

MUSICIAN'S DIARY

JoAnn Falletta

Ulster Orchestra's new principal conductor on the discovery of rare works by Holst and the joys of being an 'American in Belfast'

Recently, I headed back to Belfast for an extraordinary week. We had planned a very full calendar, and it was a rather overwhelming schedule – but great fun as well. To celebrate the Belfast Festival, the musicians and I had chosen a Pan-American programme – challenging, rhythmic and vibrant works by composers such as Bernstein, Copland, Moncayo, Gershwin and Piazzolla. It was a pleasure for me to introduce the orchestra to some North and South American pieces that were new to them, and I was delighted to see how much they enjoyed these colourful works.

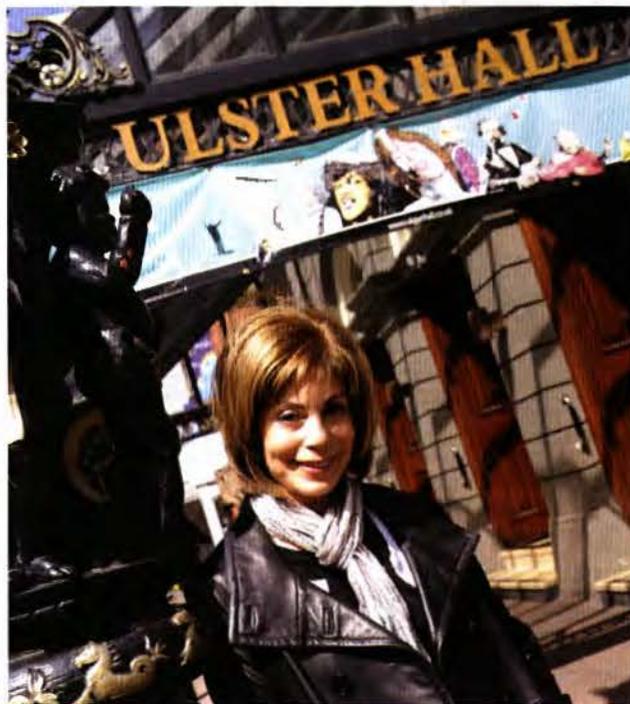
But perhaps the most important part of the week was our first joint recording project on the Naxos label. We had been asked to record five little-known works by Gustav Holst, a great opportunity that was particularly intriguing to me. I have always believed that there is a treasure of neglected pieces (often by well-known composers) that our public deserves to hear. Everyone knows Holst's *The Planets*. But his *Cotswolds* Symphony? This is a piece rarely played in concert halls. It was an opportunity for me to come to know the Ulster Orchestra

'The Holst recording is a document of the beginning of my relationship with this wonderful orchestra'

in a closer way during intense recording sessions, and a chance to discover music that was in their vernacular, not mine. We were tackling music without a significant performance tradition, and, in the case of some of the works, without complete recordings.

The advantage was, of course, that this is music which, while not known, is in the intrinsic vocabulary of the orchestra. Another advantage was the fact that the musicians have had an illustrious heritage of recording under conductors such as Vernon Handley, Bryden Thomson and Yan Pascal Tortelier. The players think quickly, respond impeccably, listen to each other, and perform with élan and a natural style and elegance. A third advantage is the spectacular acoustical environment of the Ulster Hall. A historical landmark and cultural jewel in the heart of Belfast, the beautifully refurbished hall has a sound that is warm, blended and richly resonant. Producer Tim Handley and engineer Andrew Rowland positioned the orchestra on the floor rather than the stage for the recording, creating some annual challenges for the musicians but capturing a truly magnificent sound. The musicians seemed pleasantly surprised by the music; several wondered why these pieces had languished in obscurity.

Discovering this musical language was a privilege for me. I revelled in the sweeping portrait of the Cotswolds countryside in the symphony, a tonal landscape that seemed to delight our recording team, who were happy to share with me their own personal experiences of this beautiful English region. I was intrigued by Holst's interest in other



Outside my new 'home', the beautifully refurbished Ulster Hall



At Belfast's recently opened Titanic Centre



Sampling 'the black stuff' in the Crown Bar with my husband Robert

cultures: his *Japanese Suite*, intended as a vehicle for the dancer Michio Ito, subtly explores authentic Japanese melodies; his *Indra* is a brilliantly scored painting of the Hindu god of rain and storm. His *Winter Idyll*, never performed in his lifetime, is a stunning Wagnerian tone-poem, while the *Walt Whitman Suite* is a surprising tribute to one of my own favourite American poets. Holst's music is emotional, deeply felt, nuanced and gorgeously orchestrated, sometimes betraying telling fingerprints of *The Planets* in a more intimate frame.

Ideally, this CD would create interest in these lesser-played works of Holst, and perhaps inspire an open-mindedness to other neglected works. I myself have begun looking for opportunities to programme these works in the US, where they are virtually unknown. The recording is a document of the beginning of my relationship with this wonderful orchestra, and though all of us were exhausted after the final session, we had shared an excellent time together.

Busy as I was, I must admit that I was able to find a little time to explore my new UK 'home'. Highlights included a poignant visit to the Titanic Centre, delicious early morning breakfasts at St George's Market, a quick trip to Belfast Castle, and a late-night celebration at the glorious Crown Bar. Being an 'American in Belfast' is proving to be an adventure filled with joy – and great music. **G**

► Read Gramophone's review of the Ulster Orchestra's Holst CD on page 47



New partnership: JoAnn Falletta addresses the audience at the Ulster Hall, Belfast



Tognetti and his distinctive approach in Grieg for strings

The Australian Chamber Orchestra is renowned for its crisp, clean playing, superb ensemble and intonation, and vivacious style. The partnership with lead violin Richard Tognetti has yielded some impressive results and, following their two-disc survey of Mozart's violin concertos (2/11, A/11), orchestra and conductor have looked still further north, to Grieg. Their programme mixes original compositions for string orchestra with two artful transcriptions by Tognetti himself.

It is fascinating to hear Grieg's quite hefty G minor String Quartet of 1878 played by small orchestral forces (the ACO are 17 in number), especially set alongside *From Holberg's Time* (1884), more usually played by fuller string ensembles. As Malcolm MacDonald notes in the booklet, Grieg's writing for the original instruments transfers well to the weightier medium, for instance in the vibrant *Scherzo*, the music less conversational in manner than many late-Romantic quartets. And yet the result does not strike me as a symphony for strings, retaining something of the intimacy of its source.

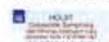
Tognetti's other arrangement is of the famous (and possibly misleadingly named) 'Erotikk', from the *Lyric Pieces*, Book 3. The treatment of Grieg's piano piece (love, rather

than eroticism, is its subject: Grieg was no Scriabin!) is a little over-ripe, leaving less to the imagination than it deserves. No quibbles about the execution, though, of this or any of its companion pieces. The enchanting *Elegiac Melodies* are beautifully done, as is *Holberg*, which dances and entrances in equal measure. Both latter works have dozens of rivals but, while one might find equally fine renditions, I doubt there are many better ones. Excellent sound, as usual from this label.

Guy Rickards

Holst

Overture, 'Walt Whitman', Op 7 H42. Symphony, 'The Cotswolds', Op 8 H47. A Winter Idyll, H31. Japanese Suite, Op 33 H126. Indra, Op 13 H66
Ulster Orchestra / JoAnn Falletta
 Naxos © 8 572914 (66' • DDD)



Falletta's first recording as Ulster Orchestra boss

The early orchestral works on this recording – the *Winter Idyll* (1897), *Walt Whitman Overture* (1899) and *Cotswolds Symphony* (1899-1900) – remind us of the substantial period Holst, like his confrère student and composer Vaughan Williams, took to develop his distinctive voice. Although Wagner is often cited as the most prominent influence on Holst as he emerged from the Royal College of Music at the turn of the century, Dvořák is much more evident in the youthful *Winter*

Idyll and elements of the Czech's Sixth Symphony seem to leap off the page of the *Whitman Overture*. As for the more ambitious *Cotswolds Symphony*, there are more signs of Holst's later colourful orchestral technique in the energetic *Scherzo*, though the other movements, not least the 'Elegy (In memoriam William Morris)' – perhaps the composer's most overt expression of his socialist allegiances – still powerfully betray their 19th-century roots.

Nevertheless, it is good to hear these works played with such panache by the Ulster Orchestra under their new principal conductor, JoAnn Falletta, who gives the *Cotswolds Symphony* a more vigorous outing than does Douglas Bostock with the Munich SO. The slightly later symphonic poem *Indra*, Op 13 (1903), though still stylistically inchoate, reveals a major step forwards in terms of the exotic material used to reflect the subject of the Indian legend. Even more exotic, however, is the much more characteristic *Japanese Suite*, Op 33 (1916), a fascinating precursor to *The Planets*. Infused with techniques and sounds that arose from sounds he drew from hearing Stravinsky for the first time, the work is beautifully performed here, most notably the delicate, crystalline sounds of celesta, harp, woodwind and horn.

Jeremy Dibble

Cotswolds Sym – selected comparison:
 Munich SO, Barock (CICO) CLASCD284