

CDs

Resurrection in Venice

David Matthews enjoys a recording of a new realisation of Wagner's last symphonic sketches

Richard Wagner in Venice. King: Richard Wagner in Venice: A Symphony; Wagner: Siegfried Idyll. The Mahler Players/Tomas Leakey. Mahler Players MP1383CD (42 minutes, available from www.mahlerplayers.co.uk), recorded at Strathpeffer Pavilion, Highlands of Scotland, on 19–20 June 2021

It is well known that, at the end of his life, Wagner had no plans for further operas, and often expressed his intention of composing a symphony, or symphonies, but died before he was able to produce one. In her diaries, his wife Cosima refers to many conversations they had about symphonies, the last one on 11 February 1883, just two days before his death. That day he showed Cosima one of the sketches he thought he might use, one of a number he had made over the past few years. As John Deathridge has



A 19th-century view of the Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi in Venice where Wagner spent the last months of his life

written in the invaluable essay 'Richard Wagner's Unfinished Symphonies' in his book *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, it seems that 'just before his death Wagner was busy putting his sketch fragments in order'. It might seem surprising that although Wagner had been thinking seriously about symphonies since 1878, he had made virtually no progress in composing one. In that year he was sent the parts, thought to be lost, of the Beethoven-influenced C major Symphony he had composed in 1832. Wagner's assistant Anton Seidl reconstructed the score, Wagner revised it, and conducted a performance in Venice on Christmas Day 1882. It was the last time he conducted an orchestra. But the reason he had given up symphonies in the first place was that he had decided that after Beethoven, symphonies were impossible and that Beethoven's true heritage was to be in music drama. As Deathridge concludes: 'It was not Wagner's lack of ability in writing instrumental music but his own polemic about the symphony and its future that in the end may have been responsible for his inability to compose one. The will to write symphonies remained with Wagner until his death, but no matter how much the aging composer brought his still lively intelligence to bear on the problem, he remained struck compositionally silent by a lifelong allegiance to a different point of view.'

What kind of symphony might Wagner have written? On 19 November 1878 Wagner told Cosima: 'I shall probably return to the old symphonic form, in one section, with an andante in the middle. After Beethoven, four-movement symphonies cannot be written any more, they just look like imitations.' Discussing symphonies with Liszt on 17 December 1882, Wagner said: 'We should just spin out a melodic line until it can be spun no further – only nothing of drama.' The four movements of his 1832 Symphony last over forty minutes; Wagner's planned new symphonies would almost certainly have resembled the only orchestral work of his later years, the *Siegfried Idyll*, a single movement of half that length. The manuscript of the *Siegfried Idyll* is headed 'Symphonie', though Wagner removed the title when the piece was published. Wagner had already conceived the idea of a single-movement symphonic work in his little-known but impressive A flat Piano Sonata composed for Mathilde Wesendonck in 1853.

These ideas, and the existing sketches, which are reproduced in Deathridge's essay, came to inspire Matthew King to attempt to compose the symphony Wagner was unable to achieve. In his detailed and informative booklet notes for this sensitively played and conducted CD recording, which appropriately also includes a fine performance of the *Siegfried Idyll*, King says: 'it seemed essential to situate the material within the broad stylistic context of something resembling Wagner's own harmonic idiom'. This seems to me the absolutely correct approach, and King has produced a work that sounds miraculously close to what Wagner might have written himself. He has scored it for the same orchestra as the *Siegfried Idyll*: flute, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, trumpet and strings, and it is similar in its shape. King has used all Wagner's sketches, all of which Wagner harmonised except the main theme of the Symphony, a 22-bar melody of considerable beauty, which King has treated in various ways with different harmony and counterpoint, including a faster version in a middle section which King calls a scherzo, though it does not feel separate from the rest of the piece. Much of the music sounds like *Parsifal*, unsurprisingly since a number of the sketches were written down when Wagner was still composing that work. At one point King quotes the 'holy fool' motif, whose descending fifths parallel one of the Symphony's chief themes.

And King's coda is, as he says, a 'Death in Venice', with quotations from Liszt's *Lugubre gondola* and, at the very end, Siegfried's Funeral March.

I have an immediate sympathy with what King has done, having worked on somewhat similar projects myself. I completed the slow movement, of which only half exists in short score, of Vaughan Williams's unfinished Cello Concerto, and wrote a *Norfolk March* based on the programme note for the premiere of Vaughan Williams's subsequently lost third *Norfolk Rhapsody*. In both these pieces there was a need to enter into the composer's mind, as Anthony Payne – to whose memory Matthew King's Symphony is dedicated – did so admirably in his completion of Elgar's Third Symphony. I feel that Matthew King has done the same for Wagner with entire success in his own Symphony.



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UPCOMING PROGRAMS

SUMMER 2022

Saul Lilienstein:
TWO PRE-RECORDED PROGRAMS ON
The Art of Transition/The Malleable Motif

SEPTEMBER 11, 2022, 2:00-3:30 P.M. EST

Kristen Wunderlich and Arlene Shrut:
LECTURE AND RECITAL

OCTOBER 16, 2022, 2:00-3:30 P.M. EST

Edward and Paula Bortnichak:
LECTURE ON **Bayreuth Productions Since 1951**

NOVEMBER 6, 2022 | Jeffrey Swann:

TWO-PART PROGRAM ON **Tristan und Isolde**

JANUARY 8, 2023

2:00-3:30 P.M. EST
Vanessa Iacocca:
LECTURE ON **Parsifal,
Kundry and Shared
Compassion as Wagner's
Allegorical Vision for Germany**

FEBRUARY 5, 2023

2:00-3:30 P.M. EST
Victoria Bond:
LECTURE ON **Wagner's Women**



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