

Instrumental

Jonathan Plowright (piano).

Hyperion CDA67767 (full price, 1 hour

18 minutes). Website www.hyperion-records.co.uk

Producer Jeremy Hayes. Engineer Tony Faulkner. Date September 2008.

Harriet Cohen (1895-1967) was one of the most influential of English pianists of the last century. She was the mistress of Arnold Bax and dedicatee of his *Symphonic Variations* as well as of Vaughan Williams's Piano Concerto. Her fascinating life story has recently been told in *Music and Men: the Life and Loves of Harriet Cohen* by Helen Fry (The History Press; 2008). Cohen was the instigator in 1931 of what became 'A Bach Book for Harriet Cohen', a collection of 12 transcriptions by leading English composers which she premiered at the Queen's Hall in 1932. It's a very distinguished list of composers – just lacking Elgar (who failed to deliver) and Holst (who declined) – and it's a fascinating document in its own right. Ronald Stevenson commented on 'A Bach Book for Harriet Cohen', back in 1982, that it was 'a manual of how not to write for the piano', comparing it unfavourably with the virtuosic transcriptions of Busoni and the like. I imagine that only a few would agree with that statement: what we have here is something rather along the lines of

the more sensitive and beautifully realized versions of Myra Hess, Wilhelm Kempff and Harold Bauer, and indeed of Busoni's less grandiloquent versions, highly idiomatic writing that is concerned with melody rather than showmanship.

Much lies in the choice of the work, and the works here are dominated by chorale melodies of which the organ prelude is transcribed. One exception is Bax's version of the middle section of the G major *Fantasia* for organ, an extraordinary rich and demanding setting in which Jonathan Plowright excels, and which Stevenson would have to begrudgingly recognize as fabulous and ingenious piano writing. Cohen was limited by the size of her hands and one has to wonder how she would have coped with this. The other notable exception is Eugene Goossens, whose transcription of the *Andante* from the Second *Brandenburg Concerto* is beautifully realized, the melodic line projected with a bell-like tone over widely spaced accompanimental figurations. It may not be virtuosic as such, but it is demanding in the extreme, as indeed is Myra Hess's famous arrangement of *Jesu, joy of man's desiring*, included as one of the eight extra Bach transcriptions which Plowright includes.

By closing with Stevenson's own version of *Komm, süsßer Tod* Plowright highlights the

differences between the genres of the transcription and the paraphrase. Whereas Frank Bridge's account of the same work is characterized by its simplicity and fidelity, Stevenson chooses to base his version on Stokowski's orchestral arrangement, with melody and accompaniment spanning the entire compass of the keyboard, exulting in the capacity of the modern grand, with rippling passagework that is musically far removed from the simplicity of the original. 'A Bach Book for Harriet Cohen' does not contain works with such dramatic gestural display and therein lies its beauty, but in setting many of Bach's most exquisite melodies it poses no less of a challenge to the performer. There are some gems here: Bantock's *Wachet auf*, as sensitive and idiomatic as Busoni's or Kempff's, Vaughan Williams's *Ach bleib bei uns* employing the mellifluous shifting chordal patterns which are so characteristic of his writing, and Howells's entirely faithful *O Mensch, bewein' dein Sünde gross*, a five-minute outpouring of finely crafted melodic writing.

This is an invaluable addition to Hyperion's Bach Piano Transcriptions series and Plowright has done us an enormous service in resurrecting these transcriptions and in rendering them so eloquently. *Nicholas Salwey*