

RECORD OF MONTH

Tommie HAGLUND (b.1959)

Hymns to the Night – Symphonic Poem for violin and orchestra¹ (2005) [38:41]

*Daughter of the Voice*² (2002-03) [26:13]

*To the Sunset Breeze*³ (1997 rev. 2009) [14:42]

Elizabeth Pitcairn (violin); Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra/Hannu Koivula¹; Jeanette Bjurling and Tua Åberg (sopranos); Karin Dornbusch (clarinet); Dan Almgren (violin); John Ehde (cello); Marie Åström (harp); Markus Leoson (percussion); Carl-Axel Dominique (piano)/Joachim Gustafsson²; John Mills (guitar); Stephen Fitzpatrick (harp); The Lysell Quartet³

rec. Helsingborg Concert Hall, Helsingborg, Sweden, 1-2 June 2009 (*Hymns*); St Nicolai Church Halmstad, Sweden 7-9 October 2009 (*Daughter*); Engelbrekt Church, Stockholm, Sweden, 11-12 February 2010 (*Sunset Breeze*)

PHONO SUECIA PSCD184 [79:48]

The name of Swedish composer Tommie Haglund will be relatively unknown to many collectors and classical music aficionados outside his native country. As far as I know this is the first internationally distributed commercial CD devoted to his music. If there is any justice in the musical world at all I hope this release will lead to a far wider appreciation of this composer's unique and extraordinary work and opportunities for us all to hear these important works in live performance wherever we live.

I use the phrase advisedly but I would, with no hesitation – but after a good deal of careful reflection – call at least one of the works here – *Hymns to the Night* - a masterpiece. I cannot think of another piece of contemporary music that has made such a strong impression on me in the last twenty years either as a performer or listener. Likewise, *Daughter of the Voice*, whilst smaller in scale in terms of length and instrumentation, packs an extraordinary emotional punch. These two works alone show Haglund to have a thoroughly unique compositional voice that is at once compelling and communicative, familiar yet utterly individual. Haglund does not write simple or facile music, these are serious works that demand, indeed command, attention. But having done that they repay the listener with the remarkable power of their musical utterance.

Before discussing the music in more detail a little biographical information might help. He was born in 1959. In the early 1980s he came to study guitar in London. During that time he met Eric Fenby – who famously acted as Delius's amanuensis during the composer's final years – from whom he received composition lessons. He now lives in the Swedish town of Halmstad. He has received international commissions and performances. There has been a performance of *Hymns to the Night* in America I believe but none, so far as I know, in the UK. This is the kind of work of a stature and importance that simply demands performances on the world's largest stages – if the planners of the Proms ever visit this site please take note and seek out this recording.

So to the all-important music itself. *Hymns to the Night* is quite unique as far as I know in form and style. Although termed a 'Symphonic Poem for Violin and Orchestra' it is an extended concerto. This is a colossal work and – I repeat myself - a masterpiece. I cannot think of *any* other single-movement work that so successfully spans its extended time-frame of nearly thirty nine minutes and where the musical argument is so convincingly sustained. I should say that in the time I have written reviews for

this site I have not listened to one work so often or so intensively prior to writing a review. The reasons for this are several – a) because the work draws me in ever more with each hearing but also because b) such are the riches and power of its invention that I feel rather daunted trying to articulate even a fraction of its worth in words. Crucially and significantly as far as the form of the work is concerned this is *not* in any sense a traditional concerto. Yes, melodic and harmonic material recurs and binds the work together but the overall sense is of a journey, a deeply personal revelation, in which the solo violin emerges as the hero/protagonist. Mentioning the solo violin at this point brings me to another of the astonishing aspects of this recording. Prior to hearing this work the playing, indeed the name, of violinist **Elizabeth Pitcairn** was unknown to me. As someone who plays the violin for a career too I feel in some modest position of authority to say her playing is nothing short of staggering. Haglund – merciless to the last! – has written her (she gave the first performance too) a part of daunting virtuosity. Then add the sheer emotional Everest of such an extended work as well as the physical fatigue playing it must produce and I have nothing but admiration and awe for her achievement. She is very ably accompanied by the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra – another collaborator in the work’s premiere – with conductor Hannu Koivula proving as convincing in his direction of the accompaniment as Mats Rondin did when the work premiered in 2005.

So often – as I have mentioned elsewhere in reviews – when listening to ‘new’ music one find similarities and commonplaces if only to allow a kind of cultural referencing. Not once did I do so with this work – this is a uniquely original work. Yet, and for me this might be the very heart of its greatness, in the midst of its newness there resonates an almost ancient familiarity. As if the listener recognises some fundamental truths in the message of the work no matter the nature of the musical vocabulary used. One of the many features of the work that impresses me so greatly is that Haglund has no need to make use of ‘contemporary effects’ as a refuge for the lack of musical imagination. By this I mean that all too often contemporary composers seek a sound or instrumental effect that is new or supposedly unique; hence work requiring endless batteries of percussion demanding ethnic instrumentations and scores garlanded with extended instructions to players to produce sounds in improbable ways. Not so Haglund; clearly contemporary though this work is there is nothing in the execution of the music that would or could be termed an extended instrumental effect.

The work takes its title from the collection of poems of the same name written by Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) from the early part of the 19th Century. In these poems the hero, the “I” of the work deserts light for darkness, day for night. In essence, it seems as though the poet/violin confronts a forbidding power hiding in or perhaps embodied by the night. One of the musically interesting structures in this work is how the violin initiates all of the musical drama contained. At key points in the work there are several extended violin cadenzas. The first of these opens the work – for a full two and a half minutes the violin plays alone with a series of phrases the most important of which is a leaping defiant gesture. **Pitcairn** is quite superb here. Her violin is the magnificent ‘Red Violin’ Stradivarius which inspired the eponymous film and in turn the series of works by John Corigliano drawn from his soundtrack to the same movie. When the orchestra do enter, initially there is a lamenting haunted quality to the music. Often the brass in particular seem especially opposed to the violin who seeks refuge and alliance with her fellow string players. From this almost conciliatory orchestral opening the soloist returns to the aggressive stance of the opening music. Gradually the opposition to the violin mounts. Often in this work this opposition presents itself as implacable walls of sound which it seem all but impossible for the soloist to circumvent let alone break through. This is

not music that ‘battles’ against the various parts; instead an obdurate stubborn opposition seems to be key; a resolute heart set against a daunting future perhaps.

A word here about the quality of the engineering and playing. Throughout the entire disc the sound of the various ensembles has been caught with exceptional clarity yet a beautiful natural balance even though three different venues and dates were used. This natural balance is especially valid in a piece where the opposition of groups, the sense of parts overwhelming others which in turn are themselves subsumed by others is crucial. If there were any sense in which these effects were synthetically achieved their impact would be severely lessened. The bass and percussion of the orchestra is reproduced with exciting richness. Again this pays dividends when Haglund’s subtle underpinning of key moments is supported by a gentle tam-tam stroke or beat of a low drum for example. Indeed, the whole score abounds in such skillful details reinforcing the sense of care and craft which has been lavished on the work. From around the seven minute mark the music takes on a lamenting quality in which the soloist and orchestra unite. The solo violin writing moves across the entire range of the instrument and one of **Pitcairn’s** particular skills is her ability to give these passages a truly linear feel. A new section emerges from some solo writing at approximately 9:30. With the soloist temporarily silenced the orchestra gropes upwards, the only thing the violin can try to do is a foreshortened reprise of the opening gesture which seems both half-hearted and forlorn. The tutti violins try to emulate their solo compatriot but sink into silent despondency. At 14:30 the second main violin cadenza is reached - with brief interpolations from percussion and horns and then again from the same forces with strings added. Some of the original material is revisited and developed. The orchestra’s response is a series of craggy brass fanfare-like figurations over timp pedals. Still the soloist refuses to be intimidated or cowed by such displays of force – the opening upward-leaping figure becoming a recurring symbol of defiance. Briefly around the 21:00 minute mark the texture lightens and the daunting atmosphere of the work begins to lift. But this proves to be a false dawn. The heavy brass soon reassert themselves so that by 22:30 – heralded by a sudden unexpected major chord – the oppressive weight of the earlier sections returns. Still the soloist uses the leaping gesture as a way of marking her independence. This leads to another cadenza passage - centred around the 24:00 mark – which seems to be based on new material. The violence of the orchestra’s response is less marked now and suddenly and rather magically over a high sustained string chord the horns intone a chorale or chant-like melodic fragment which although immediately engulfed in another angry outburst from the other orchestral instruments seems to hint at some possible consolation yet to come – a first glimmer of dawn in the eastern sky perhaps. In the ensuing orchestral conflict the upper strings again seems to be allying themselves to a similar musical vocabulary as the solo part. The blocks of music that grind against each other are the equivalent of tectonic plates, relentless and unstoppable.

A further striking feature of this work is how Haglund sustains essentially slow tempi across the entire arch of its conception. Of course there are moments when lines skitter and shatter but these function as arabesques over a much slower pulse. Again, I’m not sure any other work comes to mind where the composer has been able to maintain the intensity of a slow basic tempo so compellingly.

Another, though shorter, cadenza carries the music past the thirty minute mark. As the soloist sinks into a brief silent respite the orchestra, represented by the strings, returns to the chorale-theme, clawing its way upwards by slow degrees. Still the brass vent their opposition but this now collapses until at 32:00 a unison is reached. Haglund now introduces some more varied percussion held in reserve until

this moment – the only passage in the work where the percussion leads the musical material. Now the music is of a quite different character; the whole orchestra hauls itself up from the depths, the texture gently thinning and evaporating as it rises. At the height of the phrase disappearing into a haze of high woodwind, glockenspiel and strings the violin enters with a magically lyrical phrase. The character here is radically different from the combative stubborn resistance the violin has shown before. Accompanying this in quietly humble harmonies are gentle woodwind. All of which is preparing for the final masterstroke of the work. At 34:22 a beautifully chaste oboe sings a simple song recalling John Dowland. According to the liner this has particular resonance for Haglund as he played these whilst studying as guitarist. So there is a dual memory here, both that of the individual and a more extended timeless collective memory speaking with a poignancy and beauty which transcends the arch of time. At last the orchestra and soloist are united, the solo lines being absorbed into the texture of the orchestra. The obvious analogy would be of a dawn. But this is no easy happy ending, high held string notes give the music a frisson of tensions still unresolved – the dawn may have come but it is cold. The crisis of the night may have passed and with the dawn comes hope but more nights lie ahead. The solo violin ascends ever upwards until it floats in the very highest register gradually receding from our sight and the work ends in calm acceptance if not total peace.

The abiding and lasting impression of this work is of a deeply personal utterance spoken with total sincerity. The fact that this work does not seek easy or instant appeal increases its stature in my eyes. I have written elsewhere that a great CD needs to be a combination of the following elements: great music, insightful interpretation expressed with total technical accomplishment, well recorded. This performance ticks each of those boxes.

The second work presented here is another substantial piece lasting more than twenty-five minutes. Although written for a small ensemble of two sopranos, clarinet, violin, cello, harp percussion, and piano this is another ‘big’ work in musical/emotional terms. The bulk of the text is taken from Saint Bridget’s *Revelationes coelestes* which together with some other textual interpolations focuses on the crucifixion of Christ as witnessed by his mother Mary. Again, Haglund’s genius is that he does not simply create a simple – albeit moving – scena. Instead this becomes a meditation on the nature of love and loss and the ambivalent indeed contradictory nature of Mary’s response to the appalling act unfurling in front of her. Only through this cruelest of deaths can her son fulfill his higher purpose. The very opening is incredibly original and deeply disturbing; over a forbidding bass-drum roll some wood blocks - presumably played by members of the ensemble - randomly clatter away in a chilling representation of the nails being hammered into the cross. The instrumental playing from the ensemble is uniformly absolutely superb – expressive, detailed and committed. Again the engineers have done a superb job balancing such disparate instruments. After a two and a half minute introduction the singers join in with a wordless melisma. Probably because I happened to listen to this just a day or so ago – the arc of the line reminded me momentarily of *Daphne*’s transformation music at the end of the Strauss opera of the same name. The two singers are separated in the sound-picture. The lead soprano is to the left singing Saint Bridget’s words in a Swedish translation. The second soprano is to the right and adds expressive wordless melisma as well as additional interpolations. Again the heart-beat pulse of the work is slow.

Haglund skillfully finds a balanced path between commenting on and reinforcing the message of the text and illustrating it. For example when the text is “joy seeped through my soul like drops of

dew” [track 2 10:17] the harp has a cascading figure that is miraculously both joyous and drop-like. As with *Hymns* another remarkable feature of this music is how the musical vocabulary and spirit of the work transcends the date of its creation. Not that anyone could ever mistake it as anything but a contemporary piece but the ecstatic essence of the work springs from a much earlier age. Special mention here for the quiet rapture of Jeanette Bjurling’s singing. Both sopranos are superb but with the greater bulk of the work resting with Bjurling it is natural that her contribution should resonate longer in the memory. Her simple pure style of singing is very beautiful in its own right but again the timeless sense is underlined by the absence of any arch or overly mannered word-painting. Once again Haglund has no need to fall back on any bizarre instrumental effects. The unsettling hammering returns followed by another breathtaking vocalise. The emotional temperature of the work slowly ratchets up as the climax of the Passion is approached. The pinnacle of the agony is entrusted to the ‘second’ soprano who previously mainly sang the wordless vocalises and the interpolated texts. This is a ferociously demanding passage which she sings with superb dramatic conviction. The final stanza, “His pain was my pain” is given to the ‘first’ soprano and set to a simple almost folk-like melody with minimal accompaniment quite unlike any of the rest of the score. It struck me that the fusion of the modern and ancient is similar to that Holst achieved in his remarkable *Four songs for Voice and Violin*. In a similar manner to the *Hymns* the work floats out of this world in a heartbreakingly poignant manner.

The final work is far from being a simple ‘filler’ work itself. *To the Sunset Breeze* is subtitled *In Memory of Frederick Delius*. It is scored for the very unusual combination of guitar, harp and string quartet. The title is taken from one of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* which was a source of inspiration for Delius amongst many others. The narrative of the poem deals again with the transition from darkness to light. The range of tonal colour Haglund achieves is once again remarkable. He exploits the superficial similarities between the harp and guitar to produce a whole range of subtly nuanced sounds. With less overt drama than either of the other works this is in some ways the most elusive of the three pieces offered here. That Delius has been a profound spiritual influence on Haglund is without doubt but don’t expect to hear that carried through into the actual music. Technically there is a similar fascination with the ‘vertical’ implications of the music they write more than horizontal contrapuntal composing. By definition the writing of any monophonic part – as most orchestral instruments are – will produce literally lines and therefore contrapuntal writing so I do not mean to imply that this is static in any sense. Greater common ground, I feel, between the two composers is to be found in the way they seek to capture in music the moments of ecstatic yet transient loss.

The excellence of this recording – aside from the very generous playing time - is underlined by a booklet of exemplary quality. Interesting and informative notes in Swedish and English are complemented with some fascinating sessions pictures and portraits of the composer with **Elizabeth Pitcairn**. The liner-note goes on to make the valid point that Haglund has developed a group of musician colleagues around him who are committed advocates of his music. These are the same musicians who play on this disc. As has already been mentioned **Elizabeth Pitcairn** has lived with *Hymns* ever since it was premiered on this disc. But this extends further; the exact same group of musicians for *Daughter of the Voice* had made another recording (for Swedish Radio?) some time before this version. Within that group cellist John Ende has featured as soloist in Haglund’s extraordinary *Cello Concerto*. Likewise soprano Tua Aberg joined with Ende and violinist Dan

Almgren and pianist Carl-Axel Dominique to perform *Miraggio*. The guitarist John Mills featured in *To the Sunset Breeze* was Haglund's guitar teacher in London and the person who introduced him initially to Delius' work. And so the list goes on but the implication is clear. Do not just take my word for it – these are exceptional musicians individually and collectively who have been drawn to the work of an exceptional composer. In recent years Haglund has suffered from prolonged bouts of illness. Thankfully these are now behind him and I would like to think that this return to full health will be marked by his emergence onto the international stage as a composer of the highest calibre heralded by this quite superb disc. What a restoration of faith in the power of *new* music this disc gives me – contemporary music that is complex, rewarding, moving and above all human. My disc of the year without a doubt.

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