



# Charles O'BRIEN

## COMPLETE ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME THREE

ELLANGOWAN: CONCERT OVERTURE, OP. 10

SUITE HUMORISTIQUE, OP. 8

WALTZ SUITE, OP. 26

Liepāja Symphony Orchestra  
Paul Mann

FIRST RECORDINGS

# THE ORCHESTRAL MUSIC OF CHARLES O'BRIEN, VOLUME THREE

by Paul Mann

This is the third and final instalment in the complete recording of the orchestral music of the hitherto unknown Scottish Romantic composer Charles O'Brien (1882–1968).<sup>1</sup> The first volume of this series included *Ellangowan*, Op. 12 (1909), a large-scale concert overture lasting almost eighteen minutes.<sup>2</sup> The present version of the same work, which O'Brien designated as his Op. 10, is around five minutes shorter and seems, for reasons that remain a matter of conjecture, to have been composed at more or less the same time. The main difference between the two is the excision of two contrasting slower central sections, replaced with around fifty newly composed bars in the same tempo. The size of the orchestra is also reduced, by one each of oboes and bassoons and two each of horns and trombones.<sup>3</sup>

This 'theatre orchestra' line-up is perhaps the main reason for the revision, simply as a practical alternative.<sup>4</sup> *Ellangowan* was among the most frequently performed of O'Brien's works during his lifetime, but in its longer form may well have proved unwieldy, in terms both of its duration and the forces required. Indeed, most of those early performances seem to have been of the Op. 10 version, including the one conducted by Sir Donald Francis Tovey at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, on 23 March 1933. Even a much later BBC broadcast in October 1972, conducted by a young Andrew Davis, was compromised by confusion between the two versions,

<sup>1</sup> John Purser's biographical outline of O'Brien, given in the booklet with Toccata Classics TOCC 0262, can also be read online on the O'Brien pages at [www.toccataclassics.com](http://www.toccataclassics.com).

<sup>2</sup> *Ellangowan*, Op. 12, accompanies O'Brien's Symphony in F minor, Op. 23 (1922), on Toccata Classics TOCC 0262.

<sup>3</sup> The percussion parts were also reconfigured by the composer so that they could be covered by the solo timpanist, but this seemed an economy too far, and for the purposes of the recording I allowed them to remain as they are in the Op. 12 version.

<sup>4</sup> It is not entirely clear which version came first, but all the evidence suggests that, in spite of their opus numbers, Op. 12 is the original and Op. 10 is the reworking.

necessitating some rather drastic on-the-spot cuts. In any case, as with all the works in this series, it receives its first modern professional performance here.

The initial inspiration for the work came from Sir Walter Scott's novel *Guy Mannering* (1815), although there is no direct programmatic content in the finished work beyond the title: 'Ellangowan' is the name of the house in the Scottish borders around which some of the events in the book unfold. The true focus of the music is Scotland itself, and although the piece contains no real folk-tunes, it often sounds as if it does. O'Brien manages to make his musical ideas seem as if he simply plucked them from a highland hillside, possibly the best tribute one can pay to the quality of his invention, which is all the more impressive alongside the cogency of the symphonic argument, especially in this shortened version. The whole piece has more than a whiff of *The Hebrides* about it, and although Mendelssohn's music may have proved the more enduring, his Scottish accent was less convincing.

The piece opens [1] with a strathspey-like idea (but in  $\frac{3}{4}$  rather than the more customary  $\frac{4}{4}$ ) on a pair of clarinets in dialogue with the strings. The folk-like quality is enhanced by means of the pentatonic scale, the 'Scotch snap' is much in evidence – as it will be throughout – and the all-pervasive dotted and triplet figurations are strongly suggestive of Scottish dance-music. After a joyous *fortissimo*, the violas are left repeating an obsessive dactylic rhythm over which a gentle trumpet call leads to the slower second subject. It too is almost (but not entirely) pentatonic, and sounds like a genuine folksong. Its symphonic logic is well hidden behind an apparently spontaneous lyrical warmth, and the melody is passed gently and kindly between violins and woodwind. As it draws to a close, a note of Elgarian wistfulness enters the music, and although O'Brien's emotions are kept under tighter control than those of his more famous English counterpart, he was clearly aware of Elgar's influence at a time when some of the older composer's major works were yet to be written.

The music soon returns to its *allegro* tempo and the spirit of Mendelssohn is at its keenest in the lively exchange of rhythmic ideas between the winds and strings, although there are still occasional pensive backward glances. Horn and trumpet fanfares and a rhetorical sequence of trills in the strings herald, in the Op. 12 version, a sternly

dramatic transition to the *moderato* central section, and the complex sequence of events at the heart of the work, but O'Brien now bypasses this section with several minutes of new music. Although the rather drastic revision makes this *Ellangowan* more concise as a whole, it is also a good deal less audacious, and it is hard not to regret the loss of drama, as well as of the sheer abundance of colour he achieved in the longer version.

An entirely regular recapitulation follows, but O'Brien does hold a surprise or two up his sleeve for the substantial coda, which is of Schumannesque duration and inventiveness. As the music becomes increasingly animated, apparently headed for a joyous conclusion amid riotous scales and clashing cymbals, a solo oboe suddenly stops the party and wistfully recalls the lyrical second subject, bringing everything gently and reflectively to a close, as if looking out to sea.

Charles O'Brien's natural gift as a composer of light music is much in evidence in the remaining two works in this album. The ***Waltz Suite, Op. 26*** (1928) has already appeared in its piano form on Volume Two of the Toccata Classics survey of O'Brien's piano music,<sup>5</sup> and proves even more charming in its orchestral guise. It remains unclear what prompted this composition, but there would have been plenty of demand from the theatres of the day – and the newly emergent cinemas – for live music to be played during intervals, and it seems likely that these attractive waltzes might have enjoyed a life there. The first performance of the orchestral *Waltz Suite* was broadcast by BBC Scotland on 8 February 1929.

The orchestration is necessarily modest: strings and single winds, except for an extra clarinet, two each of horns and cornets, and a bass trombone, while the timpanist doubles on a little colouristic percussion. Each of the four movements has a title in what was no doubt regarded as fashionable French, but they seem to have little specifically to do with the music beyond suggesting their general character, and all share the same ABA structure, waltz–trio–waltz.

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<sup>5</sup> As well as the Four Waltzes, Op. 26, TOCC 0257 also features the *Barcarolle*, Op. 8b, *Arabesque*, Op. 11, *Daffodils*, Op. 13, Two Rhapsodies, Op. 22, and *Three Grandchildren Waltzes*, in performances by Warren Mailley-Smith, piano.

The first, 'Tendresse' [2], is in D major, and begins with a diffident oboe solo, as if issuing a shy invitation to dance. The waltz itself is light on its feet, syncopatedly avoiding heavy downbeats, and there are frequent 'tender' *ritenuti* and chromatic sideslips, with sad little Schubertian shifts from major to minor and back again. (Perhaps O'Brien is alluding to the 'hesitation waltz', which had been introduced to ballrooms after 1910.) The B flat major trio ranges more widely, and contains within itself a more energetic central section, with splashes of colour from the tambourine. The return to the waltz brings the same gentle ambiguity as before, ending with a *pianissimo* coda.

The second waltz, 'Joie de vivre' [3], lives up to its name. The tonality shifts up a semitone into E flat and, after a brief introduction in which a solo cornet is answered by the solo flute, the entire piece is an outpouring of the sweetest lyricism. O'Brien achieves a miraculous range of colour from his small orchestra, with a gentle interplay between strings and trilling winds, enlivened by a triangle and, for the climactic sequence, in which one can readily visualise a ballroom spinning with waltzing couples, a joyously piping piccolo in an apparently affectionate parody of a barrel organ. The A flat trio is more subdued, full of the sort of chromatic sideslips and hesitations that characterised 'Tendresse', but this time the music never loses its kind-hearted smile. The still-chirruping piccolo good-naturedly subverts the grandeur of the coda.

'Jeunesse' [4] returns to the D major of 'Tendresse', and begins with a rhythmic figure disguised to make it sound as if it were in  $\frac{4}{4}$ . There is certainly a youthful innocence about the waltz itself, which unusually remains in the home key throughout, except for a brief four-bar excursion into F sharp major. The B flat trio (which thus also retains the key-relation of 'Tendresse') is rich and warm, with *cantabile* violins embellished by a delicate flute hovering above them. A brief moment of drama is provided by a unison theme on *pesante* horns and bass trombone, but this portent is soon dispelled by a return of the violin-and-flute dialogue.

'Extase' [5] could easily have become a popular tune of the day if only someone had thought to put words to it. The straightforward A major tonality is undermined only briefly by a swift detour first into B major and then into F major; the trio is in the unusual key of the mediant major (C sharp becoming D flat). The music here is

especially charming, with a kind of courteous chromatic cheekiness which makes one wonder if O'Brien had heard *Der Rosenkavalier*.

The *Suite Humoristique*, Op. 8, is a much earlier work, dating from 1904, while he was still studying with Hamish MacCunn. The details of its first performance remain uncertain, but this must have taken place sometime during the pre-war years. The work was first broadcast by BBC Glasgow in May 1929, and again a decade or so later, together with the *Scottish Scenes*,<sup>6</sup> and also seems have been performed by Dan Godfrey in Bournemouth (as were two overtures: *To Spring* and the reduced version of *Ellangowan*). The appeal is easy to understand: each of the four movements is cast in the same ABA form, and in an instantly accessible popular style, calling for a theatre orchestra of roughly the same proportions as for the *Waltz Suite* (only the percussion section is expanded.)

The opening 'Marche fantastique' [6] features a broad melody in the violins, with a strutting *staccato* accompaniment. The *humoristique* element, however, is all-pervasive, provided first by some disruptive accents on the fourth beat of the bar, and a few rather disproportionately volatile eruptions in the woodwinds (with attendant cymbal crashes), as well as by a brief disagreement about the tonality during the preparation for the return of the march. A horn fanfare introduces the more lyrical trio, which builds itself up into something genuinely ceremonial, until undermined by a touch of mockery from chromatic woodwinds and violins. The return of the opening march, announced with comic over-emphasis by clarinets and lower strings, now sounds even more tongue-in-cheek than before. The horns attempt to announce the trio again, but are met by a brief silence, and an abrupt conclusion.

'Au Théâtre' [7] is circus music, at least in its outer sections, a breathless *galop* in which it is easy to imagine troupes of acrobats, jugglers and fire-eaters. The trio, on the other hand, is rather sad and reflective, as if the show has already left town.

The Barcarolle [8] seems to have had a special place in its composer's affections: O'Brien returned to it in later life, making a version for piano solo in the mid-1960s only

<sup>6</sup> Recorded with the two Concert Overtures *To Spring*, Op. 4, and *The Minstrel's Curse*, Op. 7, and brief *Mazurka* and *Berceuse* on Toccata Classics TOCC 0263.

a few years before he died, as a gift to his son Fred, who organised for it to be published by the Hardie Press.<sup>7</sup> There is an elegiac quality to it, like a distant memory, with some hazy echoes of Chopin's *Barcarolle*, Op. 60, with which it shares the tonality of F sharp.

The concluding 'Danse bohémienne' [9] is a sweepingly brilliant waltz which, though never losing its good-natured composure, exhibits a far more mercurial, quixotic character than the more genteel Op. 26 waltzes, as well as making some genuinely virtuosic demands upon the orchestra.

Ultimately, perhaps it is the sheer range of Charles O'Brien's artistry – the ability to conceive such imposing large-scale works as the Symphony in F minor, Op. 23, and the Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 14,<sup>8</sup> and also to turn a musical miniature with such captivating flair and charm – that most distinguishes him.

**Paul Mann** is a regular guest-conductor with many orchestras throughout Europe, the USA, Australia and the Far East. His work as chief conductor of the Odense Symphony Orchestra in Denmark achieved considerable critical success, particularly in the symphonies of Beethoven, Elgar, Mahler, Schumann and Shostakovich, and with whom he also made numerous recordings of a wide range of repertoire, for such labels as Bridge, DaCapo and EMI.

He first came to international attention as winner of the first prize in the 1998 Donatella Flick Conducting Competition, as a result of which he was also appointed assistant conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. He made his LSO debut shortly afterwards, and subsequently collaborated regularly with the Orchestra, both in the concert hall and recording studio. Special projects with the LSO included the Duke Ellington Centenary Concert at the Barbican Hall with Wynton Marsalis, and a famous collaboration with the legendary rock group Deep Purple in two widely acclaimed performances of Jon Lord's *Concerto for Group and Orchestra* at the Royal Albert Hall, the live DVD and CD of which remain international bestsellers. Among his more recent recordings is the first-ever



Photo: © Ugo Ponte

<sup>7</sup> This is the 'Op. 8b' recorded on TOCC 0257.

<sup>8</sup> Recorded by Warren Mailey-Smith, with the *Deux Valses*, Op. 25, and *Scottish Scenes*, Opp. 17 and 21, on Toccata Classics TOCC 0256.

studio account of Lord's Concerto, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, in collaboration with Jon Lord himself and a star-studded cast of soloists, and the live recording of *Celebrating Jon Lord*, a special concert which took place at the Royal Albert Hall in April 2014 with an all-star cast paying tribute to the late composer.

This is his sixth recording for Toccata Classics. The first featured the orchestral music of Leif Solberg (TOCC 0260) and the second and third (TOCC 0262 and 0263) presented the first volumes in this three-disc survey of the complete orchestral music of Charles O'Brien. His fourth was the first volume in a remarkable series of new works for string orchestra, *Music For My Love* (TOCC 0333), featuring music by Brahms (arranged by Ragnar Söderlind), Maddalena Casulana (arr. Colin Matthews), Brett Dean, Steve Elcock, Andrew Ford, Robin Holloway, Mihkel Kerem, John Lord (arr. Paul Mann), John Pickard, Poul Ruders and Ragnar Söderlind himself. A first volume of his recording of the complete orchestral music of the hitherto undiscovered English Romantic Henry Cotter Nixon (1842–1907), with the Kodály Philharmonic Orchestra, Debrecen, Hungary, was recently released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0372, and Volumes Two and Three (TOCC 0373 and 0374) are in preparation.

The **Liepāja Symphony Orchestra** – formerly also known as The Amber Sound Orchestra – is the oldest symphonic ensemble in the Baltic States: it was founded in 1881 by Hanss Hohapfel, who also served as its conductor. The orchestral strength in those early days was 37 musicians, joined in the summers by guest players from Germany and Poland. With time both the structure and professionalism of the Orchestra grew, as did its standing in the eyes of the general public.

After World War II the LSO recommenced its activities in 1947, under the wings of the Liepāja Music School, and was conducted for the next forty years by the director of the School, Valdis Vikmanis. A new chapter in the life of the Orchestra began at the end of 1986, when it was granted the status of a professional symphony orchestra, becoming only the second in Latvia. That formal recognition was made possible by the efforts of two conductors, Laimonis Trubs (who worked with the LSO from 1986 to 1996) and Jekabs Ozolins (active with the LSO from 1987 to 2008).

The first artistic director of the LSO, as well as its first chief conductor, was the Leningrad-born Mikhail Orehov, who took the ensemble to a higher level of professionalism during his years there (1988–91). Another important period for the LSO was 1992 to 2009, when Imants Resnis was artistic director and chief conductor. He expanded the range of activities considerably: in addition to regular concerts in Riga, Liepāja and other Latvian cities, the



Orchestra also went on frequent tours abroad, playing in Germany, Great Britain, Malaysia, Spain, Sweden and elsewhere. During this period a number of important recordings were made, some of them during live appearances on Latvian radio and television.

In the early days of the LSO Valdis Vikmanis began a series of summer concerts, which always sold out, and so, in 2010, the festival 'Liepāja Summer' was launched, to renew that tradition of a century before. As well as orchestral performances (some of them in the open air), the festival includes sacred and chamber music.

The Liepāja Symphony Orchestra holds a special place in the national cultural life of Latvia. It received the highest national music award, the 'Great Music Award', in 2006, as well as the Latvian Recordings Award in the years 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2008. In 2010 the Liepāja Symphony Amber Sound Orchestra was granted the status of national orchestra. The current chief conductor, Atvars Lakstigala, made his debut with the LSO in 2010 and received the 'Great Music Award' at the end of the same year.

This is the fourth of a series of recordings planned with Toccata Classics. The first featured Paul Mann conducting the orchestral music of the Norwegian composer Leif Solberg (TOCC 0260) and the second and third brought Volumes One and Two of the complete orchestral music of Charles O'Brien (TOCC 0262 and 0263).





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Mastering: Adaq Khan

New critical editions by Paul Mann

The cover portrait of Charles O'Brien won an award from the Royal Scottish Academy in 1947 for its artist, the composer's daughter Nora O'Brien (1919–2014).

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# CHARLES O'BRIEN Complete Orchestral Music, Volume Three

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1 <i>Ellangowan: Concert Overture, Op. 10</i> (1909)	13:19
<i>Waltz Suite, Op. 26</i> (1928)	23:45
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3 II Joie de vivre	7:16
4 III Jeunesse	5:46
5 IV Extase	5:54
<i>Suite Humoristique, Op. 8</i> (1904)	22:55
6 I Marche fantastique	6:04
7 II Au Théâtre	4:50
8 III Barcarolle	7:17
9 IV Danse bohémienne	4:44
<b>Liepāja Symphony Orchestra</b>	<b>TT 61:00</b>
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