

ALWYN Piano Concertos: No. 1; No. 2. Sonata alla toccata. Derby Day Overture • Peter Donohoe

(pn); James Judd, cond; Bournemouth SO • NAXOS 8.557590 (59:35)

William Alwyn (1905–1985), thanks to Chandos, has fared better on disc than a number of his British contemporaries—Alan Bush, Armstrong Gibbs, Constant Lambert, and Robin Milford. Thus far, but for a few notable exceptions, Chandos has pretty much been king of the Alwyn hill. The current Naxos CD is one of those exceptions. Initially, the two piano concertos appeared as discmates to Chandos's series of Alwyn symphonies. The concertos were played—and quite imposingly, I might add—by the always-reliable Howard Shelley. Chandos subsequently re-packaged the two concertos on a single CD. Now we have the two concertos from powerhouse pianist Peter Donohoe, who has made somewhat of a specialty of 20th-century (especially British) “killer” concertos, and conductor James Judd, who is equally at home in this repertoire.

There is much to recommend either of these versions, but the works themselves, in my opinion, probably do not warrant recommending both. Which is to say, if you already have one, you don't need another. Alwyn's First Piano Concerto (1930) is a highly compact piece, a four-movements-in-one affair—dispatched in 15:07 by Shelley and 14:38 by Donohoe—that strikes me as being long on busywork and somewhat short on melody. Its opening *Allegro deciso* has much in common with Prokofiev's spiky Third Piano Concerto, while its too-brief *Adagio e tranquillo* continues in the Prokofiev vein, but is amelodic and underdeveloped. Alwyn wrote the concerto for Clifford Curzon, who premiered it with the composer conducting the Bournemouth SO in 1931.

Alwyn's Second Piano Concerto (1960) is a more ambitious work. As with the First, there is still a lot of hustle and bustle, but Alwyn now manages to spin out some very beautiful melodic ideas. Here the differences between Shelley and Donohoe are more pronounced, with Donohoe shaving nearly four minutes off of Shelley's overall timing. The concerto's scheduled premiere had to be cancelled when its dedicatee, the Dutch pianist Cor de Groot, was stricken by paralysis in one of his arms. Alwyn hastily composed an overture, *Derby Day*—also heard on this new Naxos CD—to fill the gap for the missing concerto on the program.

Mary Alwyn, the composer's second wife—aka Doreen Carwithen, a recognized composer in her own right, discovered while rummaging through her late husband's manuscripts that he had at some point excised the concerto's second movement, even though it had never been performed. Only a brief transitional bridge passage remained connecting the two *Allegro* movements. Carwithen-Alwyn decided to restore the lovely, dreamy *Andante*, (a wise choice) and to tweak the concluding measures of the first movement to “restore a satisfactory ending.” Shelley's 1993 Chandos recording of the concerto, with Carwithen-Alwyn's contributions, was its first. Donohoe's new recording also follows the Carwithen-Alwyn score.

Between the two recordings, I find Donohoe the more visceral and driven, especially in the last movement, a Bartókian *Allegro barbaro*-like piece, where Donohoe's faster tempo and more percussive attacks generate a real electrical charge. Sonically, though, Chandos provides Shelley with the better recording.

The aforementioned *Derby Day Overture* is a sure crowd pleaser in Alwyn's best film-score style. The *Sonata alla toccata* is a fantastic piece—a thrilling ride over a turning, twisting, virtuoso roller-coaster track, interrupted by moments of equally exhilarating lyrical repose.

If I had to choose one or another of these CDs, I'd probably go for the new Naxos, and not simply because of its bargain price. I prefer by a slight margin the edginess in Donohoe's playing. But as I've said, if you already have the Shelley, I'm not convinced that a second recording is necessary.

Jerry Dubins