

Next on

## Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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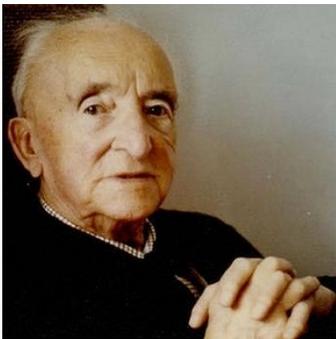
**Saturday, December 1st, 2012, 5:00-6:00 p.m.**

**Havergal Brian** (1876-1972). *Fantastic Variations on an Old Rhyme* (1907). Ukraine National Symphony Orchestra, Andrew Penny. Marco Polo 223731, Tr 1-5. 11:58

**Brian**. *In Memoriam* (1910). Ireland National Symphony Orchestra, Adrian Leaper. Marco Polo 223481, Tr 1-3. 18:48

**Carl Nielsen** (1865-1931). *Helios Overture* (1903). Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Herbert Blomstedt. Angel 81503, Tr 2. 12:01

**Brian**. *Festal Dance* (1908). Ireland National Symphony Orchestra, Adrian Leaper. Marco Polo 223481, Tr 4-5. 6:07



Who does this sound like?

That's the first question we ask when we hear music new to us. It's as true with Havergal Brian's as with anyone else's—probably more true, since his music is so rarely heard, and consequently so often new.

If we know anything about him, it's that his first symphony, the "Gothic," is called the largest ever written, with brass bands, choirs, harps, drums, and organ along with a gargantuan orchestra. Our knowledge of Havergal Brian usually ends there.

But he wrote 31 other symphonies, and much more music besides. On top of that, 27 of his symphonies and four of his five operas were composed in the last 25 years of his life, and he lived to be 96. On top of *that*, for most of his life not one note of his music was performed.

Why not? One reason may be that, while he did have proponents early on—conductors Thomas Beecham and Henry Wood, composer Granville Bantock—he was an uncomfortable "mixer." He was shy, and he was a rarity, an English classical composer from the working class. There may be another reason, though.

A local businessman had faith in his promise, and supported him with an annual stipend so that he could be free to compose. But that putatively holy grail for artists seems for him to have been a curse. It shielded him from the necessity of producing "useful" music (which generates income through performance). It certainly enabled him to spend years of work on the Gothic, which had virtually no chance of being performed.

But Havergal Brian is no hot-house flower. It's a delight to discover pieces that in fact work very well, causing us to applaud the recent upsurge in his recordings. The *Fantastic Variations on an Old Rhyme* and *Festal Dance* are carved out of another proposed first symphony. The "Old Rhyme" is "Three Blind Mice"; the dance was originally the "Dance of the Farmer's Wife," exulting in her victory over those pesky rodents. No one knows for sure who is being memorialized in Brian's work *In Memoriam*. He denied that it was for Edward VII, and other guesses are simply that: guesses. But the work nicely illuminates a noticeable aspect of Brian's output, which is his love for marches. Fast or slow, they're all over his music.

So who *does* he sound like? Different names have been suggested—Strauss, Elgar, Sibelius, others—and all tempt in different ways. The similarity in how Carl Nielsen transforms a theme has been noted, and so a listen to his *Helios Overture* may offer context.

By the end of the program, though, we'll probably agree that he does share one trait with all fine composers: Havergal Brian sounds like himself.

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Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), former Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).