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**Review of Concert:**

**Halle Orchestra,**

**Conductor: Vernon Handley**

**Pianist: Piers Lane**

**Thursday 8th January, 1998  
Bridgewater Hall. Manchester.**

This was an excellent concert, well worth a journey from York to Manchester. Apparently, I was in the seat next to where the Queen (as in Elizabeth II) sat when she came.

**Bax: Garden of Fand.**

This was the first time I had heard this performed live; I have heard it a few times on the radio (when it did not make a big impression), and on a recording with Barbarolli and the Halle. The performance was very good, with the balance achieved being excellent. In my own recording the horns are too far distant: I was able to hear their contribution to its full value live. Also, the solo viola and flute melodic line at the beginning of Fand's song was clearly audible. The audience received the piece well, with Handley being recalled a couple of times. Overall, the piece was very well executed, with no surprises

**Britten: Piano Concerto.**

This performance was a complete revelation to me. I do not know the piece that well, and have the 1968 Richter/Britten recording. Lane/Handley interpreted and performed the piece in a way that differed almost completely to the R/B recording, with a result that was riveting and very moving. Very simply, it was played in the style of Shostakovitch. The first movement was more high-energy than R/B, and this was particularly noticeable in the piano part. For example, the cadenza is fairly relaxed in R/B, but was played for dramatic effect. The result was more of a contrast between the loud/manic bits and the quiet/contemplative elements.

However, the real difference in interpretation was in the rest of the concerto.

The waltz became almost pure Weimar burlesque, with Handley making the most of the outlandish and weird orchestration which Britten is so good at. The effect was a bit disorientating in combining the mechanistic elements of the barrel-organ waltz theme with the surreal sound world.

The impromptu was magical: bleak and contemplative. Again, the effect of the repetitive nature of the variations (the fact that the variation is in the accompaniment rather than the thematic material) along with the often conflicting accompaniment again created a mood of alienation.

The biggest surprise of all was the finale. This has always struck me as lightweight, Britten at his (for me) worse. However, the previous movement transformed the finale into a very menacing piece with dark undertones, the sort of mechanistic triumphalism associated with some Shostakovich finales. Again, it was played with manic energy by the performers, and was very moving. Not what I had expected.

Afterwards, I read the programme notes (by one John Mayhew).

*“Then comes the final March...where the tone qualities of the piano are skilfully and wittily exploited. Britten’s orchestration and his use of the piano can only win our admiration, though the movement is lightweight and even smacks of the banality of Prokofiev and Shostakovich in earnest endeavour to amuse their musical public. The greatest strength of Britten’s attractive but neglected concerto is its first movement. If the Walz and March are more entertaining than profound, there is no harm in that - the composer would have claimed no more”*

I might have agreed with him before Thursday, but perhaps his obvious lack of affinity for Prokofiev and Shostakovich indicates a failure to properly appreciate subtext and darker forms of irony which for me were the essence of the performance. Indeed, I had never heard it before in his works (the powerful emotions of the violin concerto, War requiem or Peter Grimes are fairly up-front).

Lets hope that they record it!

## **Elgar 2.**

I have been slowly getting to like this piece over the last 15 years. I now think that it is very good, particularly the first three movements. The performance was very good, although I found that it flagged in the finale. I find that there is too much “pomp and circumstance” in this work (as in much of Elgar), but there are some lovely melodies and very innovative episodes which keep me interested. I have got the score out, so I may grow to like it some more...

The Bridgewater hall acoustics are fantastic (as good as any I have heard). The audience was reasonable, but by no means full (maybe 2/3). There was a long ovation with lots of cheering at the end, and indeed audience reaction to all of the pieces was very positive.