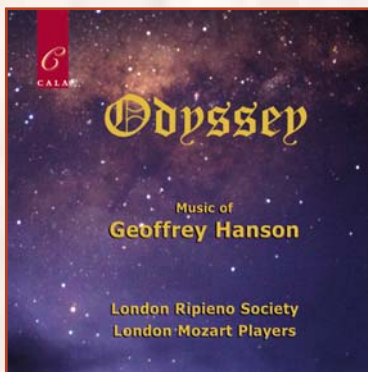




Reviews of *Odyssey*

CACD77026



London-based, English-born composer Geoffrey Hanson is a leading figure in the London Ripieno Society. He founded the Society more than fifty years ago. In addition to championing Baroque works, he has included music by Tippett, Rawsthorne, Britten, Tucapský, Burgon and Berkeley in his concerts. This is his first orchestral disc, courtesy of Cala and his sponsor contributors—listed towards the end of the booklet. There are three works for choir, two succinct concertos and a song-cycle for tenor and orchestra. The music was written during a 35-year period from 1978. The words are set out in the excellent booklet which also includes a helpfully detailed Composer's Note.

The *Five Nocturnes* is a marvel of frankly expressed clarity. Hanson uses the chamber orchestra in exemplary fashion—the melodic material is in a grand tradition and will appeal to those who enjoy the orchestra song-cycles by Carey Blyton and Geoffrey Bush. The declamatory style suggests Britten but there is a stronger expressive core and the wit has a more yielding blade: try the superb penultimate song, *An Appeal to Cats in the Business of Love*. Both the excellent tenor Pablo Strong and the orchestra bring out a battery of gawkily fine and eldritch detail: “Ye cats that...spit love at each other...I appeal to your scratches and your tattered fur...”

The 1988 *Clarinet Concerto* is in one movement. This music is not experimental—at least not in any thorny sense. Once again the writing is the epitome of clearly laid-out sound and ideas. It has a Rawsthorne-like after-taste and proceeds in a kaleidoscope of *sec* moods, bustling, uncertain, changeable, jackanapes-witty, purposeful and revelling in display. *Orpheus*, to words by Osbert Sitwell, is a vocal virtuoso piece with a probing piano line that again reminded me of Geoffrey Bush. The little *Jubilate Deo* is flecked with a surprising darkness—an apt reflection of the God-fearing theme that underpins Psalm 100.

The second concerto here is from a quarter century after the clarinet work. *Odyssey*—also in one movement—is a more open and emotional, indeed romantic, work with a greater succulent density of sound. It is presented with soulful singing urgency by Sebastian Comberti and his partners. It has that colour-subdued yet irrepressibly singing quality that I also hear in the music of American composer Arnold Rosner. It is well worth programming *Odyssey* the next time you are thinking of choosing Bloch's *Schelomo*.

Finally *Now Welcom Somer* is an a cappella work of five songs: *Now Welcom Somer* (Chaucer), *Winter is Cold-Hearted* (Christina Rossetti), *Bed in Summer* (R L Stevenson), *Beside the Idle Summer Sea* (W E Henley) and *On the Idle Hill of Summer* (A E Housman). Typically inventive and pleasing to the ear, the language is not that far removed from the RVW's *Three Shakespeare Songs*. Helena Thomson steps forward from the choir for a magical solo in *Bed in Summer*. Then two poised references to the idleness of summer. *Beside the Idle Summer Sea* (W E Henley) is strangely static and desolate—very affecting and seeming to speak of irretrievable loss. Finally in *On the Idle Hill of Summer* (A E Housman) Hanson takes another path from most of the settings of this poem; not for him a swinging march with elements of fatalism but instead a sustained shiver and chill. It takes a brave and sterling composer to end on such a note. Hanson does not disappoint.

You can find a list of Hanson's works here. Now I want to hear the concertos for piano, for oboe and for violin not to mention the large-scale *Sinfonia Amoris*.

A wide-ranging cross-section of the music by Geoffrey Hanson: varied, cool, emotionally engaged and concentrated.

Rob Barnett, *Musicweb-International*

Composer, conductor and organist Geoffrey Hanson has enjoyed long associations with the London Mozart Players and the London Ripieno Society so it's only just that both should play such a large part in the success of this disc devoted to Hanson's music composed over a near 35-year span. The portfolio of works on this disc show him writing for a variety of forces.

The disc begins, and closes, with music for voice. The *Five Nocturnes*, for tenor and chamber orchestral forces, is a supple, sensitive example of word setting. The lilting sway of *The Evening Primrose*, with its idiom pitched somewhere between Finzi and Britten, is immediately appealing and the chug-rhythm of the urgent *Airman RFC* with a strong piano ostinato offers an immediate contrast. D.H. Lawrence's poem *Piano* evokes, very deliberately, hymnal warmth but Hanson responds directly to the text drawing on brass and flute in particular to characterise Lawrence's lines. The witty commentary of the seventeenth-century *An Appeal to Cats in the Business of Love* is followed by the Egon Heath-like cool luminosity of the thematically powerful *Margaritae Sorori, I.M.* by W.E. Henley.

Now Welcom Somer, for unaccompanied chorus, takes compact settings by Chaucer, Christina Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson, W.E. Henley (presumably a Hanson favourite) and Housman. Despite the brevity of the set it is strongly evocative, and it ends in a moving, but unsettling setting of *On the Idle Hill of Summer* in which the bugle calls serve to reinforce the theme of "Soldiers marching, all to die" - no gloss on death, and no sign of jaunty strut.

The *Concerto for Clarinet and Strings* was written in 1988, cast in a conventional three-movements-in-one. The solo voice opens with a call to arms, its staccato instructions pitched against a quite busy orchestral tapestry. The clarinet journeys from furtive and uncertain through more confident soliloquizing to boisterous self-confidence, surfing on a cushion of luscious string tone in the slow central panel. The long solo lines extend eloquently before the appealing and rhythmically vivacious final section. If you're looking for a subtitle for this work, call it 'From Trepidation to Triumph'.

The other concerto is *Odyssey*, for Cello and Strings. Again, it's a one-movement work though the first two sections are slow here, a *Largo* followed by an *Andante* and then the freewheeling *Allegro vivace*. This is an expressively rich, generous work and its string suspensions remind one of the Holst/Vaughan Williams axis—not least in its movement freely between melancholy and lyrical richness, and its moments of modality. Hanson ensures the cello doesn't get bogged down in the accompanying strings—the orchestration remains light, the solo writing athletic. Hanson has the confidence to allow his music to slow, to regroup and to end quietly, even somewhat ambiguously. No false heroics here.

Orpheus is written for Chorus and Piano and shows how adeptly he writes for these forces—the poem is by Osbert Sitwell—whilst the brief *Jubilate Deo* (Psalm 100) was composed for a wedding and is appropriately affirmatory and joyful.

Texts are present throughout and there are first-class soloists—Pablo Strong is highly effective in the songs, Sebastian Comberti unruffled and communicative in the cello concerto, and Som Howie the eloquent clarinetist, are joined by soprano Helena Thomson in two of the *Now Welcom* settings. Conducting duties are shared between the composer and Geoffrey Simon. This is an excellent if belated showcase for Hanson's compositional talents.

Jonathan Woolf, *Musicweb-International*

A Versatile Composer

Before having the welcome opportunity to review this record, I hadn't heard of English composer Geoffrey Hanson (born Eastbourne, 9 December 1939)—surprising, because I have since heard that Hanson is highly regarded in the UK, and this is a very fine Cala Records release.

The disc begins with *Five Nocturnes for Tenor and Chamber Orchestra*, presented by the London Mozart Players with tenor soloist Pablo Strong and Geoffrey Simon conducting.

On listening to the lovely first song, *The Evening Primrose*, there is no doubt that this is English music, and you can really sense the evening primrose bloom at dusk and night. The song has a pastoral wistfulness, and the soloist's enunciation is clear enough for all the words to be easily heard.

Airman RFC has an entirely different mood, somewhat reminiscent of Benjamin Britten. An airman hears the whistling bombs, sees the searchlights and hopes for a better world than that containing all the violence around him. Taut and full of tension, this song is never brittle or despairing.

Gareth Hulse, an oboist whose work I'm very fond of, plays beautifully in the opening to the beautifully wrought *Piano*, again in pastoral mode, with restless harmonies giving a really nostalgic feeling, and including a hymn-like passage. As a woman plays the piano and sings, the listener wishes for this past time of his life.

Cat courtship can be quite violent and noisy. In *An Appeal to Cats in the Business of Love*, the singer appeals to the gentler expression of love, and asks the cats to think more of this. In places whimsical and at other times tender, there are some very evocative miaow sounds in the string writing.

Margaritae Sorori IM is a benediction, both of the day and, symbolically, of life. This longest of the songs closes the work beautifully. Again I am reminded of Benjamin Britten's great cycle for tenor, horn and strings, and I think that Hanson here deliberately pays homage to Britten, as well as to the greatly underestimated genre of fine British art songs.

In one of the loveliest works I have heard in a long while, the London Mozart Players perform superbly throughout, matched by the voice of the soloist ...I would love to hear Pablo Strong in *Gerontius*.

The *Clarinet Concerto* of 1988 is here played by Som Howie, an exciting young Australian player who studied in Sydney with Mark Walton. This work, in three movements, played without a break, is a great addition to the clarinet repertoire and deserves to be performed regularly. At times tender, and at others jaunty, this work is sometimes calming and at sometimes restless. Although unmistakably twentieth century music, there is nothing here that most listeners would find disquietening. The concerto's very virtuosic passages are never flashy, and it makes for very satisfying listening. A great tarantella-like section that appears about five minutes in has a few jazzy slides that must be a joy for the soloist.

Sit back and enjoy this piece, from its moments of reflection to its jaunty sense of humour and virtuosity.

Orpheus for Chorus and Piano (with words by Osbert Sitwell) portrays a dreamscape which a housewife does not feel moved by, but the child upstairs sees it all in its fantastic magnificence. I would imagine that this would be a somewhat difficult work to perform, and really shows the skill of the composer writing for such forces, but this is a fine performance of this short work.

Jubilate Deo for Chorus and Organ is joyful and triumphant, as it was composed for a wedding, but there is a slightly unsettling feeling and also a sense of forboding, at times, which belies the joyous nature of the words.

The *Cello Concerto*, entitled 'Odyssey', is a three movement work for cello and strings, played without a break between movements. Written as late as 2012, there is a flavour of antiquity here, at times reminiscent of Vaughan Williams, and reminding me of his oboe concerto in places. I think that this very approachable music, with nothing to alienate the listener, will gain in popularity with repeated listening. The performance here, by both soloist Sebastian Comberti and the string ensemble, is first class. The first two movements require a fine singing line from the soloist and a good supporting accompaniment from the string players—it's important that they do not become stodgy, and that this never happens is a credit to both composer and performers. The last movement gives the cellist a chance to shine with more virtuosic passages, which he carries off with aplomb.

A wide range of emotions are expressed in the last work, *Now Welcom Somer*, for unaccompanied choir. These beautifully performed short settings of texts by a diverse collection of poets show how versatile this composer is. I especially enjoyed *On the Idle Hill of Summer* (setting A E Housman), dealing with the fallen of World War I, which contains an ominous chill not prevalent in the rest of the work.

This is a disc that I recommend without hesitation, hoping that it goes a long way to make this composer much better known. Performances are superb and everyone is a standout. Bravo!

Geoff Pearce, *Music and Vision Daily*

A well-assorted program of finely-shaped works by Geoffrey Hanson, committedly performed by ensembles the composer has worked with for many years.

Born in 1939, the English composer, organist and conductor, Geoffrey Hanson, has produced with Cala Records a CD portrait consisting of a broad cross-section of his work. He uses two ensembles with whom he has worked closely for a long time, The London Ripieno Society (he founded this choir in 1997) and The London Mozart Players.

The program begins with the *Five Nocturnes*, five harmonious songs with orchestra, sung by tenor Pablo Strong. With two fast outer movements and an elegiac middle movement, the *Clarinet Concerto* is basically a very positive and lively work.

Two very convincing choral works lead to the cello concerto, which is not as playful as the *Clarinet Concerto*, but cellist Sebastian Comberti is made to sing a lot of material and also has a virtuosic challenge in the final allegro molto. Five lovely choral pieces complete this varied and thoroughly accessible program.

www.pizzicato.lu

Composer Geoffrey Hanson is a new name to me but one whose acquaintance I am very happy to make. He is well known as a conductor and as the founder, more than fifty years ago, of the London Ripieno Society. Under him the society in addition to performing Baroque music, has performed music by composers in the genre so out of favour post Glock–Tippett, Rawsthorne, Britten, Burgon, et al. This disc is the result of one of those excellent crowdfunding campaigns and celebrates his work with the orchestra. The disc contains three works for chorus, two brief concertos and a song-cycle for tenor and orchestra. All of the music is written in highly approachable tonal idiom reflecting the influence of some of the composers mentioned above, though by the end of the disc one realises that Hanson has a voice of his own.

The *Five Nocturnes* is a concise song cycle beautifully executed by a singer to watch—Pablo Strong. The orchestration is clear and expressive and never overwhelms the soloist. The vocal writing is often declamatory in the style of Britten but there are also some swooningly lyrical melodies.

The 18 minutes of the one movement *Clarinet Concerto* of 1988 never outstays its welcome. It is thorny in the sense that some Rawsthorne can be thorny. Like Rawsthorne, Hanson economically develops the work from some simple rhythmic motifs. This music is not experimental—at least not in any thorny sense. It captures all the moods of the clarinet from spiky to lyrical and sensual. It is a welcome addition to the British clarinet repertoire.

The cello concerto *Odyssey* was composed a quarter century after the clarinet work. Like it, it is also in one movement but as befits the instrument is more dramatic and emotional; in places it is even Romantic, and hugely appealing. The spikiness of the clarinet work is replaced by beautiful lyrical writing that sits beautifully on the cello. It is well therefore that soloist Sebastian Comberti has a warm singing tone and is wonderfully integrated into orchestral texture. The cello does not get off with being

all the dark lover however and is put through its virtuoso paces with some tricky double and triple stops and fast passage work until the concerto gently slides away to silence.

Orpheus, to words by Osbert Sitwell, is for an accomplished choir with an interesting piano part that is more than mere accompaniment. *Jubilate Deo*, for again, an accomplished choir the piano replaced by organ is not all jubilation and there are some built up dissonances. The 'glory to the son' seems to be not without reservation and the decisive final major chord by the choir seems to be questioned by the final chord on the organ.

The final *Now Welcom Somer* is an a cappella work of five songs for—and I sense a theme here—a very accomplished choir: *Now Welcom Somer* (Chaucer), *Winter is Cold-Hearted* (Christina Rossetti), *Bed in Summer* (R L Stevenson), *Beside the Idle Summer Sea* (W E Henley) and *On the Idle Hill of Summer* (A E Housman). All are highly inventive and engaging—how difficult it is to be inventive while working in a tradition rather than in an experimental idiom—Helena Thomson is captivating in the magical solo in *Bed in Summer*.

All of the works are beautifully written by a composer who certainly knows his craft. It is the type of accessible British music that will never be programmed by a major orchestra, so we are lucky to have the works on a very well-produced disc.

Paul Jackson, *British Music Society*

English composer Geoffrey Hanson (born 1939) founded the London Ripieno Society half a century ago, after graduating from Trinity College of Music, London. Initially concentrating on baroque works, the choir soon expanded to include contemporary British music by the likes of Rawsthorne, Burgon and Lennox Berkeley. In 1966 Hanson joined the staff of his alma mater; in 1987 he took the post of Director of Music at All Saints Church, East Finchley (London).

Standing firmly in the English Pastoralist tradition, the *Five Nocturnes for Tenor and Chamber Orchestra* of 2009 set texts by John Clare, Agnes Grozier Herbertson, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Flatman and W. E. Hanley. A sighing gesture permeates Clare's *The Evening Primrose*; Pablo Strong's expressive, pliant tenor illuminates Hanson's grateful line beautifully—there is, perhaps, something of Britten in the word setting, a hunch that is confirmed in the active *Airman RFC* (to a text by Herbertson). Hanson foregrounds the instrument of the third movement's title, *Piano* (D. H. Lawrence) in this softly shaded, crepuscular, gentle piece, interrupted by dissonant (but not violently so) interjections. The playful *An Appeal to Cats in the Business of Love* (Thomas Flatman) is characterfully given before the final song, *Margaritae Sorori, I. M.* (W. E. Henley) takes us to sunset, the end of day, and an end of life, too. Strong's superb legato and silken vocal line wends its way over a bed of strings. Hanson skilfully inserts pungent harmonies, occasionally veering towards, if not directly redolent of, Stravinsky to add spice to the harmonic landscape. The piece is beautifully recorded (by Phil Rowlands at All Saints Church, East Finchley, London), capturing the body of the string sound to perfection.

The *Clarinet Concerto* was premiered in 1988 in Bloomsbury, London. The first of the three movements is alive with energy, with the strings of the London Mozart Players sprightly and responsive. Soloist Som Howie himself is infinitely persuasive whether in the lyrical passages or in the forward propulsion of the finale; his sound is never less than lovely, while its cadenza in the finale reveals a rare technique and musicality.

The subtlety of the choral writing in *Orpheus* (1984, text Osbert Sitwell) balances the outgoing celebration of *Jubilate Deo* (1983), a piece appropriately enough written for a wedding. The disc swings between instrumental and choral works, offering nicely tempered variety, and so it is that Hanson's *Cello Concerto* appears. Entitled *Odyssey* (after which the disc takes its name), the ruminative cello opening is beautifully delivered by Sebastian Comberti. At nearly 20 minutes, it is of similar duration to the *Clarinet Concerto*, but here Hanson seems intent on emphasizing the ruminative side of his solo instrument, particularly by placing the slowest movement, a *Largo*, first. The ensuing movements pick up the pace (*Andante* then *Allegro vivace*). Perhaps there is an occasional hint of Elgar in the background of the *Largo*; Comberti is a player of rare eloquence. The *allegro* is jaunty, occasionally rhythmically tricky, and, frankly, a joy.

Finally, the 1978 part song cycle *Now Welcom Somer* for a capella choir. Written to invoke a summer's day in England (the cynic in me says it was probably raining), texts this time stem from Chaucer, Christina Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson, W. E. Henley and A. E. Housman. The first, *Now Welcom Somer*, shows how skilled a choral composer Hanson is in terms of the sheer confidence of writing; the more desolate *Winter is Cold-Hearted* (Rossetti) poses challenges for the choir in terms of exposed and unpredictable single lines, brilliantly managed here. Those single lines also show the excellence of the recording. Helena Thomson is the pure-voiced soprano who tackles the solo lines in *Bed in Summer* (Stevenson) and *Beside the Idle Summer Sea* (Henley); Thomson's voice is pure and glistens, her pitching perfect. Hanson's sighing setting of the word "sea" works beautifully. While the title of Housman's *On the Idle Hill of Summer* might imply frolickery and sheep gambolling in fields, the text is shot through with regret and sadness for "soldiers marching, all to die". The restrained close to Hanson's setting is the perfect way to close; the music somehow floats on and on, as the disc stops.

A beautiful release. Geoffrey Hanson's music deserves far more outings.

Colin Clarke, *Fanfare*