

is Vaughan Williams at his most violent and uncompromising, the choral parts highly challenging technically, and the organ part even more so. This is a magnificent performance, though as frequently seems to be the case in this work, the huge organ part coupled with the church acoustic prevents some of the choral dissonances from being heard. I've never quite been able to come to terms with this piece, with its tritone and whole tone harmonies, so alien to most of the composer's output, but once again this is a performance to which I will return with renewed determination in the hope of doing so. I do wonder, though, what those listeners without access to the internet, and therefore without the text in front of them, will be able to make of it. The virtuoso organ part is brilliantly played by James McVinnie. The excellent organist in the other accompanied works is Ashok Gupta, a final-year student at Clare College.

And so to the main work in the programme, the *Mass in G minor*: Westminster Cathedral Choir with Martin Baker on Hyperion are marvellous in this work, as are Laudibus and Michael Brewer on Delphian. My favourite, though, is that conducted by Richard Hickox, with a choir called the Richard Hickox Singers, and issued alongside his Chandos performance of the Fourth Symphony. This is to cite only three of the many fine recorded performances available, and to that group we may now add the present one from Clare College. The echoes of Tudor church music are particularly strong in this performance, and at certain points one is almost transported back through the centuries, such is the purity of the singing and the vision. The solo parts are particularly convincing, as they are throughout the disc, and Brown gets as close as any conductor I have heard to a real triple *piano* in the final cadence. A few technical points might trouble some listeners. For some reason the altos take a beat out of the third bar before the end of the *Kyrie*. Then there is a strange noise – another edit? – just before the word “passus” in the *Credo*. This might only bother those who listen on headphones, but few people would miss the artificially extinguished reverberation between the intonation to the *Gloria* and the first notes from the choir. But none of that should deter collectors from acquiring this most desirable disc.

William Hedley

[This is a slightly edited version of a review which first appeared at [www.musicweb-international.com](http://www.musicweb-international.com)]

### A Concert Of English Music

Vaughan Williams: *Concerto for Oboe and Strings*

With Handel (arr. Harty): *Water Music Suite*; Elgar: *Falstaff*

Mitchell Miller (oboe), Columbia Broadcasting Symphony conducted by Bernard Herrmann

Historical recording from 9 September 1945

PRISTINE CLASSICAL PASC 202AS

This is a quite superb historical discovery, taken from the acetates of an American radio broadcast in 1945. I am addicted to tracking down off-air material from long ago, but I have to say few broadcasts from this date survive in such good sound and with so little surface noise. Here too we can understand why conductor-composer Bernard Herrmann acquired his reputation for pioneering unusual repertoire, especially British, with his Columbia Broadcasting Symphony, for everything about the performances is fizzing with energy and given remarkable impact and definition over the microphone. The announcements (which are tracked separately) give added period context for it as a document. The

programme, which was broadcast on 9 September 1945, consisted of a very symphonic rendition of the Harty suite from Handel's *Water Music*, a terrific *Falstaff* by Elgar and the second American performance of Vaughan Williams' *Oboe Concerto* with the same forces as the first 'Mitch' Miller and the Columbia orchestra conducted by Herrmann. The announcer tells us that Miller's American premiere of the Vaughan Williams had been in a broadcast in June 1945 also on CBS. So far as I know that first American performance – referred to by the announcer, Sidney Berry – some three months before, does not survive, certainly not in this kind of sound quality.



Mitchell ('Mitch') Miller started his career as an oboist – on this showing a remarkably distinctive one – but soon migrated to the production side of the recording industry, becoming Head of A & R at Columbia Records. He became a significant figure in American popular music as well as classical repertoire. This is only a mono recording but this in no way detracts from the impact of the Vaughan Williams or the Elgar. The solo oboe is quite beautifully caught by the microphone, and of course, it is a live performance before the possibility of retakes had entered our consciousness. 'Mitch' Miller characterises the music as if with easy familiarity – perhaps not surprising as he had broadcast it only three months before.

The concerto has a spoken introduction from which I cannot resist quoting this: "...the seventy-two year-old master Ralph Vaughan Williams, his latest composition to reach the United States...the foremost English composer of his generation, completed his oboe concerto and his fifth symphony during the recent period of wartime stress. However, both works share one thing in common, they breathe a spirit of peace and repose far removed from a world of unrest. We may say of the oboe concerto what one critic said of the symphony, that in this unsteady, restless, perplexing world of music, it came to restore faith and confidence."

*Falstaff* is a gripping performance that quite carries one along with an edge and impetus all its own. Herrmann never allows it to bed down, and when it needs to swagger there is no restraint. The mono orchestral sound is clean and well focused – terrific for a broadcast. And how good to have a CD start with the voice of the announcer saying "Good afternoon"! I suppose this will become irritating in time; fortunately it is tracked separately.

This is available as a download or on disc and I recommend the second option. This sort of material never lasts long, particularly with the threat of the copyright date being extended, so my advice is get it now, you will not regret it.

Lewis Foreman