

**SAWYERS Symphony No. 4. *Hommage to Kandinsky*** • Kenneth Woods, cond; BBC Natl O of Wales • NIMBUS 6405 (64:32)

A number of British composers continue to write in the symphonic format, bringing to it a musical language that makes use of Modernist techniques in harmony and color without being formally experimental. Christopher Gunning, Matthew Taylor, and David Matthews are three who find the symphony a useful vehicle for dramatic expression and have contributed substantially to the genre. Another is Philip Sawyers (b. 1951), who to date has written four symphonies. The Third (2017) was the inaugural commission from the English Symphony Orchestra and conductor Kenneth Woods of an ambitious series of nine contemporary symphonies over the next few years.

In *Fanfare* 39:1 I reviewed a recording of Sawyers's Second Symphony, which I described as "tough and complex." I also said of his orchestral writing that it was "more sinewy" than that of his contemporaries, although it is expert and practical, as you would expect from a composer who spent some time as a violinist in the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. My comments on Symphony No. 2 also apply to the Fourth (2018), a large-scale work in three movements. A strong opening with trombones and timpani thundering out a four-note motto establishes the tone of the first movement. Sawyers is prepared to venture into 12-tone territory in his themes, but his tonality is no more abrasive than Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony, a work this piece often calls to mind. A quicksilver second movement and an *Adagio* finale both contain savage moments, along with sections of uneasy lyricism. The 37-minute work is tightly argued and compelling.

The composer's 2014 tone poem *Hommage to Kandinsky* almost sounds like a preliminary sketch for the symphony. It also contains heavily accented rhythmic motifs, a chromatic four-note motto played by trombones, light scherzo sections utilizing triplet rhythms, and lyrical episodes that do little to relieve the harmonic tension. The difference is that in the symphony these aspects are woven into a coherent argument, whereas here they are presented in sometimes abrupt juxtaposition (just as colors and shapes were juxtaposed by the painter Wassily Kandinsky). Sawyers's orchestration is deliberately more colorful in this work; for example, the xylophone and harp are used at times to add their distinctive timbre to the orchestral fabric.

Kenneth Woods is in his element with this kind of music, and the excellent musicians of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales are cleanly and spaciously recorded. Indeed, sound quality is an improvement on the English Symphony Orchestra's recordings of Sawyers's Second and Third Symphonies. Most importantly, both works (particularly the symphony) deserve repeated, careful

listening. To paraphrase Gavin Dixon in his review of Symphony No. 3 (*Fanfare* 41:3), tradition's future looks bright. **Phillip Scott**

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