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Phonographic Realisations of the *Gothic Symphony* by Havergal Brian

Abstract

Havergal Brian's Symphony No. 1 in D minor (1919–1927), known as *Gothic Symphony*, is possibly one of the most demanding and difficult pieces in symphonic repertoire, the largest-scale symphony ever written, outdoing the most extreme demands of Mahler, Strauss and Schönberg. After the purely instrumental part 1, part 2 is a gigantic setting of *Te Deum*, inspired by the mighty Gothic cathedrals. This outstanding work has been performed only six times since its premiere in 1961, and has been recorded in studio only once. There are three existing phonographic realisations of this work. Two of them are live recordings made in England. The first of them comes from 1966, when the *Symphony* was recorded under the direction of Adrian Boult (it was released by the Testament label under catalogue number SBT2 1454) and the second one was made in 2011 under the baton of Martyn Brabbins (it was released in the same year under catalogue number CDA67971/2). The third recording, but the first one that has been available internationally, was made in Bratislava in 1989 under Ondrej Lenárd (it was first released by Marco Polo label in 1990, and later published by Naxos in

2004 under catalogue number 8.557418-19). Made with different orchestras and choirs, under very different sonic circumstances, they also differ considerably within interpretative ideas represented by conductors. They show Brian's work in different ways, illuminating this composition. Sadly, despite their efforts, the composer's output is still perceived as peripheral curiosity for connoisseurs.

Keywords

Havergal Brian, *Gothic Symphony*, Adrian Boult, Martyn Brabbins, Ondrej Lenárd

Havergal Brian's Symphony No. 1 in D minor, known rather as *Gothic Symphony*, is one of the most original and extraordinary works of the 20th century. The composition is exceptionally rarely played on concert stages—since the moment of finishing it in 1927, it was performed only six times, in years 1961–2011 (not including one studio recording). The reason for this are logistic problems caused by the great instrumentation of the piece, and, additionally, the long duration of the composition.[1] The performance of *Gothic Symphony* takes about 100 minutes, whilst in the case of the longest romantic symphonies (including such developed pieces as *Symphony No. 8* by Gustav Mahler or *Symphony No. 8* by Anton Bruckner), duration is usually no more than 80 minutes. Most of 19th-century symphonies (e.g. works of Tchaikovsky or Dvořák) are much shorter—their duration is about 45 minutes.

The author of *Gothic Symhony*, Havergal Brian, was born in 1876 in Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire county, in family from a working class. He belonged to the same generation of English composers as Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), Gustav Holst (1874–1934), Joseph Holbrooke (1878–1958) or Frank Bridge (1879–1941). Despite Brian's outstanding creativity, his oeuvre was not recognized for a long time.

[1] *Gothic Symphony* is present in *Guinness World Records* as "the longest symphony". The date of performed given there (1954) is wrong—the premiere of this work took place in 1961. *Vide*: http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/ world-records/ longest-symphony/ [accessed: 8.07.2018].

Works of the composer were rarely performed by the outstanding conductors, such as Henry Wood, Thomas Beecham or Adrian Boult. However, the conflicting character of the composer combined with his reluctance to promote his own work placed him at the margin of English musical life. He earned for a living as a musical journalist and a copyist of scores. His oeuvre consists of five operas, three concerts, organ and piano pieces and numerous orchestral works (including concert overtures, symphonic poems and five orchestral suites). However, symphonies are in the centre of his heritage. The composer wrote thirty two pieces of this genre. Their catalogue begins with *Gothic Symhony*, and ends with *Symphony in A flat major*, finished in 1968, being at the same time the last work of 92-year-old composer. The artist died in 1972 in Shoreham-by-Sea in Sussex county at the age of ninety six years. The memory of his music is cultivated by The Havergal Brian Society, active since 1974.[2] The small recognition of the composer in Poland is seen through the fact that the article devoted to him appeared as late as in the supplement to the first volume of *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM* in 1998.[3]

Gothic Symphony was being written in years 1919–1927. This monumental work consists of six parts. The beginning three are instrumental, next—the setting of a hymn *Te Deum* — require also the participation of two choirs and four soloists. The set of the composition is as follows:

1. *Allegro assai* (284 bars)
2. *Lento espressivo e solenne* (145 bars)
3. *Vivace* (393 bars)
4. *Te Deum laudamus* (433 bars)
5. *Judex crederis esse venturus* (331 bars)
6. *Te ergo quaesumus* (765 bars)

The instrumentation of *Gothic Symphony* was presented in table 1.

[2] All information about the composer and his oeuvre, as well as bibliography and discography devoted to him is gathered by the website of the Society: http://www.havergalbrian.org/ [accessed: 8.07.2018].

[3] J. Wiśnios, *Brian Havergal*, [in:] *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM. Część biograficzna. Suplement*, E. Dziębowska (ed.), Vol. 1 (*AB*), Kraków 1998, p. 70.

Family of instruments	Parts I–III	Parts IV–VI
Woodwinds	2 piccolos (1 also flute) 3 flutes (1 also alto flute) 2 oboes oboe d'amore cor anglais bass oboe Eb clarinet 2 Bb clarinets basset horn bass clarinet 3 bassoons contrabassoon	2 piccolos (1 also flute) 6 flutes (1 also alto flute) 4 oboes oboe d'amore (also oboe) bass oboe (also oboe) 2 Eb clarinets (1 also Bb clarinet) 4 Bb clarinets 2 basset horns 2 bass clarinets contrabass clarinet 3 bassoons 2 contrabassoons
Brass	6 horns Eb cornet 4 trumpets bass trumpet 3 tenor trombones Tuba	8 horns 2 Eb cornets 4 trumpets bass trumpet 3 tenor trombones bass trombone contrabass trombone 2 euphoniums 2 tubas
Percussion	tambourine cymbals tam-tam triangle	2 tambourines 6 cymbals tam-tam thunder machine tubular bells chimes chains 2 triangles birdscare

Percussion	2 sets of timpani glockenspiel xylophone bass drum snare drum	2 sets of timpani glockenspiel xylophone 2 bass drums 3 snare drums long drum
Keyboards	organ celesta	Organ celesta
Strings	16 first violins 16 second violins 12 violas 10 cellos 8 double basses 2 harps	20 first violins 20 second violins 16 violas 14 cellos 12 double basses 2 harps
Soloists	-	Soprano alto tenor baritone
Choirs	-	mixed choir *ad libitum* (approx. 500 performers) children's choir *ad libitum* (approx. 100 performers)
Offstage instruments	-	8 horns 8 trumpets 8 tenor trombones 8 tubas 4 sets of timpani

Table 1: Instrumentation of *Gothic Symphony*.

There are not only many instruments and voices needed to perform *Gothic Symphony*, but also it requires instruments, which are very rare in symphonic orchestra, like basset horn, oboe d'amore, bass clarinet or bass trombone. Even instrumental parts require a huge number of performers, and it increases significantly in vocal-instrumental parts, for almost every group of instruments. Together, a performance of the work requires the cooperation of circa 700 musicians.[4] Moreover, the third and fourth parts are played *attacca*, what means that at the moment of the beginning of the concert all performers should be on stage.

The musical language used by the composer in this composition sometimes refers to the Romantic tradition. Waving ending of the slow part II, written for trombone and tube, conjures up a memory of instrumentation of Richard Wagner's *Siegfried*, especially fragments devoted to Fafner. In the motoric beginning of the part III, Bruckner's influence can be seen. On the other hand, the use of four wind orchestras behind the scene refers strictly to spatial effects used in Hector Berlioz's *Requiem*. On the contrary, there are many fragments characterised by a bright timbre, with the rich use of percussion section, of a sharp, aggressive character, highlighted by the dissonant harmony. An interesting example is the part III, in which the composer gave the especially demanding task to the performer of xylophone part. The texture is usually dense, and massive, orchestral *tutti* with the use of both groups of wind instruments are frequent. Exceptions include for instance theme II of the part I, introduced by violin solo in D flat major, march for clarinets in the part VI or extraordinarily originally instrumented ending if this part, using six sets of timpani, bass drums and snare drums. Choral parts are characterized by a dense polyphonic texture and the multitude of episodes for *a cappella* choir. The beginning of the part V—*Judex*—is also interesting, with episodes written so densely that they create cluster-like, dissonant effects.

In terms of the form, in instrumental parts some analogies with the traditional form of a symphony can be found. Part I is based on two themes, contrasting in expression, in which way the composer refers to the sonata form. *Lento* has the function of a slow movement, and *Vivace*—of scherzo. At the end of this part, there is a gradual reduction of volume, what prepares the listener for *attacca* entrance of the part IV,

[4] Such a number is given by The Havergal Brian Society; *vide*: http://www.havergalbrian. org/works/symphony-1.php [accessed: 8.07.2018].

in which there is lack of audible culminations. The expressive culmination, with the use of all instruments in *fff*, finishes the part V—*Judex*. *Te ergo quaesumus* has a loose and episodic form, sometimes associated with the earlier parts, and it finishes in dynamics *pp* in E major key, when the choir intonates *a cappella* the last words of the hymn—"non confundar in aeternum".

The composition was published in 1932 by the publisher Cranz in Leipzig. Brian dedicated it to Richard Strauss, with whom he corresponded vividly at that time. In the letter to English composer from the 13th January 1933, the author of *Elektra* called *Gothic Symphony* a "wonderful masterpiece", wishing it a quick premiere and recognition.[5] The composer put the quotation from Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust*: as a motto of the work: "He who strives with all his might, that man we can redeem".[6] *Gothic Symphony* meant a lot to the composer. In the letter to his friend, the composer Granville Bantock,[7] Briad said: "This work has been inside my head for a lifetime, and naturally there is inside it all those who have been very dear to me, who helped me and moulded me".[8]

Despite this, the composer kept the fact of writing such a huge and significant work in secret until the moment of finishing the first three parts in 1923.[9] He also did not admit that he wanted to finish the piece and add *Te Deum* to it. In the letters to friends written at that time he claimed that *Gothic Symphony* was fully finished.[10]

Brian's *Symphony No. 1*, due to its instrumentation and duration, is often compared with *Symphony No. 8* by Gustav Mahler. Both pieces are also connected by inspiration by Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust*. However, there is no evidence that during the creation of *Gothic Symphony* the composer knew the work of the Austrian composer

5 *Vide*: M. MacDonald, [without title], [booklet in:] H. Brian, *Symphony No. 1 "The Gothic"* [CD], dir. A. Boult, Testament 2009.

6 M. MacDonald, *Brian as Faust*, http://www.havergalbrian.org/articles/sym1_12.php [accessed: 8.07.2018].

7 Granville Bantock (1868–1946) was an English composer writing works with colourful orchestration in Neoromantic style. His oeuvre consists of four operas, four symphonies, six symphonic poems and numerous choral, orchestral and piano works.

8 The letter from 27.06.1926; as cited in: K. Eastough, *Havergal Brian: The Making of the Composer*, London 1976, p. 256.

9 *Ibid*., pp. 259–260.

10 Compare: the letter to Grancille Bantock from 12.11.1924, [in:] *ibid*., p. 252.

or was inspired by him.[11] The researchers indicate that the potential sources of inspiration were Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9 in D minor* and Hector Berlioz's *Grande Messe der Morts*, as Brian especially valued this composer.[12] Parallels are clear—both artists were fascinated by Baroque richness of orchestration, monumentalism of form and instrumentation, and a frequent use of the spatial texture.

In the search for sources of inspirations for *Gothic Symphony*, autobiographic contexts are precious. In 1887 11-year-old Brian took part—as a choir singer—in the festivities of fifty years anniversary of the Queen Victoria reign. The festivities took place in the cathedral in Lichfield in Staffordshire county, and the work performed during them was probably *Te Deum* written by Prince Albert. Brian admitted that the concert impressed him very much and hugely encouraged him to create his own composition. In the text *How the "Gothic Symphony" Came to Be Written* from 1938 the composer wrote: "I retained an impression of something on a vast scale".[13] What was equally significant was the artist's dream from 1909, "the most extraordinary and vivid dream I've ever experienced".[14] During the dream, the composer was in a German town and spent most of his time, glaring at the huge Gothic cathedral.[15] However, the most surprising stimulus and inspiration to create the work discussed here was the view of the strip of chalk mounts South Downs in South East England. As the artist wrote:

> I can think of nothing more mentally invigorating than gazing at miles of freshly made ploughed furrows, uniform and symmetrical, glistening purple red in the autumn morning light, unbroken by

[11] Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* was performed in England for the first time in 1930 under Henry Wood. Brian became more interested in the Austrian composer's work only at this time. He also wrote the essay devoted to *Symphony No. 8. Vide*: H. Brian, *Gustav Mahler's Eighth Symphony*, "Musical Opinion", March 1930.

[12] *Vide*: J. Schaarwächter, *Beethoven, Berlioz, Brian (or Three Bs and more): Influences on One British Symphony and Beyond*, http://www.havergalbrian.org/articles/threebs.php [accessed: 8.07.2018].

[13] H. Brian, *How the "Gothic Symphony" Came to Be Written*, "The Modern Mystic and Monthly Science Review" 1938, No. 2/11; as cited in: M. MacDonald, *Brian as Faust*, http://www.havergalbrian.org/articles/sym1_12.php [accessed: 8.07.2018].

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] The composer, fascinated by the German culture, many times wanted to visit this country, but the obstacle was his obsessive fear of travelling. *Vide*: K. Eastough, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

> a single hedge, over the vast rolling downs. This I have always felt to be the pivot of the *Gothic* Symphony.[16]

One of the reasons for which Brian's works were so rarely performed was the obsessive fear of the composer that the potential performer could lose the scores. The score of *Gothic Symphony* interested Henry Wood yet in 1924,[17] as he wanted to perform three first parts even before *Te Deum* was written. The obstacle was the tour of the artist through the United States.[18] The conductor again said to be interested by the piece in 1927, when it was fully finished. This time, the composer himself opposed to perform the composition, as two days after lending the score he went to Wood and categorically asked for its return.[19] Brian felt strong fear when other people had autographs of his pieces. It sounded like an irony of fate that the composer, who often worked as a copyist, did not have means to have his own composition copied.

Finally, the premiere of *Gothic Symphony* took place on the 24th June 1961 at Central Hall Westminster in London, thirty four years after finishing the composition. It was a half-professional performance, in which two orchestras participated—Polyphonia Symphony Orchestra and wind ensemble Royal Military School of Music, as well as four choirs—London Philharmonic Choir, Kingsway Choral Society, London Orpheus Choir and Hendon Grammar School Choir.[20] The performance was conducted by the Australian conductor Bryan Fairfax (1925–2014), specializing in discovering less known composers. In gratitude for it Brian dedicated him his *Symphony No, 18*, created at that time.

The first professional performance took place on the 30th October 1966 in Royal Albert Hall, where the piece was led by the doyen of English conductors, Adrian Boult (1889-1983). The performance made Brian famous and was the biggest triumph in the life of 90-year-old composer. Then, performances took place in: 1978 (Victoria Hall in

16 H. Brian, *How the "Gothic Symphony…", op. cit.*

17 Henry Wood (1869–1944)—an English conductor, one of Brian's closest friends. He is remembered as the initiator of Promenade concerts, so-called *Proms*. He led many British premieres of works of Bartók, Copland, Debussy, Hindemith, Janáček, Mahler, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, Sibelius, Richard Strauss and Webern.

18 K. Eastough, *op. cit*., p. 253.

19 *Ibid*., p. 229.

20 *Ibid*., p. 302.

Stoke-on-Trent, dir. Trevor Stokes), 1980 (Royal Albert Hall in London, dir. Ole Schmidt), 2010 (Queensland Performing Arts Centre, dir. John Curro) and 2011 (Royal Albert Hall, dir. Martyn Brabbins).

There are only three recordings of this composition. The basic data about the performers engaged in every of them are presented in table 2.

Through almost twenty years, the only accessible recording of the work was the one made in 1989 in Bratislava. In March of this year, three first parts of the pieces were recorded, and in October—*Te Deum*.[21] Primarily, Ole Smidt was to conduct the work, but when his participation appeared impossible, realisators chose the Slovakian conductor Ondrej Lenárd (b. 1942), the musical director of the Symphonic Orchestra of Czechoslovakian Radio. It is the only studio recording of *Gothic Symphony.* In the recording, two orchestras and six choirs took part.

The following two recordings come from the concerts. In the one conducted by Adrian Boult in Royal Albert Hall, one orchestra and six choirs took part. The album is supplemented by the interview with the composer conducted by J. Behague just after the concert in 1966.

The third one is the recording of the concert, which took place also in Royal Albert Hall during *Proms* under Martyn Brabbins (b. 1959). The concert aroused the interest of the audience—tickets for the hall of over 5000 seats were sold out after twenty four hours. The organizers of the concert gathered about 819 performers, what makes the performance the only one that exceeded the composer's expectations in terms of the number of musicians. Two orchestras and nine choirs took part in the concert.

The basic issue, which concerns the researcher when comparing all three recordings are tempos used by the conductors. The discrepancies between particular parts of the *Symphony* in every of three recordings are presented in table 3.

[21] D. Brown, *Recording "The Gothic" in Bratislava*, http://www.havergalbrian.org/recordinggothic.htm [accessed: 8.07.2018].

Director	Ondrej Lenárd	Adrian Boult	Martyn Brabbins
Orchestras	Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra	BBC Symphony Orchestra	BBC Concert Orchestra BBC National Orchestra of Wales
Choirs	Bratislava Children's Choir Bratislava City Chorus Echo Youth Choir Lucnica Chorus Slovak Folk Ensemble Chorus Slovak Opera Chorus Slovak Philharmonic Choir	BBC Chorus BBC Choral Society City of London Choir Hampstead Choral Society Emanuel School Choir Orpington Junior Singers	CBSO Youth Chorus Eltham College Boys' Choir Southend Boys' and Girls' Choirs Bach Choir BBC National Chorus of Wales Brighton Festival Chorus Côr Caerdydd Huddersfield Choral Society
Soloists	Eva Jenisová (soprano) Dagmar Pecková (alto) Vladimír Doležal (tenor) Peter Mikuláš (bass)	Honor Sheppard (soprano) Shirley Minty (contralto) Ronald Dowd (tenor) Roger Stalman (bass)	Susan Gritton (soprano) Christine Rice (mezzo-soprano) Peter Auty (tenor) Alastair Miles (bass)
Year of recording / year of publishing	1989/1991 and 2004	1966/2009	2011/2011
Publisher / catalogue number	Marco Polo, Naxos / 8557418-19	Testament / SBT2 1454	Hyperion / CDA 67971/2

Table 2: The basic data about the recordings of *Gothic Symphony*.

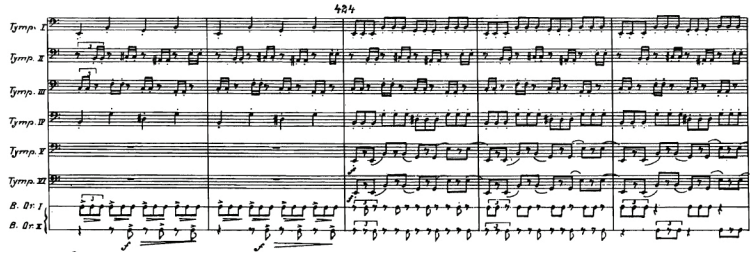
Conductor	Boult	Lenárd	Brabbins
Allegro assai	11:30	13:46	12:08
Lento espressivo e solenne	10:44	12:26	11:54
Vivace	11:49	13:00	12:14
Te Deum	18:03	19:59	17:46
Judex crederis	14:16	15:44	16:12
Te ergo quaesumus	34:42	39:12	35:46
Total duration	100:14	111:00	106:00

Table 3: Duration of *Gothic Symphony* in particular recordings.

Generally, the fastest tempos appear in Boult's interpretation, Brabbins' recording lasts six minutes longer, and the slowest tempos are characteristic for Lenárd interpretation. His version of *Gothic Symphony* lasts as much as eleven minutes longer than Boult's interpretation and five minutes longer that Brabbins'. These rules apply to all instrumental movements and part VI. In part IV, Brabbins decided to use the fastest tempo, in part V—the slowest one. Lenárd's interpretation is characterised by the biggest agogic contrasts comparing to the written marks in the score. Episodes in slow tempos are usually performed by him slower than in English recordings, and in fast fragments the Slovakian conductor has a tendency to accelerate.

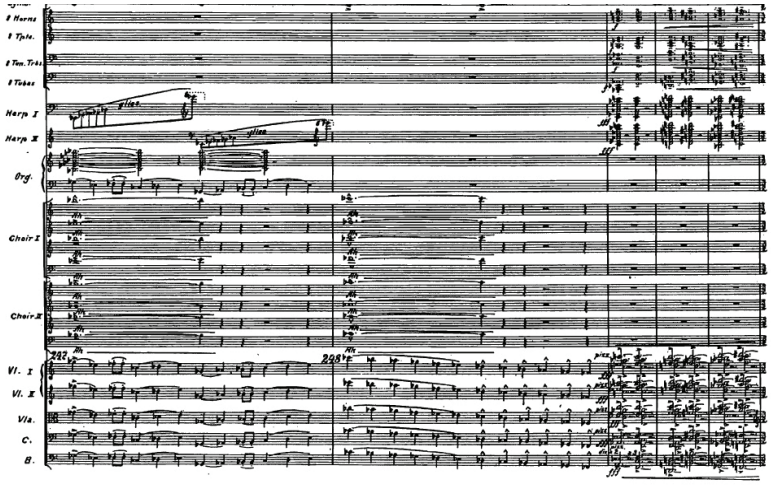
Faster tempo used by English conductors can be puzzling and surprising when we take into consideration the fact that both recordings were recorded in Royal Albert Hall. It is an especially unfavourable in terms of acoustics. Before refurbishment, which took place at the end of the 1960s, it was very reverberant with echo of three seconds, what is perfectly heard on Boult's recording.[22] Despite introducing some refinements, in the experts' opinion, the acoustics of Royal Albert Hall still leaves a lot to be desired. Perhaps, the presence of the log echo adds the element of monumentalism and spaciousness to the recording, less noticeable in the two remaining recordings. It causes the effect that, when listening to short fragments of the recordings, Boult's recording seems to be the slowest one, whilst it is the fastest. The good example can be the ending of part VI, namely the mentioned fragment for timpani and bass drums (compare example 1). In comparison, the recording of a Slovakian conductor was recorded in recording studio of Czechoslovakian Radio in Bratislava, which is characterised by short echo, because of which the sound can be heard as tight, compact and less spacious.

[22] The details about the works on the acoustics of Royal Albert Hall can be found: https://www.royalalberthall.com/about-the-hall/our-history/explore-our-history/building/acoustic-diffusers-mushrooms/ [accessed: 8.07.2018] and on the blog *The Sound Blog: Dispatches from Acoustic and Audio Engineering* led by Trevor Cox, the lecturer at the University of Salford, professionally studying acoustics: https://acousticengineering.wordpress.com/2015/03/09/ what-is-wrong-with-londons-concert-halls/ [accessed: 8.07.2018].



Ex. 1: H. Brian, *Gothic Symphony*, part VI (*Te ergo…*), bb. 422–426. A fragment for timpani and bass drums.[23]

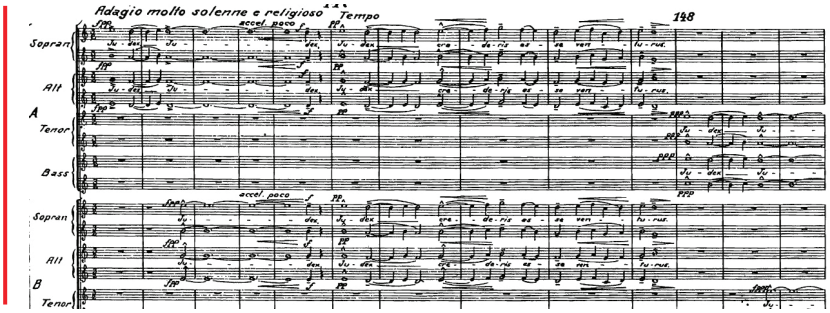
After listening to all of three recording it is clearly visible that Boult knew the structure of *Gothic Symphony* the best of all the conductors. The English conductor builds it with attention and patience, trying not to miss any detail. It is perfectly heard in the ending of *Judex*, in bb. 246–248. The chords of the brass instruments playing *fff* are accompanied by *pizzicato* of a string quintet, perfectly heard in Boutl's recording and practically unnoticeable in Lenárd's (compare: example 2). Taking into consideration the concert conditions, the age of the recording and imperfection of technologies accessible—it is a testimony to the truth of the extraordinary professionalism of the conductor.



Ex. 2: H. Brian, *Gothic Symphony*, part V (*Judex*), bb. 246–248. *Pizzicato* of a string quartet.

[23] The score of *Gothic Symphony* is available online: http://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_No.1_(Brian%2C_Havergal) [accessed: 8.07.2018].

In terms of the quality of play of engaged ensembles, the disproportion is noticeable. English choirs and orchestras pay much attention to articulation marks in the Brian's scores than Slovakian ones. The example could be again the fragment of part V with articulated *marcato* entrances of choir, perfectly heard in both English recordings (compare: example 3).



Ex. 3: H. Brian, *Gothic Symphony*, part V (*Judex*), bb. 1–13. A choir part.

The Brabbins' recording significantly differs from Boult's and Lenárd's interpretations due to the great quality of a recording as well as the skillfully highlighted timbre—both in terms of the orchestra and choirs.

Considering the quality of the performance in terms of the orchestra and choirs, as well as perfect plan of form and selective sound, Adrian Boult's recording is distinctively more than only a historical curiosity. Albeit the monophonic sound of the recording causes that on the ground of the quality of realisation it cannot be compared with Lenárd and Brabboin's realisation, it is surely worthy to pay attention to it.

Ondrej Lenárd's recording surely will be remembered by many listeners as the first recording of *Gothic Symphony* that was possible to buy or hear, but it is definitely inferior to competitors due to the level of performance of engaged ensembles, as well as the level of the conductor's knowledge of the form of this long and difficult masterpiece.

Martyn Brabbins' recording is outstanding in many aspects. It can be seen as the best realised recording of *Gothic Symphony* in terms of the quality of sound. Warm, spacious and natural sound makes the listener concentrate on the music itself, orchestra's play and a perfect

sound of choirs. It is worth highlighting that Brabbins' interest in Havergal Brian's music led to the studio recordings of other works of the composer—for Dutton Epoch label the artist recorded also *Concerto for orchestra* and symphonies Nos. 2, 5, 10, 13, 14, 27 and 30.

Despite these actions, Brain's work remains somehow forgotten. The place of music of this composer in the context of the 20th-century work has not been clearly stated, and a majority of his works remain unknown. However, Havergal Brian did not seem to be worried about it too much. When in 1966, during the interview for BBC, he was asked if the lack of the performers' interest had not discouraged him, the artist answered: "not a bit. The greatest interest I have in my works was to get them written, not to get them performed".[24]

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