

✓ ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF
(September 19th, 1984)

ENGLISH STRING ORCHESTRA

Anthony Hopkins (conductor).

Neil Smith (guitar).

Anthony Hopkins is renowned as a broadcaster and his attractive style of analysing music on the air is better known than are his activities as a conductor.

Anthony Hopkins the speaker introduced each item on this programme giving brief synopses which were not always without controversy: 'no composer has written music of greater ebullience and wit than Sir Michael Tippett', he said.

As it turned out, Anthony Hopkins the conductor was somewhat less witty or interesting than the broadcaster.

The core of concert consisted of two guitar concertos and Grieg's *Holberg Suite*. The first concerto was that in A Major by Mauro Giuliani. It is an attractive work with a particularly delightful slow movement which contained extended passages for a quartet of single string players accompanying the guitar. The performance, however, could only be termed workmanlike and Neil Smith's solo contribution uninteresting in its blandness, especially in that slow movement which cried out for greater sensitivity of phrasing and embellishment of the solo line.

The rest of the first half consisted of a mechanically pulsed reading of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik* which contained a surprisingly teutonic march-like 'Menuetto' and a performance of Barber's *Adagio and Fugue*

which caught the hushed tones but not the luminescence nor necessary shaping of interweaving voices.

The second guitar 'concerto' came in the form of Malcolm Arnold's slight but charming *Serenade for Guitar and Strings*.

The virile reading of the *Holberg Suite*, in which Helen Roberts was a notably agile and attractive viola soloist, was perhaps the most thoroughly satisfying of the evening.

The concert concluded with performances of Tippett's unengaging *Little Music for Strings* and Grainger's frolicsome *Molly on the Shore*.

The Orchestra had a good deal of intonation problems, especially during the first half of the concert and the players seemed not always as sure of entries and cut-offs as one might have expected.

(Lovers of those incidents that often provoke food for thought may like to know that the solo guitar was 'discreetly amplified' to quote Mr. Hopkins, 'because this hall is bigger than that for which Giuliani composed the work').

Now, there is some strange thinking here.

Firstly the management of St. David's Hall is currently advertising that it has the finest acoustics in Britain and indeed Segovia had no need for amplification during his recent solo concert.

Secondly, if the relationship of the small group of strings was correct for accompanying the guitarist, and if that group of strings could be heard quite well on its own and required no amplification, then why did the guitar need amplification? (In other words, if 'a' = 'b', and 'b' = 'c', then 'a' has also to equal 'c'). And what of the change of timbral quality caused by the electronics to the guitar, not to mention the degree of phase difference added by the distance of the loudspeakers from the instrument?

Or, thirdly, was the work not suitable for performing in that particular hall anyway?

As I said, strange thinking for one who has made his living through expounding analysis.