

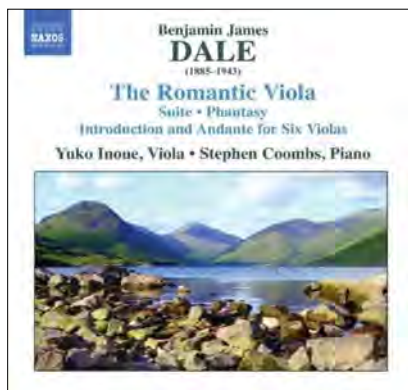
# Classical Music Reviews



**Bloch: *Symphony; Poems of the Sea*.** London Symphony, Atlas. Naxos.

Ernest Bloch's *Symphony in C-Sharp Minor* is as vast as the ocean. Written between 1901 and 1903 when Bloch was in his early twenties, it's massive and of stunning maturity: the emotions are never once tainted by youthful excess. The orchestration is always in service of the music, and though most of the themes aren't quite the kind you leave the house whistling, they are fertile soil for fascinating development. The writing is late-Romantic like Bruckner, Mahler, and Richard Strauss; in fact, the melodies and their presentation in the second movement are very redolent of Mahler. The first movement accounts for 22 of the piece's 55 minutes—it's a canvas painted with the brooding and strength of the human spirit. The third, *Vivace*, is a sober-minded scherzo with rhythmic similarities to Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*; the fourth builds off of that in a final triumph that never disowns tragedy. *Poems of the Sea*, inspired by Walt Whitman's work, is a calmer set, with an American-sounding second movement and a third that integrates Irish jigs quite naturally. Sonics are balanced and let the music bloom fully. SE

**Further Listening:** Hans Rott: *Symphony in E* (BIS)



**Dale: *The Romantic Viola*.** Yuko Inoue, viola; Stephen Coombs, piano; RAM Viola Sextet. Naxos.

Benjamin Dale was born in North London in 1885; he entered the Royal Academy of Music at fifteen and studied composition with Frederick Corder, the teacher of York Bowen and Arnold Bax. Professor Lionel Tertis, the “father of the modern viola,” encouraged his students to write solo music for the viola; Dale responded with his *Suite for Viola and Piano*, a three-movement work more than a half-hour long. The writing is reminiscent of Brahms but tinged with a little Impressionism and an interesting Spanish-sounding section near the very center of the piece. The *Introduction and Andante for six violas* is a ten-minute delight with searching, swelling themes. The *Phantasy for Viola and Piano* also has a slight Spanish feel at the beginning, but filtered through Dale's own personality. The lengthy thematic and temporal relaxation leading into the faster middle section is remarkable; Dale was a man of no mean talent. His harmonic style is quite tonal for the time (1906-11) but nothing sounds anachronistic. It's a joy to discover solid romantic music that's so individual, imaginative, and enjoyable. The playing is good, the sound nothing special but serviceable nonetheless. SE

**Further Listening:** Bax: *Viola Sonata*, etc. (Martin Outram/Naxos)



**Valen: *String Quartets*.** Hansa Quartet. 2L.

Norwegian composer Fartein Valen (1887–1952) was an eccentric autodidact who retains a small but devoted following. His disinterest in appealing to an audience is, well, part of his appeal. His music is dissonant yet flowing, drawing on both Schoenbergian chromaticism and Renaissance polyphony, yet quintessentially Nordic in its reticence, inwardness, and striving for ascetic purity. Imagine, if you can, Bach—or Palestrina—writing 12-tone music. Valen's three string quartets have rarely (if ever) been recorded, but 2L has now (quixotically—this music is never going to be popular) released them in superb performances and you-are-there sonics on a two-disc set, the complete program issued twice, on two formats: hybrid CD/SACD and Blu-ray Disc. The first quartet, from 1909, is an early work in a traditional tonal late-romantic language indebted to Brahms and Dvořák. It's a melodious, well made, pleasing item, and if without much individual profile its seamless flow and restraint adumbrate those qualities in the composer's later music. The two mature quartets are atonal, offering a cool but deeply-felt expressiveness, their very avoidance of tension and the erotic urge for consummation so intrinsic to tonality strangely liberating and consoling to those willing to put aside their preconceptions and just listen. ML

**Further Listening:** Boykan: *String Quartets* (CRI)