

Welsh organ music

T. J. Morgan *Fantasia on three Welsh hymn-tunes*

Richard Elfyn Jones *Meditation; Allegro Giocoso*

William Mathias *Berceuse; Recessional*

Mansel Thomas *Six preludes on Welsh hymn tunes*

Gareth Glyn *Three Psalms*

Jane Watts (organ)/ Brecon Cathedral

Recorded 1998 (1997 in Welsh); TT65'15". SAIN SCD 2140

This disc, the production of which is partly funded by the Welsh Arts Council, presents an interesting opportunity to hear a cross section of Welsh organ music from 1924 to the present day. For a project like this to succeed in winning over a wider audience for little-known music, both production and performances need to be of the highest quality. Jane Watts is more than equal to her side of the challenge, playing with great clarity and authority, but this issue falls short in other respects. The closely recorded sound which works well for classically voiced instruments in resonant buildings is ill suited to the restored Hill organ in the dry acoustic of Brecon Cathedral. Some pipes produce unpleasant transients on release, particularly noticeable in loud staccato chords, and small imperfections in voicing, wind supply and tuning – doubtless imperceptible in live concerts – are too apparent.

A CD of little-known music also needs clear liner notes. But there is no summary list of contents, track numbers or timings; these are incorporated into the programme notes which confusingly alternate between English and Welsh with inconsistent presentation and formatting.

As for the music, T. J. Morgan's *Fantasia on three Welsh hymn-tunes* is perhaps not the best place to start except for those who enjoy the idiom of 1950's FRCO sight-reading tests. This piece - reminiscent of Rheinberger but less competent - won the composition prize at the 1921 Eisteddfod in Caernarfon, and like many winners of composition prizes over the years is anodyne and unmemorable. Mansel Thomas's *Six preludes on Welsh hymn tunes*, composed in the 1970's, are curious; the harmonic language is advanced and sometimes dissonant, and so contrasts oddly with the conservatism of the rhythmic and textural writing. Number 5, *Lledrod*, is the most charming but the least adventurous - a little like a pre-evensong improvisation.

Richard Elfyn Jones's *Meditation* (1980) is far more interesting. Although slow and quiet, the piece is given a subtle urgency by the pedal part, which moves constantly and in irregular rhythms. Challenging without being obscure, Jones's style is original but does not strive for effect. The sleeve note describes the next piece, his *Allegro giocoso*, as a 'joyful piece suitable for a festive occasion'. Certainly the organ textures and rhythms are festive and

fanfare-like, but the harmonies cast a sombre mood over the piece and sometimes undermine its sense of direction.

Mathias's *Recessional* shows him in his well-known festive spirit with harmonies dominated by fourths and fifths and plenty of lively rhythms. His *Berceuse* is one of the highlights of this CD; like Roger-Ducasse's *Pastorale* it takes a simple genotype and develops it into something that far transcends the original form. A substantial introduction with distinctive thematic material leads into the berceuse proper, a dark and restless piece. This builds slowly over long pedal notes into a powerful climax with the dramatic reappearance of material from the introduction before the berceuse returns and dies away.

Another piece that deserves a wider audience is Gareth Glyn's *Three Psalms* (1985). A short *Intrada* leads into the *Fuga* which is quiet and sombre. The festive last movement is initially reminiscent of a Mathias processional but soon becomes more complicated and ambiguous. The harmonic idiom is sometimes tough but its dissonances seem to come from a contrapuntal logic and the piece as a whole has an organic unity. Its technical demands are met with well-controlled and powerful playing from Jane Watts.