

SOMMCD 0183

*Céleste Series*

Maria Marchant plays piano music by  
SIR GRANVILLE BANTOCK (1868-1946)

1 Chanson de Mai (May Song) 2:17

**Memories of Sapphire**

2 I Largamente espressivo 3:59

3 II Lento cantabile 3:18

4 III Allegretto delicato 1:15

5 Cloisters at Midnight 4:39

6 Barcarolle 3:49

7 Reverie 2:08

8 Parade March 2:51

**Two Scottish Pieces**

9 The Hills of Glenorchy – Quickstep 3:41

10 The Bobbers of Brechin – Reel 3:48

11 **Saul** – A Symphonic Overture 12:24

**Twelve Piano Pieces**

12 Rhapsode 2:41

13 Meditation 4:12

14 Phantasy 1:43

15 Scherzo 1:47

16 Nocturne 2:51

17 Legend 1:08

18 Preghiera 2:19

19 Mazurka 3:02

20 Intermezzo 2:12

21 Serenade 2:13

22 Caprice 2:01

23 Romance 3:12

Total duration: 73:43

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FIRST  
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The history of music reveals many figures who exerted a great influence on their contemporaries in terms of the practicalities of musicianship, the wider appreciation of music and its relevant applications during their lifetimes. Yet, their own compositions, for whatever reason, have, fallen into neglect since their death.

There are many reasons for the posthumous abandonment of music which, during the composer's lifetime, was frequently heard, chief, perhaps, being the reflex reaction of younger generations against those who immediately preceded them. There may also be a perceived critical element, as those composers come to maturity, elbowing aside the work of their no-longer-active elders. It may also be that the vagaries of fashion reveal earlier music to be of a lesser quality or relevance than it was previously thought to contain. Performing musicians, too, who once championed a particular composer or style of music may have retired, or passed on, leaving an interpretative black hole in their wake. Finally, the artistic circumstances surrounding practical performance may not be as readily available to the re-discovery of music once regarded as being of great significance, but which, for one reason or another, has fallen by the historical wayside.

In considering the life and work of Sir Granville Bantock (1868-1946) we encounter the quintessential example of such a figure. His father, Dr George Granville Bantock, was a leading gynaecologist and obstetrician who publically opposed Joseph Lister's pioneering use of antiseptics in surgical procedures.

Bantock's earliest lessons in composition were overseen by Dr Gordon Saunders at Trinity College of Music, before entering the Royal Academy of Music after being awarded the first Macfarren Scholarship in 1889. At the RAM, he was

a pupil of the devoted Wagnerite Frederick Corder. Thereafter, he toured the world as a conductor of musicals with the George Edwardes Company, and was then appointed, in 1897, Director of Music at the New Brighton Tower, where he transformed the resident dance band into a full symphony orchestra.

In the almost 80 years of Bantock's life, reasons may be found for the relative posthumous neglect of his music. In his earlier years, as the 19th century drew to its close – the period subsequently (but erroneously) typified by the oft-quoted phrase “a land without music” in so far as Britain was concerned – the pursuit of a career in music was not invariably received with unalloyed pleasure by many would-be composer's families, no matter how financially comfortable – as in Bantock's fortunate case – they might be.

Yet, if having managed to announce themselves, aspiring composers of that time would have found themselves part of a world in which large orchestras, choral societies and even fully-staffed touring opera companies were the norm. This was the world in which, as Bantock came to maturity, his legendary energy – allied to his considerable natural gifts and wide-ranging interests – enabled him eventually to establish himself as a major player in several roles: composer, conductor and administrator.

In 1900, Bantock was appointed first Principal of the School of Music at the Birmingham and Midland Institute (now the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire). On Elgar's recommendation, Bantock succeeded him as Peyton professor at the city's university and held both positions until his retirement in 1934. In 1920, he co-founded the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra: such practical and long-lasting examples of Bantock's achievements outside of his own compositions

demonstrate that he was a virtual powerhouse of ideas whose influence, other than purely artistic and practical, spread further than the shores of the British Isles.

His world was profoundly altered by the Great War of 1914-18, as was that of many composers whose reputations had been established before the conflict. As the 1920s dawned, they found themselves out of fashion, struggling to adapt – or soon giving up the struggle – to a new social and artistic world. If Bantock was not the only figure thus affected, such profound changes led to fewer opportunities for hearing his music and the consequential lack of appreciation of the best of his large-scale works, such as *Fifine at the Fair* and *Omar Khayyám*.

These works, especially, demand enormous orchestral and choral forces, making them expensive to perform. Bantock's death, within 18 months of the end of the Second World War, saw Britain's new post-war austerities unable to consider reviving the enormous orchestral and choral forces required by his scores or meeting the practical requirements of his three operas. The musical language in which they were written was out of fashion for a second time.

It has fallen to later generations to seek out those evident, if long-neglected, qualities that led Sibelius to dedicate his Third Symphony to Bantock, not least the Englishman's thorough musicianship championing, amongst others, Frederick Delius: Bantock gave the world premiere of *Brigg Fair* in Liverpool, in his enterprising concert series – with another life-long composer-friend, Havergal Brian, sitting next to Delius at the rehearsal and performance.

Unlike many of his major contemporaries who wrote principally for the large orchestras common before 1914 (in particular, Elgar, Mahler and Richard Strauss –

and even Stravinsky) Bantock did not neglect chamber music or the requirements of the solo pianist, producing a concurrent body of work in which the more intimate of his wide-ranging ideas could find their natural expression.

In this recital, coincidentally marking the sesquicentenary of Bantock's birth, it is remarkable to consider that every one of the 23 pieces in Maria Marchant's programme is being heard in its first commercial recording, affording music lovers of the early 21st century a rare opportunity of coming into contact with the piano music of one of the most influential British composers of his – or any other – generation.

Such is the range of Bantock's output that alongside his major works we also find within his solo piano pieces examples of his always-clever structuring and drily eloquent melodic style – facets constant throughout his oeuvre, if often hidden beneath impressionistic titles suggesting reactions which may cause the superficial listener to overlook the individuality of Bantock, the master-craftsman.

The programme opens with a miniature study from 1920, *Chanson de Mai* (May Song), a little over 150 bars in length and in a broadly simple ABA structure. It is full of subtle varieties of tonality (within an overall F major) and melodic turns of phrase which betoken a master's hand, gently propelled by off-beat syncopation. The movements making up *Memories of Sapphire* – 'three impressions for pianoforte' – were published in 1938 and are amongst the most personal music Bantock wrote. Throughout his marriage, Bantock was not the most faithful of husbands, and whilst staying at the town of Sapphire in North Carolina (where he was visiting as an examiner for Trinity College) he embarked upon a prolonged affair with a lady named Muriel Mann, 30 years his junior. Muriel's daughter provided the recollection that led to the composition of the suite:

“Once [Bantock] went with us to Sapphire for a few days and later wrote *Memories of Sapphire*, three beautiful lyrical tone-poems, which he dedicated to [my] Mother. He put the initials M.A.B. (meaning Muriel Angus Bantock) on music he composed after they had agreed to work out a permanent arrangement”.

But the Second World War intervened, and whatever arrangement the couple hoped for did not come to pass. All we have as a result of the liaison are these “three beautiful lyrical tone-poems”, the third of which, with its descending *animando* chromatic thirds in the right hand and mini cadenza, can almost be likened to a picturesque *memento* before a brief, calm codetta, following the sturdy first movement (a self-portrait?) and contemplative poetry of the second.

Four independent shorter pieces follow. The first, also dating from 1920, is an avowedly impressionistic study, *The Cloisters at Midnight* (*New College, Oxford*). Whilst it may be too much to claim a pervasive French influence, there is a perceptible acknowledgement of whole-tone expression as befits a work dedicated to one of the outstanding British pianists of the day, Frederick Dawson, a pupil of Anton Rubinstein and noted interpreter of Debussy, Fauré and Ravel. The subtly changing moods, reflecting the implications of the *Kyrie eleison* – the text of which appears at various points above the music – capture the essence of the locale the music avowedly depicts.

The more extended *Barcarolle* (1894) reveals Bantock’s early command of writing for the piano at its finest. Well imagined and laid out for the keyboard, this stand-alone work in F minor does not deserve the neglect it has suffered. The score is headed by a broken quotation from Robert Browning’s poem, *In a gondola*:

“Past we glide, and past, and past!  
– your harp, believe,  
With all the sensitive light strings  
Which dare not speak, now to itself  
Breathes slumberously, as if some elf  
Went in and out the chords, his wings  
Make murmur wheresoe’er they graze.”

This work – not alone in being inspired by a Browning poem – is one of the most convincing examples of early English impressionism in music. The same year also saw the composition of *Reverie*, a shorter, technically easier piece, more akin to the popular salon style of the day – *Andantino elegante* is the rather endearing tempo indication.

Bantock’s 1936 *Parade March* (in 6/8, marked *Con spirito*) shows the composer in very different guise. Not quite Elgarian, this lively affair is a more than presentable example of the genre, although its dedication – ‘To Sir Herbert Dowbiggin and the Ceylon Police Force’ – risked censure from those to whom the dedicatee exemplified the worst excesses of British Imperialism.

Although London-born, Bantock’s interest in his Scottish forebears led him to compose a number of large-scale orchestral works inspired by Scotland and the country’s history and culture, including, self-evidently, the *Two Scottish Pieces* published in 1918. These are settings of traditional tunes; the first, *The Hills of Glenorchy*, has survived in various forms as well as Bantock’s quickstep version. The reel, *The Bobbers of Brechin*, is a drinking song, proceeding on its merry way until Bantock’s *brillante* coda heralds the five final *Allargando* bars.

The symphonic overture *Saul* was written, performed (under Bantock's baton) and published by Breitkopf & Härtel in versions for a Brahms-Tchaikovsky-size orchestra and for solo piano (by Bantock himself) in 1894. The score is headed by a quotation from the first Book of Samuel (11:15): "And all the people went to Gilgal; and they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal".

Clearly, the music is programmatic in inspiration, but – in whichever form it is heard – the overture is more than purely representational. Its three main themes are each subjected to development in almost Straussian terms, and indeed it is not difficult to discern the influence of *Till Eulenspiegel* – purely in structural cohesion, certainly not in character – of a large-scaled symphonic rondo. Other striking characteristics of *Saul* are its overall treatment of the underlying tonality, C major, which is approached and varied at various dramatic and structural points in the work. Arguably, it is the earliest appearance in Bantock's work of the oriental thematic colour later to assume such significance in his output.

Bantock's *Twelve Piano Pieces* were collected and published as a set in 1897. Several were composed much earlier, in particular the first three pieces, which all date from 1892. The title of the first, 'Rhapsode', is rarely encountered today, but would have been known to well-bred late-Victorians, referring to a performer of epic poetry in Ancient Greece. It is, therefore, not too fanciful to imagine Bantock casting himself in this role here.

Indeed, with the exceptions of perhaps the Scherzo, Mazurka and Caprice, there would seem to be – despite the collection having been written over several years and not planned to be performed as a set – an overriding mood of contemplation,

a simpler, more direct style of utterance which perhaps points to the drawing room rather than the recital hall.

It is worth noting that Bantock's published sequence of the pieces is broadly in chronological order of composition, with four – Scherzo, Nocturne, 'Preghiera' (Prayer, or Supplication) and Intermezzo – having been written in December, 1893 (the Nocturne on Christmas Day). 'Preghiera' is prefaced by a quotation from the opening lines of Hymn of the City by the American nature poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878): "Not in the solitude / Alone may man commune with heaven" – a rare glimpse, perhaps, into Bantock's personal beliefs.

The Mazurka, Caprice and Romance were composed over five days in April 1897. If, as we suggested, Bantock saw himself as the Rhapsode of the opening piece, the final Romance reinforces an over-riding personal aspect of the set by being dedicated to his fiancée, Helen.

If, individually or overall, the 12 pieces do not plumb any emotional or intellectual depths, such relatively lighter qualities as they possess should be seen against the background of Bantock's musical life in the late 1890s, arising from taking up the conductorship of the New Brighton orchestra. Equally, however, the titles occasionally imply more serious feelings – with Bantock's deeper expression soon to appear in a major work, the *Elegiac Poem* for cello and orchestra.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2018

# Maria Marchant

“A richness of musicianship that haunts the memory.” (*BBC Music Magazine*)

“Phenomenally played, with Marchant’s chameleon-like ability to inhabit each work something to marvel at.” (*Arts Desk*)

A *BBC Music Magazine* Rising Star, British pianist Maria Marchant is active as a recitalist, concerto soloist and chamber musician following her Wigmore Hall and Southbank debuts. She has performed for festivals, music societies and leading venues in the UK and internationally. A passionate advocate of British music, she regularly features works by Holst, Ireland and Roderick Williams in her concerts, many of which have been broadcast on Radio 3, most recently on *In Tune*. Her debut SOMM CD, *Echoes of Land & Sea*, was released in 2017 to critical acclaim.

Chamber music highlights include membership of the Stradivarius Piano Trio and working with LPO co-principal clarinettist Thomas Watmough at the Shipley Arts Festival, where Maria is pianist-in-residence. Maria gave the world premieres of *Goodwood by the Sea* and *Sea Fever* – solo piano works by Roderick Williams written for her and commissioned by the Shipley Arts Festival and John Ireland Trust respectively.

Maria’s many competition successes include First Prize and Gold Medal in the International Hindemith Competition whilst studying for an MMus in Advanced Piano Performance at the RCM, supported by the BBC Performing Arts Fund. She was awarded the RCM Hilda Anderson Deane Scholarship, selected as an RCM Rising Star and became a Concordia Foundation, Park Lane Group and Tillett Trust

artist. Maria gained First Class BMus Honours and the Silver Medal for Piano Performance at Trinity Laban. Her professors have included Alexander Ardakov, Philip Colman, Niel Immelman and Yonty Solomon. Maria believes in the significant role of music in health care and is resident pianist at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital as an ambassador for the Concordia Foundation.

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