

## CD Review: Victor Herbert Cello Concertos with Mark Kosower & the Ulster Orchestra

by Timothy Robson



Poor Victor Herbert, the Irish-born, German-trained cellist, conductor, and composer, has gotten the short end of the music history stick. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century he was one of the most acclaimed American musical figures, both as a performer and as a composer of concert works — as well as a successful grand opera (*Natoma*, 1911) which starred soprano Mary Garden and a young Irish tenor making his operatic debut, John McCormick. But these days Herbert is known for a string of still-performed operettas: *Babes in Toyland*, *Eileen*, and

*Naughty Marietta*, among many others, while his concert music has become a vague memory.

Herbert wrote two cello concertos, the second of which has been recorded a number of times, but the first is much less frequently performed. Cleveland Orchestra principal cellist Mark Kosower has recently released a recording on Naxos (8.573517) with the Ulster Orchestra led by JoAnn Falletta. The attractive album contains both of Herbert's cello concertos, plus a rousing performance of the composer's *Irish Rhapsody for Grand Orchestra* (1892).

*Concerto No. 1 in D*, Op. 8, was composed in 1884, and first performed in Stuttgart in 1885 with the composer as the soloist. Melodic, the work hints at the great tunes that would later appear as songs in Herbert's operettas and musical comedies. A much sterner work with comparatively greater technical challenges, *Concerto No. 2 in e*, op. 30 dates from 1894. Both concertos are clearly written by someone with first-hand expertise in the instrument's capabilities.

An elegant player with fine-grained tone, sensitive phrasing, and fluent technique, Mark Kosower is the perfect advocate



for these two concertos. Never aggressive in his playing, his lyrical gifts shine through even in the climaxes. The first concerto's "Andante," an operetta song-without-words, is orchestrated with great delicacy. Kosower dispatches the many scales and leaps of the second concerto's opening and closing movements with ease.

JoAnn Falletta and the Ulster Orchestra are distinguished collaborators, attuned to Kosower's phrasing and never overwhelming his playing. Recorded in Ulster Hall, Belfast, Northern Ireland, the sound of the disc is clean and transparent.

Victor Herbert's *Irish Rhapsody* is an extended medley of Irish songs, most of which are likely unknown to modern listeners, with the possible exception of *Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms* and *Gary Owen*. It's rollicking good fun, and Herbert's contrapuntal expertise in combining multiple tunes is evident at the end of this persuasive and enjoyable album.

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