

The Music of Hampson Sisler

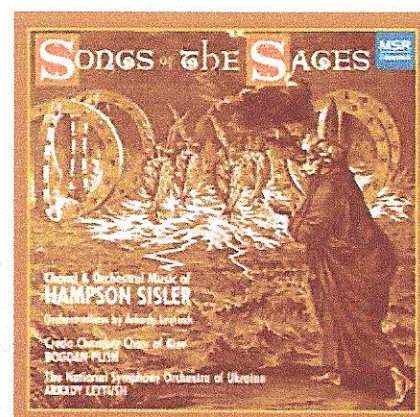
Curtis Rogers

The recent release on the MSR Classics label of eight CDs covering the music of the American composer Hampson Sisler affords an opportunity to examine the broader output of this distinguished creative figure whose contribution to sacred and organ music has been a notable feature of his life-work.



The Second Coming

Oratorio for Chorus and Orchestra
Sofia Chamber Choir; Sofia Sinfonietta;
Marlon Daniel (conductor)
MSR Classics MS 1489 (56:12 mins)



Songs of the Sages

Diurnal Night; Four Anthems; Nature's Terrorists; Songs of the Sages; Arkady Leytush – To Life

Viktoriya Khokhlova (soprano); Hampson Sisler (organ & narration); Credo Chamber Choir of Kiev; The National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine; Arkady Leytush (conductor)

MSR Classics MS 1262 (53:46 mins)



Phoenix Forever

Phoenix Forever; In the Wake of the Storm; Music in the Soul; Prayer of St. Francis

Lori-Kaye Miller (mezzo-soprano); Darnell Ishmel (baritone); Praga Sinfonietta; Marlon Daniel (conductor)

MSR Classics MS 1389 (44:50 mins)

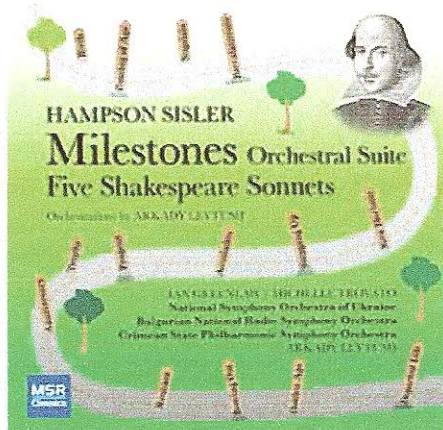


Trans-Cultural Bonding

Israeli-American Festival Overture; Cantata for Living; Japan Tragedy 2011; Faiths Cohabiting

Vocal soloists; Golden Voices Choir; Childrens Choir; Israel Symphony Orchestra; Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra; New Symphony Orchestra of Israel; Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra; Arkady Leytush (conductor)

MSR Classics MS 1518 (68:46 mins)



Milestones

Milestones; Five Shakespeare Sonnets

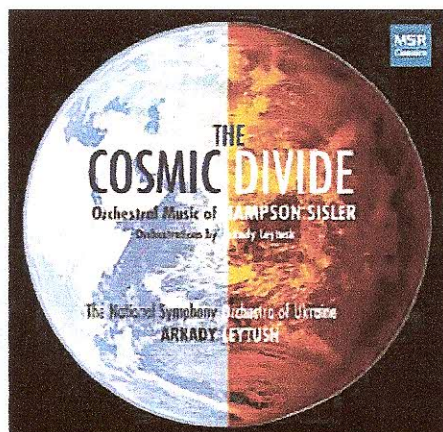
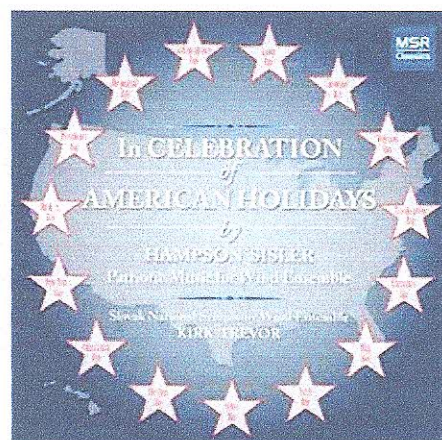
Irina Kharchenko & Velin Iliev (organ); Michelle Trovato (soprano); Ian Greenlaw (baritone); National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine; Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra; Crimean State Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra; Arkady Leytush (conductor)

MSR Classics MS 1414 (100:11 mins (2 discs))

In Celebration of American Holidays

American National Holidays Suite; Civic Events Suite
Slovak National Symphony Wind Ensemble; Kirk Trevor (conductor)

MSR Classics MS 1369 (66:41 mins)



The Cosmic Divide

Four Impromptus; Rondo Symphonique, Fugue and Epilogue; The Cosmic Divide; Tsunami; Rachmaninov – Russian Song (arr. Leytush)

Valery Michailuk (organ); Douglas Grandgeorge (narrator); National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine; Arkady Leytush (conductor)

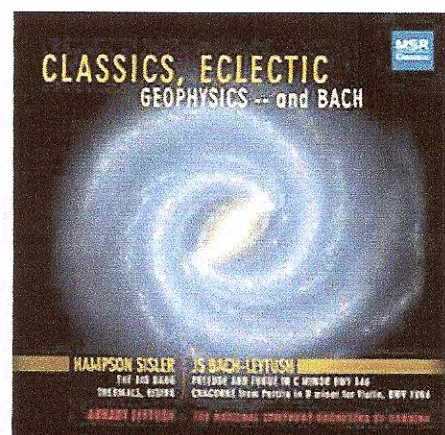
MSR Classics MS 1229 (63:08 mins)

Classics, Eclectic, Geophysics – and Bach

The Big Bang; Thermals Rising; J.S. Bach – Prelude and Fugue BWV546 (arr. Leytush); Chaconne from Partita BWV1004 (arr. Rakhlin & Leytush)

Valery Michailuk (organ); National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine; Arkady Leytush (conductor)

MSR Classics MS 1312 (70:41 mins)



The works of Hampson Sisler (b. 1932) recorded on the CDs under review here raise the interesting question as to how far music can bear a meaning which points beyond itself. In some of these works the music serves a religious or philosophical purpose, or is clearly meant to put the listener in mind of spiritual matters, such as the *Four Anthems for a capella chorus* (whose choral writing shows the hand of a well-practised organist and choir master, as Sisler has been for many decades), the *Cantata for Living* (1974), the *Songs of the Sages* (1998), *The Cosmic Divide* (2000) or the hour-long oratorio *The Second Coming* (2012-13). However, the latter two compositions (using texts from the Book of Revelation) also seem to have an ostensibly political purpose, as the composer's own notes on the oratorio reflect that 'with rising hostilities, both international and on individual, intimate levels, many Christians believe that we are heading for a major crisis in worldwide evolution'.

Actual or impending disasters are something which preoccupy Sisler a great deal, and a number of the works here address these specifically, with the composer's express intention that they serve 'as an encouragement to "warring" religions...to learn greater tolerance and acceptance' in the case of *Faiths Cohabiting* (2012); or further examples are *Japan Tragedy* (2011) dramatising the earthquake and subsequent tsunami of that year; *Tsunami* (2006) seemingly not referring to any specific event, but the tsunami which overwhelmed the Far East in 2004 must surely have been an influence; *Thermals Rising* (2008) concerns global warming; and *Nature's Terrorists* (2006) expresses the savagery from lower forms within nature such as piranhas and venus fly traps.

The text of *Cantata for Living* might be a rather anodyne series of platitudes ('Help us,

Almighty God, to comply willingly and work your vineyard with understanding' or 'God, make us attentive parents, kinfolk, friends, in the broader family of humankind') but there is frequently the implication – explicit or latent – in works like that one, *Faiths Cohabiting*, and the others already mentioned, that they are not mere musical memorials, but exhortations (moral, ideological, social or so on) to mankind to take action, and that Sisler is therefore making a political point. Whether it was meant to or not, the *Israeli-American Festival Overture* (2013) – written 'to assist in the celebration of America's Independence Day in Israel. A symbol of Israel's gratitude for American support, both financial and political' – can surely only act as a provocation to critics everywhere of Israel and its problematic relationship with the US.

The question arises, then, as to how successful these points are drawn in the music itself. Most of the compositions mentioned create an atmospheric background over which the sung or spoken texts may be declaimed, or the narratives filled in by the imagination from the pointers given by the composer in the notes printed in the CD booklets, rather than work out full symphonic discourses which develop clearly identified themes. A chorus of children in *Japan Tragedy* give a Japanese folksong, but otherwise there is no text and the listener must rely upon the description given by the composer – the ambient sequences of music sound as though they are the background to a visual montage which we do not see. Even without such a film, however, there seems to be something prurient about this recounting of such terrible events, though the oddly reserved nature of the music (in view of the topic) may have been intended to counteract that, so as not to depict these events in music too literally.

There is a more cogent sense of musical drama and narrative in *Nature's Terrorists*, obviously depicting the pests referred to in its movements, the quartet of tone poems in *Phoenix Forever* (2009), the *Songs of the Sages*, or *The Second Coming* where the seven seals and horsemen of the apocalypse are evoked solely through instrumental, rather than choral, music. The 'Killer Bees' section of *Nature's Terrorists* appears to utilise the B-A-C-H motif, but without sight of the score it is not certain whether this is a deliberate device or simply coincidence.

A clear musical trajectory is more evident in Sisler's works which adapt and develop existing melodies, often in sophisticated rhapsodic fashion. This is the case in the three books of movements constituting the *American National Holidays Suite* (no date given) orchestrated for woodwind and brass by Dale Jergenson, the *Civic Events Suite* (no date given) orchestrated for similar forces by Rob Deemer, and the three books of the suite *Milestones* (no date given) again orchestrated by Arkady Leytush. The use of wind and brass in the former two Suites, in addition to a plethora of well-known American themes, might evoke the spirit of Sousa, but that is more in terms of form rather than stylistic content. In fact, the use of existing melodies and the scoring in the *American National Holidays Suite* suggest Vaughan Williams's *English Folksong Suite* as a closer parallel. Incidentally the use of two hymn tunes from 17th century Scottish Psalters in 'Reverie' from the *Four Impromptus* (2003) and its string scoring also evoke the precedents set by the English composer in the *Hymn Preludes*, the *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus*, or the *Greensleeves Fantasia*.

Apart from these compositions which work existing tunes,

it is unclear to what extent much of Sisler's output on these discs is to be regarded as fully-fledged, articulate musical statements, rather than something equating more to incidental music, as many of the compositions are given in orchestrations by Arkady Leytush (who also conducts the majority of the performances). The only works originally scored for orchestra by Sisler here are Phoenix Forever, In the Wake of the Storm (2005), Music in the Soul (2005/9), Prayer of St. Francis (1970/2009), and The Second Coming. Neither the CD notes nor Sisler's website specify for what combinations of instruments the other compositions were originally scored. In any case, Leytush's results are convincing and conform to Sisler's own procedures in the works the latter has scored for orchestra himself. Quite often, given their subjects, these compositions create a sense of foreboding and anxiety, which is amply conveyed in the performances under Leytush's baton with various ensembles.

Also apparently orchestrated by Leytush is the Rondo Symphonique, Fugue and Epilogue (2004). It is described as a concerto for organ and orchestra, but no details are given as to the scoring of this work in its initial form. As an organist and long-established choir master, having served in churches around the New York, perhaps it was originally conceived for organ solo, and it is a fair guess that the other works on these discs also featured the organ prominently. Some of the orchestrations certainly use the organ, though on the whole it is no longer a significant feature of the scores. The performances, variously by Valery Michailuk, Irina Kharchenko, Velin Iliev, or Sisler himself, are accomplished, though electronic organs seem to have been used.

Sisler's compositional style is identifiably American in what may be termed its expressive

honesty and immediacy, perhaps characterised even by a certain naïveté (which is not at all meant as a pejorative comment), characteristic also of other American composers such as Copland and Barber, through a particular type of melodic facility and a use of modal systems, as much as tonal ones. That said, Sisler's tonal practices embrace a considerable degree of chromaticism and polytonality.

In view of the considerable number of orchestrations amongst these discs, it is difficult to distinguish between other stylistic traits which are intrinsic to Sisler, and those which are by-products of the orchestrations. The 'Toccatà' of the Four Impromptus has an oriental impressionistic quality, not unlike Debussy's *La Mer*, and musical impressionism is also brought to bear on *Diurnal Night* (2006) with its lush harmonies and a melancholic melody reminiscent of Chausson. The bellicose, aggressive nature of some parts of *Nature's Terrorists* call to mind Shostakovich, but this may owe something to Leytush's being steeped in the Russian tradition (both in his own compositional style and in his conducting manner). The sense of angst imbued in a number of the compositions here bears a passing resemblance to Mahler's style, though again this may derive from the wider European tradition in which Leytush is schooled and which he has brought to his orchestrations and interpretative disposition in performance. However the obsessive repetition of cell-like motifs in the 'Hebrew' section of *Faiths Cohabiting* is obviously attributable to the actual substance of Sisler's music there, and this bears some relation to Janacek's distinctive compositional method. Some parallels with Vaughan Williams have already been mentioned, and Sisler's use of modalism also tends to invoke

the character of that composer as much as anybody – passages of the *Songs of the Sages* recall such earlier choral works as the *Five Tudor Portraits* for example.

There is little to fault in the playing by the various orchestras recorded on these discs, with cohesive accounts overseen by Leytush who shows exemplary control of tension and momentum in the music, as well as lucid balancing among the sections of the orchestra. Sometimes the singers let these standards down – all of the soloists in the *Cantata for Living* have wobbly moments, or their English diction is compromised, for instance. Neither defects beset Viktoriya Khokhlova's performance in *Diurnal Night*, however, whilst the soloists in the *Five Shakespeare Sonnets* secure the music's lyrical impulse. Sisler has generally received persuasive advocates of his music on these discs, therefore, which offer a comprehensive overview of one of the significant composers in contemporary America.

We should like to express our appreciation to MSR Records for their supply of the recordings of Hampson Sisler's music, and for their assistance in the preparation of Mr Rogers's article. We understand that Mr Sisler is keen to compose a new major organ work, which we look forward to hearing.