

**BLISS:** *Checkmate; Melee Fantasque*

Scottish National Orchestra/ David Lloyd-Jones  
Naxos 557641—65 minutes

This may be heresy, but I think the best music here is the filler, *Mélée Fantasque*, composed in 1921 and according to the notes, the first orchestral work of the composer to be performed in public. It has varied, enticing, sometimes beautiful episodes, with many contrasting elements. Bliss considered it his first ballet score and dedicated it to his friend Claude Lovat Frazier, an artist and theatrical designer. Colorfully expressive sections are meant to convey Frazier's paintings, and amid these

more dynamic sections come, in the words of the composer, "elegiac passages that hint at the loss of this gifted friend". They are quite beautiful. Bliss was so fond of the score, he revised it twice in the following years. Lloyd-Jones gives it a captivating presence and appeal.

*Checkmate* is performed complete. It's an interesting idea for a ballet—the stage a chessboard and the dancers the chess pieces. Here's an example from the notes:

"The Entry of the Black Queen" is epitomized by a sensuous clarinet melody offset by harp arpeggios, indicative of both her sexual allure and deadly, cold-hearted nature. She mesmerizes the red pieces, especially the Red Knight, and to a melting solo violin phrase flings him a rose: he is enslaved by her guile.

As more pieces come onto the board, their various characters are portrayed, and of course it evolves into a battle, eventuating in duels, betrayals, and stabbings, including the final death of the Red King, who cannot escape as his protective pieces are dispatched by the black forces and he becomes surrounded. The pieces take on a very human character.

But the ballet's concept and execution seem more inspired than Bliss's music. There are some fine passages, such as the brassy, mechanistic 'Entry of the Red Castles'. Here, Bliss uses 'The Building of the New World' from his film score for HG Wells's *Things to Come*. And there are other fine moments—certainly these Royal Scottish musicians play well—but I don't find the music inspired enough to recommend the CD to other than Bliss aficionados or the curious. Other entries in the Naxos series might make better introductions to this composer, including the excellent piano concerto.

Perhaps *Checkmate* will grow on me in time, but my feeling is that it doesn't do well independent of the production itself—as does Prokofiev's music for *Romeo and Juliet*, for example. With no memorable melodies, *Checkmate* doesn't come close to that level. Yet, I can imagine it being effective in an actual production of the ballet.