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PRELUDES

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 *Coswold's 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 Torielier. 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 aural 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 Coswolds 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. ◻

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