küster' and 'Das Mädchen', and even Mark Stone's splendidly Mephistophelean Death offers her a warm hand in 'Das Kind', for which Adès invokes the ghost of a strophic song somewhere between Schubert and Mahler in lineage. Plenty of composers have moved on. But for proof that Adès does what he does with mind-boggling brilliance, look no further. **Andrew Mellor**

J Anderson

Another Prayer. The Bearded Lady. The Colour of Pomegranates. Poetry Nearing Silence.

Prayer. Ring Dance. Van Gogh Blue

Nash Ensemble / Martyn Brabbins

NMC © NMCD256 (78' • DDD)



This selection of six relatively small-scale chamber pieces by Julian Anderson takes in works written between 1987 and 2015; and just like his larger-scale output from the same years, these compositions show increasing refinement of style and sharpening of dramatic atmosphere. The recordings, made at the Menuhin School over three days in April 2019, are not only technically immaculate but also demonstrate the Nash Ensemble's trademark commitment to

contemporary repertoire that challenges performers in music blending forcefulness and economy, subtlety and spontaneity, to beguiling effect.

The programme order on the disc becomes strictly chronological if you play the two closely related pieces – *Prayer* (2009) for solo viola and *Another Prayer* (2012) for solo violin – together before the final item. As Anderson explains, his titles relate to Jewish traditions containing 'considerably more protest and struggle ... than is present in other religions'. This makes the 'sudden oasis of quietude and inner contemplation' with which both pieces end almost disconcertingly 'other', and demonstrates Anderson's imaginative reconfiguration of traditional genres. In a movement from *Poetry Nearing Silence* (1997) Anderson pays affectionate tribute to his 'favourite composer', Janáček, with just such a highly personal take on the briskly folk-like, avoiding any hint of parody.

In *Poetry Nearing Silence*, allusiveness is teasingly specific, with detailed references to Tom Phillips's book of poems and drawings, *The Heart of a Humument*. But there is never anything remotely laboured about such cross-referencing. Similarly, the relation between the early *Ring Dance* for two violins and Norwegian Hardanger music, or between *The Bearded Lady* for clarinet and piano and the character (and music) of Baba the Turk in Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*, provides highly relevant context without weighing down Anderson's musical responses with inappropriate suggestions of ancestor worship.

Van Gogh Blue (2015) – the most recent work included – is an act of homage to another deeply troubled genius; and here the music gains special strength from a sense of compressing elements from the expressive worlds of works on a much larger scale, like the opera *Theban* and the Violin Concerto. The lament-like ending reaches well-nigh expressionistic heights, yet the bold, flexible structures of *Van Gogh Blue* are the more impressive for avoiding the siren calls of ultimate disintegration. As Anderson unflinchingly shows, an emphasis on 'protest and struggle' need not be musically incoherent. **Arnold Whittall**