

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

Discs auditioned

R Strauss – *Salome*. Nilsson/VPO/Solti. **Decca CD 414-414-2. Decca CD & BD-A 483 1498**

R Strauss – *Elektra*. Nilsson/VPO/Solti. **Decca BD-A 483 494**

Shostakovich - Symphony No 5. Pittsburgh SO/Honeck ([details here](#))

Shostakovich – Symphony No 12. Netherlands Radio PO/Wigglesworth ([details here](#))

Mahler – Symphony No 5. Minnesota Orchestra/Vänskä ([details here](#))

Schoenberg – *Gurrelieder*. SWR Sinfonieorchester/Gielen. **Hänssler Classic CD 93.198**

Rautavaara - *Rubáiyát* - song-cycle for baritone and orchestra. Finley/ Helsinki Philharmonic/Storgårds. ([details here](#))

Detlev Glanert - *Requiem for Hieronymus Bosch*. Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra/Stenz ([details here](#))

Puccini – *La Fanciulla del West*. Soloists/Royal Opera Orchestra/Mehta. **DG 419 640-2 & Pentatone PTC 5186 243**

Bach – *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Bach Collegium Japan/Suzuki ([details here](#))

It's been rather a long time – too long, in fact – since the last session in the Listening Studio, back in April so David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn had some catching up to do. For this session, all Blu-rays were played through the Oppo machine as were SACDs, unless otherwise stated. The Meridian player was used for all CDs.

Decca have reissued a number of leading analogue recordings from their catalogue in packages which include not just CDs but also a Blu-ray audio disc. Previous releases in this dual format have included Lorin Maazel's Sibelius cycle ([review](#)), the Dvořák recordings by István Kertész ([review](#)) and Britten's *War Requiem*, which is a stunning experience in BD-A ([review](#)). Now another batch of notable recordings has arrived, taken from the Decca vaults and spruced up as remastered CDs together with BD-A. We auditioned two Richard Strauss opera recordings, regarded as spectacular when first issued and both featuring Birgit Nilsson in the respective title roles.

First up was *Salome*. This was recorded by producer John Culshaw and engineer Gordon Parry in Vienna's Sofiensaal in October 1961. The recording was one of Decca's Sonicstage issues and the original LP cover, complete with a rather lurid picture of Nilsson as Salome, has been reproduced for this issue. The sound has been newly remastered in 96kHz 24-bit sound. Decca's package offers the opera on two CDs and a single BD-A disc. We listened to the same extract, Salome's Scene 4 solo, 'Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund...' First, we listened to the music on the original CD pressings, which LM has owned for many years. Frankly, we found the sound aggressive. The treble registers, including Nilsson's high notes, had a tendency to shrillness and both LM and DD felt the orchestra sounded confusing and congested. We soon switched to the remastered CDs from the new package and noticed an immediate improvement in the same passage. The treble has been tamed and the orchestra comes across much more satisfactorily – the VPO horns sounds splendid. However, the BD-A was a revelation. Here the passage sounded even more vivid and detailed. The orchestral sound is superb and as for Nilsson, one is simply gripped by her singing. LM commented that hers is a voice that can sometimes sound strident but there's no question of that here. DD felt that the recording now reveals properly the many subtleties in her singing. It's remarkable to think that this famous recording is now more than 55 years old: it has never sounded better. JQ will be reviewing this set in detail in the near future.

We turned to the Nilsson/ Solti recording of *Elektra*. This was made in the same venue and by the same Decca team (with the addition of James Bowen on the engineering side.) This recording was set down in March and June 1966. This time we auditioned only the BD-A and we listened to Elektra's first solo 'Allein! Weh, ganz allein'. Here was another example of gripping characterisation by Birgit Nilsson. We admired the great amplitude and weight of the VPO's lower brass; indeed, the entire orchestra is

recorded with great presence and the engineers achieved a fine sense of space round the players. Nilsson is well balanced against the orchestra and her marvellous enunciation of the text can be heard very clearly. Solti's conducting is gripping. DD, who has listened to the whole opera in this new incarnation, once again drew attention to the many subtleties of Nilsson's performance, even in such a full-on role. We all agreed that the BD-A results are hugely impressive. As with *Salome*, the recording is presented in newly remastered sound and the package includes a pair of CDs and a BD-A disc. The release will receive a detailed review shortly.

Next, at DD's suggestion, we sampled a recent SACD recording of the **Shostakovich Fifth Symphony**. This is a live recording, made in 2013, by the Pittsburgh Symphony and Manfred Honeck. Opinions were divided about both performance and recording. DD, who has listened to the complete performance, likes it. He feels that Honeck has looked with fresh eyes at everything in the score and brings it all out in performance. His view is that the conductor has "deeply scrutinised" the work. JQ was less impressed. The opening of the symphony should grab the listener's attention and that didn't happen here, he felt. The performance, though well played, doesn't seem to dig deep and the long, deeply felt violin melody (from 4:36) doesn't really move the listener. We sampled also the start of the second movement where more weight and heft was noted. JQ's verdict was that had he attended one of the live performances he would have been satisfied but, based on what he'd heard, this performance offers nothing particularly special in a hotly-contested field. LM agreed. He also felt that the recording, one of Reference Recording's 'Fresh' issues, was not arresting: "a concert hall acoustic that obscures the sound". He also felt that the performance wasn't one that leads the listener on.

We sampled another **Shostakovich** recording next. Mark Wigglesworth's recording of the **12th Symphony** was made for BIS as long ago as 2005. JQ admits that he has had a blind spot regarding this symphony, thinking it one of the composer's lesser works. However, he'd listened to the work again in preparation for attending a live performance at this year's Three Choirs Festival. The listening he'd done and the quality of the live performance ([review](#)) had made him re-evaluate the work. Dan Morgan had lent him the Wigglesworth recording. We listened to the last two movements. We were seriously impressed both by the quality of the performance and by the terrific BIS sound. The dynamic range is very wide and the BIS engineers have conveyed the sound of the orchestra superbly. The percussion is reported with stunning realism, as we noted in the closing minutes of the 'Aurora' movement – and elsewhere. LM remarked that the sound of the percussion towards the end of 'Aurora' was "the aural equivalent of fireworks". He also felt that this recording presented "a much more open orchestral sound" compared to the Honeck recording. The sound that BIS have given this Wigglesworth performance has superb presence and definition and the engineers have achieved great internal clarity, even in the loudest passages. JQ felt that this exciting, truthful recording offers sound of demonstration quality. Between us we have heard most if not all of the recordings in Wigglesworth's Shostakovich cycle. Though the recordings were made over quite a number of years the performances are consistently very good and the sound quality is uniformly excellent. We hope that BIS might consider issuing the cycle as a boxed set: it would be a most attractive proposition.

We stayed with BIS for a new recording of **Mahler's Fifth**. This comes from Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra and it's billed as the first release in a projected Mahler symphony cycle from this team. The recording was made in the orchestra's home, Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis. JQ had heard part of this broadcast on BBC Radio 3 not long ago so he was keen to hear the recording on our Studio equipment. The SACD sounded impressive in the first movement. The recording has presence and though we thought the recording of the Shostakovich 12th packed an even greater punch the difference is almost certainly down to the different acoustic properties of the respective venues. We have found that BIS recordings rarely disappoint and this new Mahler recording is up to their usual standards.

We then turned to a rather earlier recording, again drawn to our attention by Dan Morgan. This is the recording of **Schoenberg's Gurrelieder** made for Hänssler Classic by Michael Gielen back in 2006. Though this recording has been around for some years we've not reviewed it on MusicWeb International. JQ, who has listened to the complete performance, suggested that Gielen's soloists are

all good if not, perhaps, the best on disc in their respective roles. What stands out, though, is Gielen's conducting of the score, the excellent playing of the SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg and the terrific recording. We listened to Waldemar's solo 'Du wunderliche Tove!' and the following orchestral interlude from Part One. Tenor Robert Dean Smith, who sings well, is nicely balanced while the sound of the orchestra is full, rich and detailed. Gielen's conducting is impressive: he's clear-eyed in his approach, not only picking up the nuances and points of detail in the score but also conveying its sweep. The SACD sound is superb and the engineers have succeeded in letting all the contrapuntal details in Schoenberg's teeming score come through without any sense of artificial highlighting. The dynamic range is wide, as it needs to be in this score. We were all very impressed both by the quality of the performance and the splendid sound.

Next, we heard the Ondine recording of **Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Rubáiyát***, a song-cycle for baritone and orchestra. JQ, who has recently [reviewed](#) the disc, was keen for LM and DD to hear it. Though both of them have heard quite a number of this composer's works this particular one was new to them both. It made a strong impression, partly through the excellence of the performance – in which Gerald Finley is outstanding – and partly through the fine quality of the Ondine recording. We felt that the sound is beautifully balanced and integrated. Rautavaara's orchestration is full of interest and the engineers see to it that the listener can enjoy the scoring to the full. Finley is expertly balanced within the recording and the words he is singing come through with exceptional clarity – a tribute, of course, to his diction. LM commented that the vocal line is so written that the music follows the natural speech rhythms of the text. He felt that the vocal writing bears a resemblance to the way in which Delius wrote for the voice. DD said that he wouldn't have immediately recognised this as a piece by Rautavaara, based on his previous experience of this composer. However, he too liked the music very much, relishing its sensuousness. We regarded the music, performance and recording as conspicuously successful.

Next, we sampled another very recent work, **Detlev Glanert's *Requiem for Hieronymus Bosch*** which dates from 2016. JQ has been listening to this recently in connection with a forthcoming review. We listened to the first two sections of the work: 'De Demonibus' and 'Requiem Æternam'. The piece was completely new to both LM and DD and though they were reluctant to reach a verdict based on hearing just a small portion of a large-scale work both of them felt that the hyper-active music of 'De Demonibus' seemed rather congested: LM much preferred the quieter second section. JQ admired the recording itself which gives a very good sense of the hall besides conveying the performance itself very well. He noted that by comparison with listening on his own equipment, the soloists' lines were more clearly heard in 'De Demonibus'. In the hushed 'Requiem Æternam' the soft organ pedal notes have been very well caught in the recording. This SACD is one of the best recordings we have heard from the RCO Live label.

We moved from Glanert's unusual work to the more familiar strains of grand opera and **Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West***. Our spur for listening to this is that Pentatone has recently licenced and remastered the 1977 DG recording in which Zubin Mehta conducted a cast led by Carol Neblett as Minnie and Plácido Domingo as Dick Johnson. The venue was Watford Town Hall. For comparison, we had the original CD set which DD has owned for many years. In making our comparisons we were a trifle wary of playing the original CDs on the Meridian player and then experiencing the Pentatone SACDs via the Oppo player as we wouldn't be comparing apples and apples. We decided, therefore, to play both discs on the Meridian. We selected the passage near the end of Act One beginning with Minnie's 'Io non son che una povera fanciulla' followed by Johnson's 'Quella che tacete'. We all felt that the DG CD gave very good reproduction: both the orchestra and the singers were well conveyed. When we listened to the Pentatone remastering as a CD we were a bit disappointed with the results. We had to boost the volume (from 67 db to 71 db) and then we noted that the sound had a bit more warmth but some of the brightness of the original disc had been lost and there was less life in the sound. We then played the Pentatone disc as an SACD through the Oppo machine and this time we noted a marked improvement. SACD sound invests the singers' voices with more presence and the orchestra has more warmth than on the DG discs. If you can only play CDs then the DG version (which we believe is still

available in The Originals series) is the best bet. However, if you have an SACD player then Pentatone offer an enhanced experience.

Finally, we forsook the Wild West and moved to Lutheran Germany to hear choral music by Bach. Our interest in this particular recording lies in the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first Blu-ray release on the BIS label, celebrating the conclusion of Masaaki Suzuki's distinguished cycle of the Bach sacred cantatas. We watched and listened to Suzuki and his Bach Collegium Japan in the opening chorus of the cantata *Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele*, BWV69. This opens the programme on a release entitled ***Gloria in excelsis Deo***. The performance is presented in good, clear pictures and sound. It's good to be able to *see* as well as hear this fine ensemble. The playing and singing is crisp and lively.

With Bach's joyful music echoing in our ears we concluded our latest listening session having once again experienced a varied selection of music in excellent modern sound.

[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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