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Damian Thompson

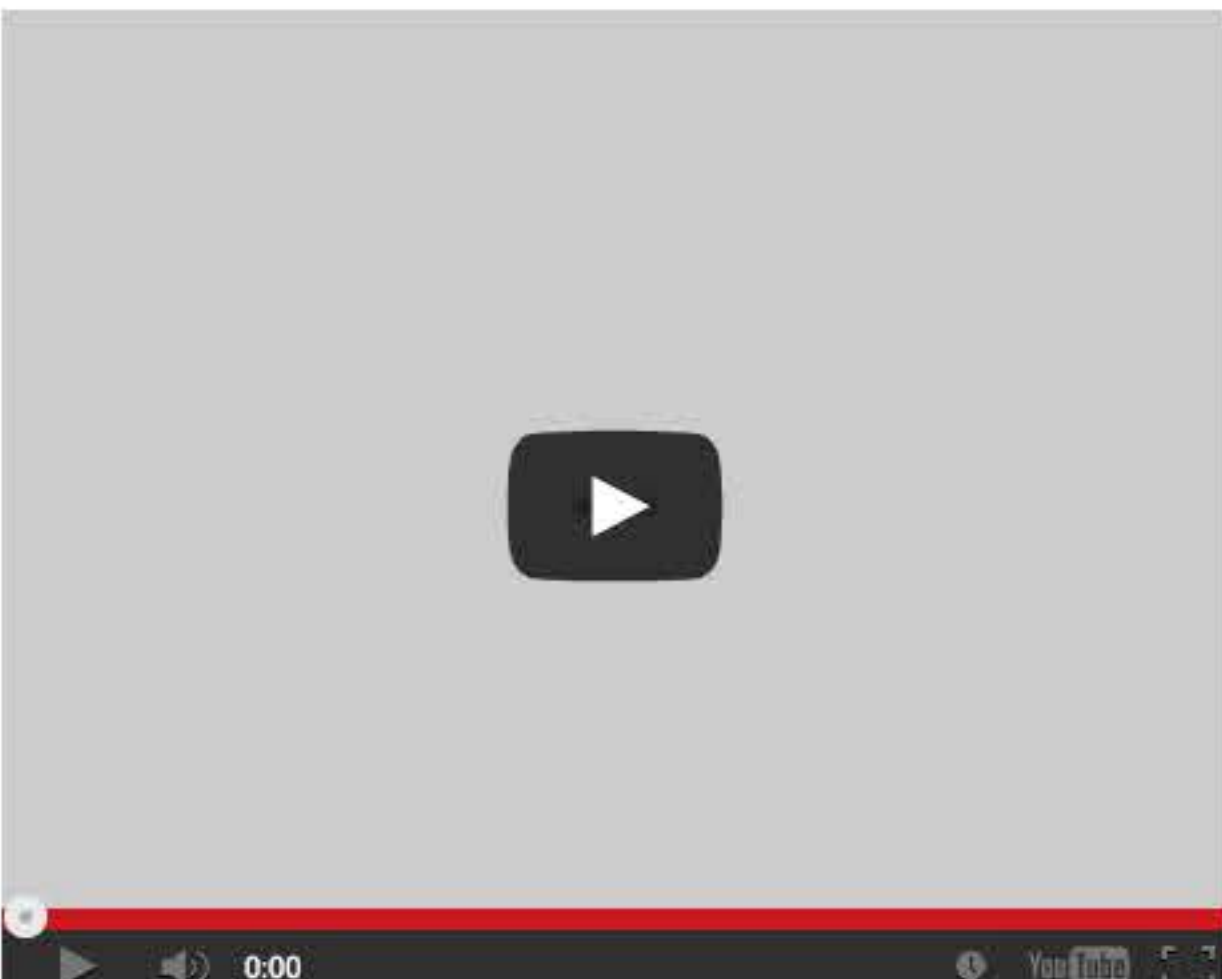
Damian Thompson is Editor of Telegraph Blogs and a columnist for the Daily Telegraph. He was once described by The Church Times as a "blood-crazed ferret". He is on Twitter as HolySmoke. His latest book is The Fix: How addiction is taking over your world. He also writes about classical music for The Spectator.

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Is Singapore growing one of the great orchestras of the world?

By **Damian Thompson** **Music** Last updated: October 24th, 2010
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I've written the Culture Notes in this week's *Spectator* about the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, which created an unusually glistening and choppy seascape in Debussy's *La Mer* at the Southbank earlier this month. Here's my short article, in which I suggest that the SSO under its Chinese-born maestro Lan Shui could become one of the great orchestras of the 21st century. To be fair, so could its regional rival, the Malaysian Philharmonic – but the latter was bought rather than grown, if you get my drift. What I didn't say in the article, but should have, is that our own Stephen Hough gave the most magical performance of Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto in the same concert, stretching (but not crossing) the boundaries of good taste with smoochy rubato before throwing cascades of notes at us that had to be heard to be believed. Anyway, here's the orchestra on YouTube, in the first movement of Sibelius's Second Symphony. The recorded sound isn't great, but notice what fluid and impulsive rhythms Lan Shui extracts from what's obviously a very tightly drilled orchestra. Give them five years...



Tags: Lan Shui, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Stephen Hough

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castalian · 4 years ago
I am not an expert on Sir Bilious but I would agree about the orchestra. They sound well practiced and even on YouTube their accuracy leads to a very clean and pleasing rendition.

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Hamish Redux · 4 years ago
Well, since we've changed topic, I don't think Sibelius's symphonies sound the same. There is a clear development from Number 1 (very influenced by Tchaikovsky) through to 7, which is as individual as they come. Also the "warm" symphonies, 2, 3, 5 and 7, are in contrast to the "cold" ones, 4 and 6. What is clear is that Sibelius has his own recognisable style, but that's not the same thing.

Likewise, Vaughan Williams rings the changes also in his symphonies. Numbers 4, 6 and 9 are more violent than the contemplative 3 and 5, for starters. 1, 2, 7, 8 are all very individualistic works, none completely like any other. Yet again, as with all great composers, VW leaves his fingerprints on his output.

I've never found Rubbra and Simpson interesting enough to get deeply into their symphonies. Bax is one I've taken a bit more seriously, especially 3, 5 and 6: in this case it is indeed harder to tell them apart.

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Damian Thompson · 4 years ago
Interesting point about Sibelius's symphonies sounding the same. Some truth in it, but couldn't one level the charge at many 20th-century symphonists? Shostakovitch (middle ones, anyway), Vaughan Williams (though Simon Heffer would disagree), certainly more minor English figures such as Rubbra and Simpson. In fact, I defy anyone to pass a blind test of the Robert Simpson symphonies, though I'm very glad to own a complete set. Lots of the Americans, too. But you could say the same thing about Bruckner, too, and in my opinion he's one of the greatest of all composers: the stylistic continuity is part of his appeal.

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Damian Thompson · 4 years ago
I thought I had the Lympany, but it turns out to be Eileen Joyce with the LSO under Anatole Fistoulari. Marvellous though she could be, it doesn't show her at her best, not least because the piano is recessed and the orchestra is excessively straight-laced. She doesn't (quite) have Hough's technique, but she does find room for rubato. I must listen to the Serkin again – I know it's regarded as superb – but I can't help thinking that the soloist must have fun in this concerto, which isn't the greatest music. It's certainly not a patch on the Chopin first piano concerto, which *can* take a dark, almost Brahmsian treatment, such as Arrau's.

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Guest · 4 years ago
Sibelians will vehemently disagree, but his symphonies sound much the same to me. One quickly has one's fill of tone poems redolent of icy fjords, snow-capped mountains and majestic forests. Not that Sibelius has to be given the sub-zero temperature treatment, as Ashkenazy with the Philharmonia proved. And I am afraid that one simply cannot begin to judge an orchestral performance on the basis of that clip. The sound was diabolical.

Moura Lympany, who to my mind recorded the best ever Mendelssohn No. 1 with Malcolm Sargent on the Readers Digest label, had some interesting things to say about Mendelssohn's piano concertos: she thought they should be played straight (I paraphrase) with no pulling and tugging of the tempi, the soloist resisting the temptation to dash it off as quickly as possible. So I doubt whether she would have approved of the boundaries of good taste being stretched with smoochy rubato and cascades of notes being chucked around, but who knows? I certainly thoroughly enjoyed Mr Hough's definitive interpretations of the Saint-Saens PCs, his more recent Tchaikovsky PC cycle less so.

Lympany apart, Rudolph Serkin delivers the goods in vintage recordings of Mendelssohn's PCs with the Philadelphia (No.1) and Columbia SO (No.2) under Ormandy, the PCs coupled with a recording of the VC played by Isaac Stern, on a Sony CD I picked up on Amazon for a song. I often wonder why I keep coming back to the Cleveland under Szell and Philadelphia under Ormandy on Sony for truly satisfying recordings of the core symphonic and concerto works. It is a puzzlement.

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Guest · 4 years ago
I blame the Anglicans,

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Hamish Redux · 4 years ago
To my ears that's a very lively performance: it's a wonderful symphony, of course, but I've known that for 40 years. At first hearing I thought it was being played rather fast, but in fact it is longer than many comparable recordings.

It always impresses me when countries for which Western classical music isn't part of the heritage produce performers who can outdo some of our local efforts. Incidentally, there seem to be quite a few SSO performances on Youtube.

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