

CHORAL & SONG

David Temple, Stephen Cleobury and Jeannette Sorrell offer alternative approaches to Bach's dramatic *St John Passion*; *Musica Secreta* explores 16th-century motets attributed to Leonora d'Este; and Gerald Finley is on refined form in Rautavaara's arrangements of Sibelius songs

MUSIC CHORAL & SONG CHOICE

A loving homage to Haas

Steph Power admires the Czech composer's expressive genius



HAAS

Fata Morgana; Seven Songs in Folk Style; Four Songs on Chinese Poetry; Chinese Songs

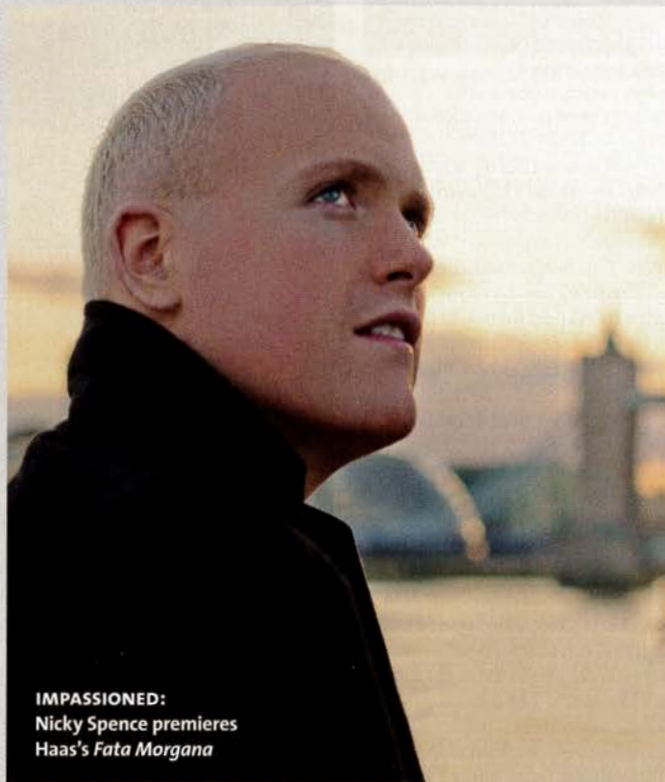
Anita Watson (soprano), Anna Starushkevych (mezzo-soprano), Nicky Spence (tenor), James Platt (bass); Navarra Quartet; Lada Valešová (piano, director)
Resonus RES 10183 69:29 mins

Among several promising Czech-Jewish composers taught or inspired by Janáček, Pavel Haas (1899-1944) shone especially brightly. His brutal murder in a Nazi death-camp alongside others of his generation remains an incalculable loss to western music, which may otherwise have taken very different directions post-World War II. By

Seven Songs in Folk Style feel defiant in their national pride

1941, when Haas was transported to Terezín, he had already produced many fine works in a highly expressive idiom combining Moravian and Bohemian folk tunes and Hebrew chant with a quirkily off-kilter, jazz-inflected polytonality. Incredibly, before dying in Auschwitz he composed the exquisite *Four Songs on Chinese Poetry* that form one of the four song cycles in this important and lovingly presented homage.

Pianist-musicologist Lada Valešová has gathered together a stellar group of young singers and



IMPASSIONED:
Nicky Spence premieres
Haas's *Fata Morgana*

musicians. *Fata Morgana* refers to the Tagore song cycle completed by Haas following studies with Janáček (1923) – and which receives an impassioned premiere recording by Nicky Spence and the Navarra Quartet alongside Valešová.

Otherwise, more conventional forces of voice and piano prevail, but with no loss of bittersweet adventurous spirit. The 1944 *Four Songs* are given added poignancy – if any were needed – by James Platt's heartfelt rendition appearing alongside *Chinese Songs* from happier times (1921), richly sung by

Anna Starushkevych. Composed as Nazi occupiers tightened their grip, the 1940 *Seven Songs in Folk Style* (sung by Anita Watson) feel defiant in their national pride. From joy to despair, every emotion is here in subtle colours; a legacy of great human and musical worth.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

ON THE WEBSITE

Hear extracts from this recording and the rest of this month's choices on the **BBC Music Magazine website**
www.classical-music.com



JS BACH

St John Passion

Sophie Bevan (soprano), Robin Blaze (countertenor), Benjamin Hulett, Robert Murray (tenor), Andrew Ashwin (baritone), Neal Davies (bass-baritone), Ashley Riches (bass), Peter Jaekel (organ); Crouch End Festival Chorus; Bach Camerata/David Temple
Chandos CHSA 5183(2) (hybrid CD/SACD)
109 mins (2 discs)

Singing Bach's Passions in a language other than German can be a gnarly issue. The inflected colours of the original text are as crucial to the soundworld as the use of period instruments. And for a translator, how paramount are Bach's notes, the rhyming schemes, the theological niceties? 'Accessibility' drives this new recording in English. Yet within the opening recitative, 'for Jesus resorted thither oft' betrays a certain clunkiness; and where Bach allots four notes and a springy rhythm to Jesus's first utterance, the English version yields three and impeccable smoothness. What exactly are we 'accessing'?

In assorted translations of the *Matthäus-Passion*, the start of the tenor aria 'Geduld' is rendered variously as 'Rejoice', 'Be still', 'Be strong' or 'Endure'. Linguistic immediacy comes at a price. For those who think it's a price worth paying, however, there's plenty to recommend a recording – purposefully conducted by David Temple – that also swims against the tide with a hefty 100-plus chorus mustering venom aplenty. The solo line-up is without a weak link; among its glories Sophie Bevan's deeply affecting 'Zerfließe, mein Herze', Benjamin Hulett's finely nuanced 'Erwäge', and Robin Blaze's exquisitely judged 'Es ist vollbracht'. Robert Murray's Evangelist holds everything together with narrative acuity. *Paul Riley*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



JS BACH

St John Passion

Sophie Bevan (soprano), Iestyn Davies (countertenor), James Gilchrist, Ed Lyon (tenor), Roderick Williams (baritone), Neal Davies (bass); Choir of King's College, Cambridge; Academy of Ancient Music/Stephen Cleobury
King's College KGS 0018 (hybrid CD/SACD)
109:23 mins (2 discs)

It's roughly a decade since the choir of King's College, Cambridge last released an account of Bach's 1724 *St John Passion*. More recently they recorded its 1725 reconfiguration; this one, reverting to the original version and enjoying the benefits of hybrid SACD, preserves live performances given as part of last year's Easter at King's Festival. With alumnus James Gilchrist as a supple Evangelist, not to mention trenchant instrumental support from the Cambridge-based Academy of Ancient Music, it's something of a family affair.

A choir comprising young male singers with boy sopranos is, of course, exactly what Bach had at his disposal in Leipzig where the *St John Passion* was first heard, but it doesn't necessarily give director Stephen Cleobury a head start over rival versions. A certain King's specialness sometimes softens the visceral qualities of the unfolding drama, and the chorales can sound like hymn interludes rather than pertinent theological commentary. For the arias, however, Cleobury has assembled an unassailable team of soloists, whose powerful insights gild Neal Davies's Jesus, a characterisation of immense presence and authority. *Paul Riley*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



JS BACH

St John Passion

Amanda Forsythe (soprano), Terry Wey (countertenor), Nicholas Phan (tenor), Christian Immler, Jeffrey Strauss (baritone), Jesse Blumberg (baritone); Apollo's Singers, Apollo's Fire/Jeannette Sorrell
Avie 822252236927 107:42 mins (2 discs)

The accompanying information for this new *St John Passion* describes it as a 'visionary concept of a dramatic production'. In truth no successful



FLEETING PASSION:
Jeannette Sorrell
directs a lively *St John*

performance could be anything but 'dramatic'; Bach has hardwired drama into the work's DNA. But apparently the 'visionary concept' included the protagonists singing their reported speech directly to each other (off copy), and members of the choir mingling among the audience for the crowd scenes. Perhaps a DVD rather than CD release might have been appropriate, although a snatch of video on the ensemble's website suggests something decidedly less ambitious than Peter Sellars's 'ritualisation' of the John and Matthew Passions for Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic.

Judged purely as an audio experience, Jeannette Sorrell's direction certainly produces a lively account, her fleet tempos rarely sounding rushed, even if they can momentarily leave singers challenged. And the singing is the chief glory of the set: Nicholas Phan is a personable Evangelist who also negotiates the jagged perils of 'Ach, mein Sinn' with no nonsense, while Jesse Blumberg's Jesus is quietly authoritative. Soprano Amanda Forsythe and baritone Christian Immler acquit themselves with distinction in the arias, and the 20-plus chorus is impeccably disciplined and incisive.

The opening 'Herr, unser Herrscher', however, flags up a few intrusive stylistic mannerisms. Sorrell is not averse to indulgent rallentandos; and the dynamic shading can be a touch over-manicured. John Eliot Gardiner's live 2011 release with similar choral forces lives in the moment more vividly; while, for the ultimate 'visionary concept', the Dunedin Consort's liturgical reconstruction remains revelatory. *Paul Riley*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



DOVE

**For an unknown soldier;
An airmail letter from Mozart**

Nicky Spence (tenor), Melvyn Tan (piano); Portsmouth Grammar School Chamber Choir; Oxford Bach Choir; Children's Choir - The Minster School, Monks Orchard Primary School, Ecclesbourne Primary School; London Mozart Players/Nicholas Cleobury
Signum SIGCD 452 65:22 mins

It is possible to feel that contemporary classical music occasionally takes itself a mite too seriously, and is no fun anymore. Then along comes Jonathan Dove's *An airmail letter from Mozart*. Imagining how, in the whirl of modern jet travel, the great composer might have negotiated protracted periods of absence from his beloved Constanze, Dove spins 15 minutes of variations scored for single strings and two horns, on a theme from a Mozart Divertimento. By turns scamperingly hyperactive, tender and skittish, it's a delightfully endearing portrait of Mozart sketched in a modern accent, and a blast to listen to.

For an unknown soldier tells a different kind of story. Using a selection of texts by Wilfred Owen, Helen Dircks, Ivor Gurney and others, Dove constructs a narrative describing the experience of war, from recruitment through painful separation from loved ones, bloody battlefield and death. While the mechanistic lurch and clamour Dove summons for his intense setting of Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump' is in many ways the work's musical centrepiece, its heart is the yearningly lyrical conflation

of 'Before Action' and 'To You in France', where the harshly different perspectives of men and women in warfare are movingly contrasted.

Conductor Nicholas Cleobury does a sterling job of marshalling the forces, which include a combined children's choir, and tenor Nicky Spence, whose contributions are memorably plangent. *Terry Blain*
PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



KELLY

Songs and piano works including It is not dawn till you awake; A Dirge; Break, Break, Break; Crossing the Bar; March; The Daffodils; A Cycle of Lyrics; The Gallipoli Sonata; Monographs for piano; The Somme Lament; Piano Sonata in F minor

Louise Page (soprano), Christina Wilson (mezzo), Andrew Goodwin (tenor), Christopher Latham (violin), Alan Hicks, Tamara-Anna Cislowska, Caroline Almonte (piano)
ABC Classics ABC 481 4576
180:50 mins (2 discs)

Frederick Septimus Kelly was 35 when he was killed at the Battle of the Somme. Some of his very last works, including the chastely beautiful *Elegy - In memoriam Rupert Brooke*, suggest he was just reaching a fully distinctive maturity when he died. Most of the music on these two CDs however is pre-World War I, and while the composer's talent and sensitivity are evident right from the earliest examples, there remains for me something elusive about Kelly.

Ending the collection with an updated version of the old music-hall song 'Has anyone here seen Kelly?' seems strangely apt under the circumstances: is it quite possible, even after nearly 160 minutes of music, to 'see' what this composer is about? Kelly must be right at the other end of the introvert-extrovert spectrum from his compatriot Percy Grainger. There are glimpses of a rare sensibility from time to time, as in the slow movement of the unfinished Piano Sonata. Yet it often seems to mask itself behind echoes of the salon Ellgar, the Victorian drawing-room ballad or folk-tinged English Brahms. There are some good songs here, notably 'Weep no more, sad fountains' and 'It is not dawn till you awake', but nothing that to me proclaims another Ivor Gurney, Peter Warlock, or even a Roger Quilter. But this generously-filled, well-recorded set offers plenty