

NAXOS

Edmund RUBBRA

Violin Concerto

Improvisation for Violin and Orchestra

Krycia Osostowicz, Violin • Ulster Orchestra
Takuo Yuasa



Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986)

Violin Concerto, Op. 103 · Improvisations on Virginal Pieces by Giles Farnaby, Op. 50 Improvisation for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 89

Although he was renowned for his symphonies, concertos and quartets, the unique compositional gifts of the British composer Edmund Rubbra sometimes seemed at variance with the large sectional contrasts and structural symmetries of the sonata-based forms he composed in. Rubbra drew perhaps his profoundest inspiration from the polyphonic music of the sixteenth century and the Baroque eras – he was a natural composer of vocal motets, of large, breathing spans of counterpoint. Although a subtle harmonist, the basic unit of his music is the line, whether for a voice or an instrument, flexibly moving against and in consort with other lines. Growth happens in the way these lines extend themselves, growth of a peculiarly organic, always-developing kind, more resembling the inner life and progressive metamorphosis of a plant than the formal architecture of, say, a Beethovenian sonata-movement. It is no coincidence that the first movement of Rubbra's *Piano Concerto* carries the botanical title '*Corymbus*', suggesting a shape peculiar to certain plant forms, nor that he wrote one of the most valuable short manuals on counterpoint in the twentieth century.

One might, therefore, expect any work that Rubbra entitled *Improvisation* to manifest this quality of free, formally untrammelled growth to perfection: and so it is with the **Improvisation for violin and orchestra, Op. 89**, composed in 1956 for the Louisville Orchestra of Louisville, Kentucky, under that orchestra's enlightened policy of commissioning, giving the première and subsequently issuing commercial recordings of new works from leading composers around the world. The world première was given by Sidney Harth, the orchestra's leader, during the Louisville Orchestra's 1957 season, under the baton of their conductor Robert Whitney. The *Improvisation* is in fact a substantially recomposed version, using a smaller orchestra, of a *Fantasia* for violin and orchestra that Rubbra had composed in the mid-1930s but had held back owing to dissatisfaction with its shape and scoring. The *Improvisation* opens with an extended solo for the violin in which, accompanied only by a timpani-

roll, the soloist expounds the main material, growing freely and spontaneously from the calm initial phrase and its answer, which between them immediately span nine of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. This long, eloquently 'speaking' line immediately sets the scene for a discourse at once searching, serious and passionate. This opening is taken over basically unchanged from the original *Fantasia*, but Rubbra was now able to build upon its implications with a greater sense of direction.

Thus the violin proceeds to explore several of the motivic elements of the line in partnership with the orchestra, in a combination of variation and thematic metamorphosis. The mood is mainly meditative, but apt at any moment to flare up in sudden ardour or slip into dreamy fantasy. The tempo quickens into a brief, furious *Allegro*, then subsides to the initial *Lento* with a return to the opening theme. As a new, contrasting melody, marked *molto cantabile*, in suave conjunct motion rather than the wider leaps of the initial theme, takes over the proceedings, this section develops into a kind of ardent slow movement. Before long, however, the stormy faster music returns and rushes, with solo writing of virtuoso standard, into the work's climactic outburst, with the opening theme on winds heard against a reiterated polonaise rhythm in *col legno* strings. The contrasting theme, majestically *sostenuto* on full strings, leads into a brooding coda where the violin rhapsodizes against chorale-like wind chords. The opening theme is heard for a last time shared between harp and violin, with a closing reminiscence on solo horn.

Rubbra's affection for the music of the Elizabethans and Jacobean is displayed in a different fashion in another work whose title incorporates the term 'improvisation', the **Improvisations on Virginal Pieces by Giles Farnaby, Op. 50**, of 1938-9. Farnaby (c.1563-1640) wrote many vocal works but is most celebrated for his keyboard pieces. Rubbra arranged five of these for a Haydn/Mozart-sized orchestra, double woodwind, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings, at the request of his publishers, who after his first three symphonies desired a less complex

work that would be comparatively inexpensive to produce and might be easier to market to a wide audience. Rubbra had in fact already demonstrated a knack for working creatively with early-music materials, notably in the scherzo of his *First Symphony*, founded on the old French dance *Périgourdine*. While some of the *Improvisations* adhere quite faithfully to the modest dimensions of their originals, even observing Farnaby's literal section-repeats, others use them as a jumping-off point for further exploration of the material in a more contemporary context, after the manner perhaps of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*. The opening *Farnaby's Conceit* is a case in point. The spell-binding *His Dreame*, with its haunting oboe solo and muted strings, establishes a magical sense of connexion between Farnaby's day and the English pastoral school of Rubbra's own time. The glinting, capricious *His Humour* breaks up its tunes all over the orchestra in teasing scherzo-style. A solo viola then intones the tune of *Loth to Depart*, one of Farnaby's best-known pieces, whose air of melancholic elegy gains a cumulative intensity from Rubbra's setting. The final movement, *Tell me, Daphne*, treats the eponymous tune to a series of six short and simple variations of which the last, marked *Allegro bucolico*, forms a cheerful finale.

The violin *Improvisation* of 1956 sometimes sounds like a study for a full-scale concerto, and indeed only three years later Rubbra completed his **Violin Concerto, Op. 103**. While his previous concertos for piano and for viola had been designated by key, the *Violin Concerto* discloses no 'official' overall tonality (in fact the first and last movements are fairly clearly centred on A and the central movement on F and C). As his music evolved Rubbra became increasingly interested in the power of particular intervals to govern the harmony, while remaining firmly within the orbit of diatonic tonality. The work was first performed in February 1960 by the violinist Endre Wolf with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Rudolf Schwarz. As in all the works on this disc, Rubbra's orchestration is notable for its range of colour and timbre and his precise judgement of weight and texture, so that the solo instrument is never masked.

The first movement is one of Rubbra's finest sonata structures, while showing continuous organic growth

across the formal divisions of exposition, development and recapitulation. The stern opening theme, which has been compared in rhythm and interval-structure to that of Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*, is soon contrasted with a sweeter, more aspiring theme in woodwind, and these two ideas, immediately taken up by the violin, provide most of the movement's material. The formal second subject, in D major, could be viewed as an extension of the woodwind theme. There is a quality of passion and seriousness about the music which is reminiscent of the Bloch and Shostakovich concertos, but also a very English quality of serene joyfulness which is very much Rubbra's hallmark. The development section flows into the recapitulation without obvious break, and the searching cadenza appears very late in the movement, just leaving time for a few abrupt final bars.

Rubbra entitled the slow movement *Poema*; though no specific poem is indicated, it seems to have a spiritual kinship with the slow movement of his *Sixth Symphony* (1954), entitled *Canto*, and which was inspired by lines from a poem of Leopardi concerning the restorative effects of a well-loved landscape. This musical 'poem' has two contrasted themes, expounded by the orchestra and taken up by the violin, but a powerful unity of mood: a gravely ecstatic quality of meditation. *Calmo* and *sereno* are characteristic markings, not seriously disturbed by the march-like tread of the central section, which issues in a calm dialogue between violin and flute. Only towards the end does a hint of drama emerge, in throbbing triplet writing and wide violin leaps, but eventually the solo line soars calmly, nightingale-like, into the upper air.

The finale has been called a country dance; certainly it makes clear allusion to folk-music and bagpipe drones. But this is a very sophisticated dance, teasingly irregular in its cross-rhythms and changes of metre and with a quality of blithe formality that harks back to the *Farnaby Improvisations*. The tonality here is a bright A major, but twice, the second time very near the end, a contrasting theme in the diametrically opposite tonal direction of E flat minor casts a brief, ambiguous shadow over the proceedings before this splendid concerto ends decisively in A major in the highest of spirits.

Malcolm MacDonald

Krysia Osostowicz

Krysia Osostowicz is one of the leading violinists of her generation, well known both as a soloist and chamber musician. She studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School and Cambridge University before completing her violin studies in Salzburg with the distinguished violinist and quartet leader, Sandor Vegh. She has given concerto and recital performances across Europe and made a series of award-winning recordings. Her concerto engagements have included performances of Rubbra's *Violin Concerto* with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Britten's *Violin Concerto* in Estonia. Krysia Osostowicz is also well known as a chamber musician. Her reputation was established with the pioneering piano quartet Domus, which went on to win a worldwide audience and two Gramophone awards in ten years. She now leads the Dante Quartet, which she formed in 1995 and which is recognised as one of the finest quartets in Britain. As an independent chamber musician, Krysia Osostowicz has collaborated with artists such as Radu Lupu, Steven Isserlis, Michael Collins, Ernst Kovacic, Levon Chilingirian and Christoph Richter. She has made over twenty recordings of solo, duo and ensemble repertoire, winning particular praise for her discs of Brahms, Fauré and Bartók: the Fauré disc, with the pianist Susan Tomes, won a Deutsche Schallplattenpreis, and the Bartók solo sonata was shortlisted for a Gramophone award. Her recording of Rubbra's *Violin Sonatas*, with the pianist Michael Dussek, was also shortlisted by *The Gramophone* and won high critical acclaim.

Ulster Orchestra

Based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the Ulster Orchestra was formed in 1966 and is now one of the major orchestras in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Its main concert season takes place in Belfast's Ulster and Waterfront Halls, but it also gives concerts across Northern Ireland. It is the Orchestra-in-Residence for the Belfast Festival at Queen's, accompanies opera and ballet productions at Belfast's Grand Opera House, and its outstanding education and outreach work was recognised a few years ago by an award from the Royal Philharmonic Society. Thierry Fischer is the Ulster Orchestra's Principal Conductor and Artistic Adviser, following a list of distinguished artists who have previously held the post, including Bryden Thomson, Vernon Handley, Dmitry Sitkovetsky and Yan Pascal Tortelier. For many years Takuo Yuasa was the Orchestra's popular Principal Guest Conductor. The Ulster Orchestra has made more than sixty recordings, notably for Naxos, Chandos, BMG and Hyperion. The BBC has a unique relationship with the Orchestra as its exclusive broadcast partner, with many relays on BBC Radio 3, Radio Ulster and BBC TV. Tours of Europe, Asia, and the United States have added to the Orchestra's reputation.

Takuo Yuasa

Until August 2005 the Principal Guest Conductor of the Ulster Orchestra in Northern Ireland, the highly regarded Japanese conductor Takuo Yuasa regularly performs throughout Europe and the Far East. He has held positions as Principal Conductor of the Gumma Symphony Orchestra in Japan, and Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, and his success with the Ulster Orchestra in Belfast brought further extensions of his contract there. He has a most successful recording career and is an exclusive Naxos Artist, recording for the company with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland and the Ulster Orchestra. He has earned many fine reviews and particular acclaim in the Penguin Guide for a wide range of repertoire, with music by Britten and Rawsthorne, Honegger and Vieuxtemps, Webern and Schoenberg, from Macdowell to Macmillan, Schubert to Rimsky-Korsakov, Pärt, Górecki, Glass and Nyman, as well as a newly emerging strand of music from Japanese composers such as Yashiro, Moroi and Yamada. Takuo Yuasa was born in Osaka, where he studied piano, cello, flute and clarinet from an early age. At eighteen he left Japan to study in the United States at the University of Cincinnati, where he completed a Bachelor Degree in Theory and Composition. He later moved to Europe to study conducting with Igor Markevitch in France, then with Hans Swarowsky at the Hochschule in Vienna and with Franco Ferrara in Siena before he became assistant to Lovro von Matacic, working with him in Monte Carlo, Milan and Vienna. Since winning a Special Award at the Fitelberg International Conducting Competition in Katowice, Poland, Takuo Yuasa has frequently conducted the major orchestras there including the Warsaw National Philharmonic and Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestras. His career has brought acclaimed appearances with major orchestras throughout Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

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1 Improvisation for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 89 12:25

Improvisations on Virginal Pieces by Giles Farnaby, Op. 50

2 I: Farnaby's Conceit 3:24

3 II: His Dreame 2:33

4 III: His Humour 2:18

5 IV: Loth to Depart 3:12

6 V: Tell me, Daphne 2:44

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 103

7 I: Allegro 14:36

8 II: Poema (Lento ma non troppo) 10:41

9 III: Allegro giocoso 5:12

Although he was renowned for his choral music (Naxos 8.55255) and his eleven symphonies, Rubbra composed a small number of concertante pieces and concertos notable for their eloquent musicality rather than mere virtuosity. At the heart of the very fine 1959 *Violin Concerto*, which unfolds characteristically in large, seamless spans, is the deeply reflective slow movement, a musical 'poem' of rapt meditation and yearning. In all the works on this disc, Rubbra's orchestration is distinctive for its range of colour and timbre, its precise judgement of weight and texture, and passages of great beauty.

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