

From the MusicWeb International Listening Studio: Another Audio Report
By John Quinn

Discs auditioned

Ravel – *Daphnis et Chloé*. LSO/Monteux. **Decca 425 956-2; Decca The Originals E4757525; Praga Digitals DSD350073**

John McCabe – *Notturmi ed alba*. Gomez/CBSO/Frémaux **Warner Classics 0190295886738** and **EMI CDM 7 63176 2**

Walton – *Crown Imperial*. CBSO/Frémaux – **Warner Classics** (details as above) and **EMI CDM 7 64201 2**

Bizet – Symphony in C. CBSO/Frémaux – **Warner Classics** (details as above)

Rachmaninoff – *All Night Vigil*. Gloria Dei Cantores/Jermihov **GDCD 063**

Adam Schoenberg – *Finding Rothko*. Kansas City Symphony/Michael Stern **Reference Recordings RR-139**

Vaughan Williams – ‘Pastoral’ Symphony. RLPO/Manze ([details here](#))

Elgar – Symphony No 1. BBCSO/Gardner **CHSA 5181**

Verdi – Requiem. Soloists, London Symphony Chorus, LSO/Nosedá ([details here](#))

Verdi – Requiem. Soloists, Chicago Symphony Chorus & Orchestra/Muti ([details here](#))

Mendelssohn - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Incidental Music. LSO/Gardiner ([details here](#))

Towards the end of April David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn convened in the MusicWeb International Listening Studio to put aside all thoughts of the UK General Election campaign and concentrate instead on some fine recordings. On this occasion, unless otherwise stated, all the recordings were played on the Meridian player rather than the Oppo.

We began by doing something we've not previously done in the Studio. On several occasions – and indeed later in today's session – we've compared different recordings of the same piece. This time, however, we started by sampling three different incarnations of one recording. In a recent [review](#) of a new recording of Ravel's complete *Daphnis et Chloé* by Les Siècles and François-Xavier Roth Dan Morgan had waxed lyrical about a Praga Digitals remastering, as an SACD, of the famous Pierre Monteux recording made for Decca in 1959 in London's Kingsway Hall. We were keen to compare this Praga issue with two earlier Decca CD releases of this justly celebrated recording. The obvious extract to select was the *Lever du jour* from Part III of the ballet.

We began with Decca's digital remastering of 1990, with which both JQ and LM have been familiar for many years. This was quite impressive. The washes of woodwind figurations come over well; the violins are bright toned but not edgy and the choir is well recorded. Next we heard the same passage from the 96kHz/24 bit remastering in Decca's 'The Originals' series. This, we believe, was produced in 2006. Here there is a firmer bass and LM thought the sound warmer and "more relaxed". We preferred the sound of the violins while the chorus parts had greater impact and definition. In 2013 Karel Soukeník remastered the recording for Praga Digitals. According to the booklet this most recent incarnation is remastered DSD Bi-channel and is edited from stereo analogue tapes (London US). Though we didn't alter the volume controls it was evident that the Praga version is reproduced at a higher level. Frankly, the results are amazing. The bass is very firm indeed right from the start. We noted more space around not only the orchestra as a whole but also round individual sections. LM appreciated the wider sound stage. The string sound is smoother. JQ noted that the choir's first entry, which is fairly quiet, was especially well defined in this transfer. Of all three incarnations we heard this one has the greatest presence and impact; it is quite remarkable to think that the sessions took place in 1959.

As Praga has issued this as an SACD we also listened to the passage in that format, using the Oppo player. We felt that this enhances the sound still further. The original recording was produced by John Culshaw with engineering by Alan Reeve and this Praga release reveals the quality of their work as never before in our experience. Monteux's superb performance has long been a benchmark

against which more modern versions are judged interpretatively; now it competes with the modern releases on an equal sonic footing too.

We moved on to the work of another French conductor, the late Louis Frémaux. By a poignant coincidence Warner Classics has just issued, a matter of weeks after his death at the age of 95, a 12-CD box of his complete EMI recordings with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. For this compendium the recordings have been remastered from the original tapes in 24 bit/96kHz sound. This gave us the chance to compare a couple of the recordings against their earlier CD incarnations. First we sampled a section of **John McCabe's *Notturmi ed alba*** with soprano soloist, Jill Gomez. We selected the fourth of the five sections, *Somnia*. The recording was made in the Great Hall of Birmingham University in September 1972. Listening first to the 1987 digital remastering of the analogue recording (CDM 7 63176 2) we were astonished at the vivid sound. In particular, the contributions of the large percussion section are thrillingly reported. But, then, the entire orchestra is very successfully captured by the EMI team (producer Bill Newman and engineer Stuart Eltham). Jill Gomez's voice comes across really well. Above all we liked the sense of the acoustic of the hall around the performers; the hall's resonance has been expertly judged. The recording is 44 years old but wears its years with impressive lightness. DD commented on the "superb sound" and the sense of "so much space". The remastering would have to be good to improve on this outstanding sound. When we listened to the disc from the box set we felt that Warner's reissue adds a bit more presence to the singer's voice. JQ noted not just the impact of the orchestra in loud passages but also that in an episode around 2:40 where the strings play very quietly their sound is better defined in the remastered recording. LM had the sense of listening in the hall itself and that in the remastered presentation the performers were set slightly further away, which was beneficial.

A recording of Walton's great coronation march ***Crown Imperial*** was, in DD's words, "a bit of a let-down" after the McCabe. This was made in Birmingham Town Hall in 1976; we suspect the venue was chosen because an organ was required but we couldn't help but wonder how much better the results might have been in the spacious University acoustic. We had the impression that the listener is placed much closer to the orchestra – the recording was described as "more overbearing" by LM. We first heard the 1987 digital remastering (CDM 7 64201 2) and then the new remastering from the boxed set. In both incarnations we missed the space round the orchestra that was evident in the previous recording sampled. DD felt the sound was "perfectly acceptable" and we all agreed we might have reached a different verdict had we listened to the Walton before the McCabe. We believe that Warner's latest remastering has improved the sound and we identified a bit more space around the orchestra – LM felt the percussion was better separated. Finally, at LM's request and just for the sheer pleasure of it, we listened to the first movement of **Bizet's *Symphony in C***. This recording found Frémaux and the CBSO back in the Great Hall of Birmingham University, this time in June 1974. This is a spirited performance and we liked the sound and the sense of space round the orchestra, though on this occasion JQ wondered if there was perhaps just a bit too much surrounding resonance. All sections of the orchestra come through very clearly. Why don't we hear this bubbly, effervescent music more often? JQ will be doing a detailed review of this box set in the near future.

A new SACD of **Rachmaninoff's *All Night Vigil*** has just arrived from the American choir, Gloria Dei Cantores conducted by Peter Jermihov. This was recorded in the Church of the Transfiguration, Orleans, MA and the sound is the work of engineer Keith O Johnson. We listened to the first three movements. We liked the sound very much: it's very natural and the acoustics of the church contribute very well. The sound is atmospheric and the singers are slightly distanced but the choir doesn't sound at all indistinct. LM's verdict was that we were listening to "velvet sound" which was just right for the music. DD's ear was caught in particular by the sound of the bass section which he described as "like a rock"

We've come across the work of Keith O Johnson before, usually in orchestral recordings for the Reference Recordings label, and by sheer chance one such disc was next for consideration. This is a disc of music by the young American composer, **Adam Schoenberg**. JQ has been listening to this for a

forthcoming review; he suggested that both the recording and the music were worthy of our attention. The performances are by the Kansas City Symphony under Michael Stern. We listened to the four-movement work for chamber orchestra, *Finding Rothko* (2006). Each of the movements is inspired by a different picture by the celebrated American painter. As we listened we noted excellent left-to-right and front-to-back perspectives in the recording, which was made in the orchestra's home, the Helzberg Hall, Kansas City. In the first movement, *Orange*, JQ commented that the sound appeared well balanced and nicely defined and when the music becomes louder in the second movement, *Yellow*, the sound is warm. LM and DD were less convinced: both had the view that the treble end appears somewhat subdued and LM felt the sound overall is a little opaque. However, they agreed this apparent lack of treble could be due in part to the scoring for chamber orchestra. We all agreed that the percussion was vividly reported in the third movement, *Red*. Despite some reservations over the sound LM liked the music which he described as "very approachable."

We moved on to more familiar territory with Andrew Manze's recent recording of the '**Pastoral Symphony by Vaughan Williams**'. This is from the second volume of Manze's projected VW symphony cycle and we played the symphony's finale. JQ was familiar with the recording, which he has recently [reviewed](#), but it was new to LM and DD. Though both of them are VW aficionados they were taken by surprise to hear a tenor voice at the start of the movement. The composer specified either a soprano or tenor but, so far as we know, this is the first recording to use a male voice. The recording has been produced by Andrew Keener and engineered by Phil Rowlands. The tenor's voice comes over in a wonderfully atmospheric way and the soft drum roll as he sings is judged to perfection. As the movement unfolded we admired the sound which is very natural and expertly balanced; the woodwind come across in an especially pleasing way. The climaxes open up very well. We liked both the performance and the recording though LM and DD felt they would need time to adjust to the sound of a tenor when they are so accustomed to the more ethereal tones of a soprano.

More English music followed in the shape of the first movement of **Elgar's First Symphony**. This is from a new Chandos recording by Edward Gardner and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The venue was Watford Colosseum and the engineering was in the hands of Ralph Couzens. At the start the motto theme is rich and full when restated by the full orchestra. During the movement we noted a well-defined bass and that the horns are splendid throughout. The recording offers a first class dynamic range and expertly managed detail. The performance itself is no less impressive. The urgency of Gardner's way with the fast music is enhanced by the vivid quality of the recording. By turns the music sounds opulent or delicate, according to the demands of the score. At the end LM's verdict on the performance was that it is "absolutely tremendous"; it has the feel of being a single, sweeping take. JQ, who has been listening to the disc for a forthcoming review, assured him that the remainder is just as impressive.

Next we sampled a new LSO Live release. This is a recording of the **Verdi Requiem** taken from performances given in London's Barbican in September 2016. The conductor is Gianandrea Noseda. We auditioned the opening 'Requiem aeternam' and also the 'Dies irae' and 'Tuba mirum'. The definition of the choral sound in the quiet opening is good and later at 'Te decet hymnus' the choir is firm and clearly heard. The 'Dies irae' struck us being too hectic. The 'Tuba mirum' blazes but JQ was bothered by Noseda's decision to speed up this passage once the full brass choir starts to play. LM thought the recording good, with a wide dynamic range, but was less impressed by some of the fast speeds which seemed, at a first hearing to compromise clarity. For a comparison we turned to Riccardo Muti's Chicago recording, also live, made in Orchestra Hall in 2009, listening to the same passages. This recording is at a higher level – we had to reduce the volume setting – but after this adjustment had been made we thought Muti's chorus was better defined and we also preferred his pacing. In particular Muti maintains a steady speed in the 'Tuba mirum' and as a result the music sounds more dramatic and imposing than with Noseda. The CSO Resound recording has more heft to it than what we heard from LSO Live and on the evidence of the extracts we preferred the Muti

sound. JQ will be reviewing the LSO Live release in full shortly and since our Studio session Dan Morgan's [review](#) of the recording as a download has been published.

We went back to LSO Live for something very different: Sir John Eliot Gardiner's recording of **Mendelssohn's Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*** which JQ has been enjoying for a forthcoming review. At his suggestion we listened to the Finale because this brings together all the forces: the three actors, the singers and, of course, the orchestra. Using the Oppo machine we listened to the Blu-ray audio disc in the 2.0 LPCM stereo option. JQ liked the presence of the actors' voices and felt that the orchestra and singers were very clear. LM commented that the sound was "very precise". Oberon's final speech is magical – and expertly enunciated by Frankie Wakefield - while Puck's closing speech, delivered against Mendelssohn's exquisite music, seems the perfect *envoi*. However, when we compared notes afterwards both LM and DD said that they had found it difficult to distinguish the actors' words against the music – both were of the opinion that this was not the fault of the performers but rather an issue with the engineering. JQ had not experienced this difficulty but, of course, has had the advantage of greater familiarity with the recording.

The Blu-ray disc also includes a film of the concert as an HD video. JQ proposed that as an experiment we should watch the same segment to discover if *seeing* the actors deliver their lines made a difference. This time round both LM and DD found it much easier to discern the words and LM said this was the case even when he experimented further by closing his eyes. We noted that we had played the video at a lower volume setting – 64db compared with 77.3db for the BD-A disc. It's the same performance but LM suspects that the sound has been rebalanced for the video. Despite the issue over the clarity of the words we agreed that artistically this is a most successful issue and it's an attractive package too, offering BD-A, SACD and HD video options.

Puck's farewell seemed an appropriate cue to end our listening session and we steeled ourselves for a return to everyday routine and the ups and downs of the General Election campaign. The winner of our poll today was the Chandos disc of the Elgar First Symphony – and that's not Fake News!

[John Quinn](#)

Equipment used

- Meridian 808 Series 5 CD player with integral digital pre-amplifier.
- Jeff Rowland Continuum S2 integrated amplifier. (Power output: 400 watts/channel into 8 ohms)
- B&W Nautilus 802 Diamond loudspeakers
- Blu-Ray player: Oppo BDP-105D

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