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*For the classical music establishment, and emperor's new clothes moment looms*

Last Saturday I had the pleasure of attending a thrilling performance of George Lloyd's Fourth Symphony, by the Ealing Symphony Orchestra. The venue was packed, and the audience gave the work an ecstatic reception. It had been 37 years since the piece was last heard in public; I trust it won't be another 37 years before it is heard again. Yet, once the excitement had faded, one was left with a depressing thought: it remains tiresomely difficult for contemporary British composers to command performances of works with popular appeal. Lloyd, who died in 1998 aged 85, is not the only example. I have been listening recently to music by Ian Venables, 63, who has been composing for decades and has a devoted following. Venables, a miniaturist, writes exquisite chamber music in the English style of Howells or Ireland; he has been acclaimed by independent minded critics as the finest writer of art songs since Gerald Finzi.

His works which have instant charm for intelligent listeners while being intensely musical, are preformed rarely in the great temples of changer music such as the Wigmore Hall or the Purcell Room. Nor are they broadcast frequently on the main classical music stations. He delights audiences in the provinces- there was a recent concert in Luton- while metropolitan taste is deemed different (an interesting contention) and Venables is frozen out.

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The two Venables CDs I have been listening to lately are immensely rewarding. The first, *The Song of Severn* (Signum Classics), includes two song cycles and nine other songs. Britain's greatest living baritone, Roderick Williams, sings them. Venables sets to music verse by often forgotten poets, from John Clare to John Masefield; to hear them is to hear something reflective, brooding, melancholy and unmistakably English. Occasionally he makes me think of Vaughan Williams; they share a knack for presenting a new song that, on first hearing, sounds as though one has known it all one's life.

The second CD (Somm) featuring Venable's Piano Quintet and other chamber works for violin, viola, cello, and piano, is a revelation. Played by the Coull Quartet with the pianist Mark Bebbington, the Quintet was written in 1995 and premiered the following year at the Malvern Festival (Venables, a Liverpudlian by birth, has lived in Worcestershire since the Eighties.) It is an exceptional work with many shifts of tone and varieties of expression, and if Venable's excellence could be symbolised by just one piece, it would be this. Again, it proves that composers can be original without being dissonant or unappealing.

Most recently, Venables has set the verse of five Great War poets in a new song cycle, *Through These Pale Cold Days*. It will have its premiere in Worcester this autumn and be recorded next year; both should be regarded as events of national importance in our musical culture.

Sadly, the people who mostly shape musical opinion these days will afford it no such recognition. They are too deeply embedded in the cult of the composer who, often in receipt of public subsidy, writes music of limited ability and massive self-indulgence, that seeks no audience outside a circle of like-minded introspectives.

George Lloyd had to wait until his 70s to win recognition as a composer because the musical establishment ridiculed and rejected a man whose only crime was to write music in romantic tradition, with he did because he like dit and his public liked it: and in the end public demand forced performances of his work. Lloyd's day will come again- indeed, is coming. So will Venable's. That he remains a minority taste in the musical world is the fault of an establishment that awaits its emperor's new clothes moment. Let us hope that moment comes before its fatuous attitudes destroy classical music's audience once and for all, and while Venables- unlike Lloyd- is still around to enjoy the success his talent merits.

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