

✓ ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF  
(February 5th, 1984)

BBC WELSH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Conductor: Bryden Thomson      Soloist: Martin Jones (piano)

'Americana' was the theme of this concert which was one in the series of South Wales Echo Centenary Concerts. By the time the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra had reached the last item on the programme they had warmed up, were thoroughly relaxed, and gave a magnificent performance of Leonard Bernstein's masterly *West Side Story*.

The thematic richness and rhythmic variety — not to mention the virtuosic orchestration — of the work showed up the musical poverty of the 'late bloated' style of John Williams, two of whose scores had preceded it, and brought the true sound of contemporary Americana at its best to St. David's Hall. The orchestra responded magnificently and from the second, finger-snapping movement, the performance took wing.

The precision of the playing of the complex rhythms and the clarity of the textures (which were everything that the muddy, unprecise performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* during the first half of the concert had not been) were a joy to hear. From the beautifully played (by the strings) Mahlerian *Somewhere* to the snap and crackle of the whole orchestra during *Mambo and Rumble*, this was a first-rate performance.

Bryden Thomson had throughout the evening shown himself to be for the most part a relatively conservative conductor, but he redeemed himself with all the panache one could wish for during the performance of Bernstein's suite. (It is interesting to recall, by the way, that the lyrics for *West Side Story* were written by one Stephen Sondheim, whose first major work on Broadway this was, and who has gone on to do quite well in the musical line himself!).

Shame on the printed programme for not listing the names of all the players in this (augmented) orchestra, including two who were essential to generating the successful performance that it was, namely the jazz drummer and the pianist.

The other highlight of the evening was Martin Jones's witty and stylish pianism that nicely caught the swinging spirit of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The performance was also notable for two fine, brief, trumpet moments: one a flutter crescendo, and the other a short muted solo.

It serves little purpose to try and re-write the programme, but it is difficult to resist rueing that the composer of the most consistently beautiful music that America has produced, Lou Harrison, was not represented; or wishing that the true voice of Charles Ives might have been heard, fun though the *Variations on America* were. Bryden Thomson caught some of the spirit, though he tended to down play it.

But most of all, one regretted the commercial need to perform second-rate film music and a banal TV score, when there is so much glorious and great American film music available: by Bernard Hermann (*Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *Taxi*), or Jerry Goldsmith (*Sand Pebbles*, *Under Fire*). If the music of John Williams was really required — and if music from a western film was really essential — then the audience should have been given the chance to hear John Williams at his very best, during his middle period, in his compositions for *Missouri Breaks* and *The Cowboys* . . . In the event *Star Wars*; the *Star Wars* clone, *Superman* (though the *Love Theme* from the latter is a subtler composition than *Leia's Theme*); and Moross's *The Big Country* were belted out well enough, though without the Cantina Band movement, the bombast of *Star Wars* is unrelieved.

I have fond memories of playing Barber's *Adagio for Strings* in an orchestra and of experiencing how lovely a thing it is to perform as well as to hear. Although Bryden Thomson did not capture all of the romance and glow in the music, the performance let us hear the essence of it in a fairly straightforward reading.

Having covered itself in glory with the performance of *West Side Story* the orchestra should have left the stage. I shall not soon forget the utter fool Bryden Thomson made of himself by making purile fun of the encore, *Stars and Stripes for Ever*. Since Mr. Thomson is a Scot, I wonder how he will feel when the Kansas City Symphony (a regional American orchestra about on a par with the BBC Welsh) apes *Scotland the Brave*.

Gerard Hoffnung he is not, but then that great humourist knew the difference between the comic and the demeaning.