

# Reviews

Recordings and books rated by expert critics

## Welcome



Having shared the nominations for the BBC Music Magazine Awards 2023 (see p26), I can't help but wonder what recordings might make next year's list.

I'd be surprised if Ruby Hughes and Huw Watkins weren't somewhere on it; their album *Echo* (see Recording of the Month, right) is a beautifully curated programme which stirs the soul. Then there's the Takács Quartet's sublime set of works by Dutilleux, Ravel and Stephen Hough (see our Chamber Choice).

We've two princes of the piano: Eric Lu offers sumptuous Schubert (this month's Instrumental Choice), while Hannes Minnaar dazzles in Shostakovich. And we've managed to muster up three magnificent violin recordings in Brief Notes, by Mayumi Hirasaki, Anne Battegay and Charlie Lovell-Jones. **Michael Beek** *Reviews editor*

### This month's critics

John Allison, Nicholas Anderson, Michael Beek, Terry Blain, Kate Bolton-Porciatti, Garry Booth, Geoff Brown, Michael Church, Christopher Cook, Martin Cotton, Christopher Dingle, Jessica Duchon, Rebecca Franks, George Hall, Malcolm Hayes, Claire Jackson, Daniel Jaffé, Stephen Johnson, Berta Joncus, Erik Levi, Natasha Loges, Andrew McGregor, David Nice, Roger Nichols, Bayan Northcott, Freya Parr, Ingrid Pearson, Steph Power, Anthony Pryer, Paul Riley, Jan Smaczny, Michael Tanner, Sarah Urwin Jones, Kate Wakeling

#### KEY TO STAR RATINGS

★★★★★ Outstanding  
★★★★★ Excellent  
★★★★ Good  
★★★ Disappointing  
★ Poor

### RECORDING OF THE MONTH

## This *Echo* lingers long after the music fades

*Paul Riley* is enraptured by Ruby Hughes and Huw Watkins's recital which traces the spiritual connections between composers



### Echo

Works by JS Bach, Purcell, Britten, Huw Watkins, Errollyn Wallen, Cheryl Frances-Hoad and Deborah Pritchard

Ruby Hughes (soprano),  
Huw Watkins (piano)  
*BIS BIS-2568 (CD/SACD)*  
63:33 mins

A rich skein of melancholy and introspection is woven throughout soprano Ruby Hughes's latest collaboration with composer-pianist Huw Watkins. And at its heart is his song cycle *Echo*, which receives its premiere recording in an adroit programme pondering love, loss and the passing of time – themes conspicuously to the fore in the cycle which was written for Hughes and premiered by the duo at Carnegie Hall in 2017.

To the left and right of it are Bach and Purcell, plus a trio of Britten folksong arrangements including *Dafydd y Garreg Wen*, one of the eight arrangements for voice and harp Britten made a few months before his death – it's performed here in Colin Matthews's version, replacing the harp with piano. To end, there are three 21st-century works by Deborah Pritchard, Cheryl Frances-Hoad and Errollyn Wallen – Pritchard's *The World*, incidentally, also written for Hughes, and destined to be incorporated into a new cycle.

Echoes abound – literary as well as musical. And three of Britten's affectionate Bach realisations (which he collected into the *Five Spiritual Songs*) are spliced with solo keyboard Bach including Watkins's limpid account of the Sarabande from Partita, BWV 828 which ushers in a compelling Bachian sequence, mediated and unmediated. What intense imploration and contained longing Hughes finds in the arching contours of 'Komm, süßer Tod', the

Exquisite musicianship:  
Ruby Hughes and Huw  
Watkins plumb the  
emotional depths



## Performer's notes Ruby Hughes



### Why did you call this *Echo*?

It's a very beautiful word and it evokes so much, musically, spiritually and in nature. We see echoes of so many things; we hear how composers through the ages have echoed, to a greater or lesser degree, other composers – especially with Britten's love of Bach and Thomas Adès's love of Purcell, and how their music may have informed how they write a melody, or how they feel music should be, spiritually.

### Tell us about the newer programme choices...

I was really keen to record Huw's piece, and it grew from there. Deborah, Cheryl and Errollyn are three composers I adore; I love their soundworld, they're all so individual and have an idiosyncratic approach to harmony and rhythm. Again, they have a sort of relationship with the past and with influences, but also spiritually as well; they're connected to those things and are able to draw on the past and be influenced by it. In Deborah's piece, she is using echo literally in the piano and the sounds reverberating around. With Cheryl and her lament there's the poem by Andrew Motion, which is extremely sad and reflective. There's something really melancholic about it and I feel that she has that ability to tap into grief in a way that Huw does.

### And they work so well with the older works, like the Bach...

I love Bach on the piano. The *French Suites* and the *Partita* seemed to fit in, spiritually; they're not really complex, but there's something about the dance-like feel, the way they move and express harmony that worked really well.



veiled opening of the second stanza particularly affecting – and, scintillatingly played, we're jolted out of its soulful death wish by the two-part frolics of the *Corrente* from the *Partita*, BWV 830. Delivered with a winsome delicacy, the *Sarabande* from the *French Suite* No. 3 counterpoints Hughes's knowing serenity which cloaks 'Gedenke doch, mein Geist, zurücke' with an understatedness that yields to a haunting change of colour on the word 'sterben' (to die).

Embracing an eclectic selection of poems ranging from Christina Rossetti to David Harsent, Watkins's cycle shares Britten's ability to meld text and musical gesture with an acuity seemingly effortless, almost plucked

ready-formed out of the air. The title song is a translucent setting of Rossetti's *Echo*, and above Watkins's deliquescent accompaniment Hughes floats the line with a poise that treads as softly and enrapt as Rossetti's text itself. It's a hallmark of

### Hughes floats above Watkins's piano line with a poise that treads softly and enrapt

her calculatedly restrained artistry throughout. She's an economical singer for whom 'less is more', instinctively husbanding her considerable resources so that emotional climaxes generate maximum impact; and she swaddles herself in the sentiment of

Larkin's 'If grief could burn out' as if mindful of the ultimate sorrow that awaits in the benumbed, desolate landscape of Harsent's 'Baby Blue'.

Thomas Adès's idiomatic realisation of Purcell's 'By beauteous softness' emerges coy and silkily seductive; the folk-song arrangements are artfully caressed – 'The Wren' rapturously innocent yet at the same time worldly-wise – and the mood is compounded by a childlike innocence that pervades Wallen's incantatory Christmas carol-cum carillon, *Peace on Earth*. An exquisite release touched with poignant pleasures and depth-plumbing reflections that echo, re-echo, linger and endure.

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★  
**RECORDING** ★★★★★