

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

Discs auditioned

Holst – *The Planets*. Boston Symphony Orchestra/William Steinberg. **DG 479 8669**

Shostakovich – Symphony No 10. Prague Symphony Orchestra/Václav Smetáček ([details here](#))

Suk – *Asrael* Symphony. Südwestfunk-Orchester Baden-Baden/Karel Ančerl **SWR Classic SWR19055CD**

Bernstein – *Candide* Overture. Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra /Christian Lindberg ([details here](#))

Schumann – Symphony No 3. San Francisco Symphony/Michael Tilson Thomas **SFS Media 821936-0071-2**

Brahms – Symphony No 2. Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Robin Ticciati **Linn CKD 601**

Wagner – *Lohengrin* Prelude. **Bruckner** – Symphony No 4. Gewandhausorchester Leipzig/Andris Nelsons. **DG479 7577**

Rachmaninov – Symphonic Dances. Bavarian RSO/Mariss Jansons ([details here](#))

Shostakovich – Symphony No 6. Estonian Festival Orchestra/Paavo Järvi ([details here](#))

Vaughan Williams – Symphony No 5. RLPO/Andrew Manze **Onyx 4184**

There were welcome signs that what has been a long, dreary British winter might at last be yielding to Spring when David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn gathered in the MusicWeb International Listening Studio at the end of Easter week.

Most of the releases that we audition in the Studio tend to be modern digital recordings but we began this session with a clutch of recordings that were made in the period 1968-1970. We began with a disc that pairs two of the handful of recordings that William Steinberg made during his fairly brief tenure as Music Director of the Boston Symphony (1969-72). DG made three LPs with Steinberg and the BSO and two of them - Holst's *The Planets* and Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* have just been reissued by DG in a package that includes a CD and a BD-A disc. Our attention had been drawn to this coupling not long ago when Dan Morgan praised it lavishly when using it as the comparator for a new digital release of the same two works on another label. And he had previously praised the coupling as a download ([review](#)). We sampled the Holst recording and selected 'Mars, the Bringer of War', listening to it first in CD format. Steinberg's performance is taut and urgent and there's really no let up. The orchestral sound had plenty of punch and JQ noted a good sense of the hall's acoustic was conveyed. However, for LM that aspect was overdone: he found the reverberation was excessive and the sound of the orchestra itself was somewhat muddled as a result. The trumpets seemed over-prominent to DD and both he and LM found it difficult to "place" all the sections of the orchestra accurately within the sound picture. We then switched to the BD-A disc, using the 2.0 PCM Stereo option. The difference was immediately apparent to all of us. As JQ put it, the sound was tightened up, and we felt that the sound of the orchestra was much better defined. We also listened – in BD-A only – to 'Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age'. Here, the dynamic range of the recording really comes into its own and the steady build-up of orchestral sound as the piece progresses is most impressive. We noted a genuine presence to the recorded sound and the towering climaxes are powerfully conveyed. JQ felt that as the music wound down to its tranquil conclusion the harps were a bit too prominent but, overall, we thought this BD-A reincarnation is a significant success. The recording was made in Boston's Symphony Hall in 1970 and, as LM observed, the sound really belies its age on BD-A. JQ will be doing a full review of the release shortly.

We then listened to the first movement of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony in a live recording made in London's Royal Festival Hall in March 1968 by the Prague Symphony Orchestra under Václav Smetáček. DD and LM had recently listened to this disc. JQ [reviewed](#) it some years ago but could not remember

the performance so was, in effect, coming to it fresh. The acoustic of the RFH is drier than that of Symphony Hall, Boston and the sound of the orchestra comes across truthfully on the Virtual Concert Hall CD. To JQ the sound of the strings seemed somewhat grainy though LM didn't register the same effect. DD remarked – in a complimentary way – that the sound made by the orchestra seemed somewhat old-fashioned and JQ appreciated the woody sound made by the first clarinet. The sound is somewhat unvarnished and LM felt it was more natural than DG's recording of the Boston Symphony. Unfortunately, the accuracy of the Virtual Concert Hall recording extended to the bronchial audience. JQ was rather underwhelmed by the performance itself, feeling that Smetáček simply didn't invest the music with sufficient breadth. LM and DD enjoyed the performance rather more – DD described it as “very respectable – and it has also been praised previously on MusicWeb International by [Jonathan Woolf](#).”

Next, we turned to another recording of the same vintage. In May 1967 the great Czech conductor, Karel Ančerl appeared as a guest conductor with the Südwestfunk-Orchester Baden-Baden and he led them in a performance of Josef Suk's *Asrael* Symphony. The recording was set down in the Hans-Rosbaud-Studio in Baden-Baden and has just been issued by SWR Classic. This is an important release since Ančerl made no commercial recording of the symphony. We listened to the substantial first movement. Right from the start we were impressed by the warmth and fullness of the sound. All departments of the orchestra are well defined and also the engineers have secured an excellent internal balance. Sonically, this was in a different league to the Smetáček recording – DD remarked on the width and space of the Ančerl recording. As if this were not enough, the performance itself is ardent; LM found it “really involving”. As the movement unfolded, JQ commented that the playing was really edge-of-the-seat stuff; one wonders how well, if at all, the players had known the music previously but they project it with huge conviction. The climaxes are potent, a point reinforced by the excellent dynamic range of the recording. JQ was mildly disappointed that at the massive last climax the pounding drum triplets are rather tamely reproduced but this is a minor cavil. It's a terrific performance – DD used the word “knockout” – and the sound belies its 50-year age. JQ will be reviewing the disc shortly and if the rest of the performance lives up to this standard then this will be a major addition to the Ančerl discography.

Feeling that it was time for us to move from historic recordings, we came right up to date with a release timed to celebrate the Leonard Bernstein centenary. For BIS, Christian Lindberg has set down an album of some of Lennie's best-known orchestral works with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. We suspect this may be the first time the RLPO has recorded for the label; the venue was Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool. We listened to the fizzing *Candide* Overture. Bernstein's bright, at times deliberately brash, scoring presented quite a contrast to Suk's orchestral sound world. The performance is full of vitality though LM wondered if the pace was just a little too fast. (JQ commented that the first time he'd listened to the disc he'd had the same thought.) There's lots of clarity in the sound but overall, we just a little bit disappointed. The recording seemed a bit too clinical – though there were benefits to this, too, such as pin-point placing of the woodwind. DD liked the spatial sense of the recording but felt that the strings seemed slightly underpowered – though this may simply be a function of the scoring. We've praised BIS recordings on many occasions in the past but this time LM felt somewhat underwhelmed. We didn't have time to sample any more of the album; it may be that other items on the SACD will impress more, as they impressed Dan Morgan when he [reviewed](#) the album as a download.

There was even more of an American connection to our next selection. Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony have just released a set of the four Schumann symphonies on the orchestra's own label. These are live performances, given in Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco. JQ has just completed a review of the set, which will be published soon, and he was keen to hear his colleagues' reaction to the first movement of the 'Rhenish' symphony. He was careful not to divulge his views until after DD and LM had delivered their verdict. After a few minutes LM commented that what he was hearing was “rather bottom heavy with the brass somewhat subdued”. DD felt the sound was good

but there was something missing that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It was time for JQ to reveal that the verdict in his review was that the sound is somewhat oppressive and "in your face", though he felt the recording reproduced better on the Studio equipment than had been the case on his own system. LM in particular, felt that "oppressive" was a good word. He also felt there was insufficient life in the performance, a point which JQ has made in his review. We sampled also the first few minutes of the Fourth symphony LM found that the performance didn't really engage his interest; it fails to sparkle. DD observed that the orchestral sound is far too homogenised – the orchestra's sound has been polished up too much – and this may account, in part at least, for the rather disappointing impression of the recordings themselves.

It's a short and logical step from Schumann to Brahms and this gave us the perfect segue into a new cycle of the Brahms symphonies made for Linn by Robin Ticciati and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. We listened to the first movement of the Second symphony. This, of course, is a very different conception to the full San Francisco Symphony in Schumann because the SCO is a smaller band – we are unsure of the precise forces involved. The SCO strings seem to use vibrato more sparingly than their American colleagues and because the string section is relatively small Brahms' woodwind writing comes through with great clarity. Indeed, clarity is a cardinal virtue of this performance: there's no suggestion at all of unwanted thickness in the orchestral textures. But as we listened it soon became clear that the performance – and its success – is about much more than clarity. Ticciati leads a lean, animated performance but he achieves this while at the same time allowing the music the necessary amount of space. LM felt that the conductor was moulding the performance and adding interest in a way that had not been apparent in the Tilson Thomas Schumann performances. We liked this performance very much; it's one of those that makes you listen to every bar. As for the recording, we found it very realistic. The bass is just right: positive but not too heavy. LM was being entirely complimentary when he said, towards the end, that he'd "stopped listening to the recording" itself, so pleasing is the sound and so full of interest the performance. We hope that the rest of the set will live up to this promise.

We stayed with the Austro-German repertoire to audition the second instalment of the Bruckner cycle that Andris Nelsons is making for DG with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig. These are live performances. Nelsons has now reached the Fourth symphony. Conscious of the clock, we decided against just dipping into one of Bruckner's substantial movements and instead we opted for the whole of Wagner's *Lohengrin* Prelude, which precedes the symphony on the CD. JQ felt that the shimmering opening seemed not quite as timeless as some performances he has heard and it didn't help that on at least one occasion you can hear an extraneous noise. However, as the music unfolded the sonority of the orchestra's lower strings and brass is very impressive and the piece's majestic climax is excellently reported in the recording. Overall, we feel that the DG engineers have achieved a good, well blended sound.

From Leipzig we moved to Munich to sample a Rachmaninov disc recently issued by the BR Klassik label. Mariss Jansons conducts the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in live performances given in the Herkulesaal. We chose the *Symphonic Dances*, as performed in January 2017, and auditioned the first of the three dances. At the start the bass line is very punchy indeed and JQ wondered if the bass was not a bit too heavy but LM disagreed, liking the solid foundation to the orchestra's sound. As the movement ran its course we all appreciated the firmness of the BRSO's sound and the way that the engineers have conveyed this. In the central, nostalgic episode, LM and JQ remarked how perceptive it was of Rachmaninov to unveil his yearning melody on the saxophone. Towards the end of the movement LM and JQ both felt that the sound of the piano was a little too prominent, though this didn't trouble DD. In any case, if the instrument is indeed over-prominent at this point it's likely to be due to the microphones rather than the pianist. Our overall verdict was that this was a good performance well recorded.

More Russian music followed: the Sixth symphony of Shostakovich, which appears on the debut disc by the Estonian Festival Orchestra under Paavo Järvi. All of us had heard this already but we were keen to hear it again under Studio conditions and we were unanimous in wanting to hear the substantial first movement. Our unanimity didn't end there: we were as one in admiring both the marvellous playing of the EFO and the excellence of the recording itself. This Alpha CD offers very open, spacious sound which conveys a very natural impression of the orchestra. The climaxes register powerfully but what we especially admired were the long stretches of icy music. Järvi and his players sustain the tension superbly in these passages and, as LM observed, time seems to stand still. Throughout the movement the EFO's playing is distinguished: the musicians demonstrate genuine feeling for the music as well as technical accomplishment. It's a very concentrated reading and the excellence of the recorded sound plays a full part in the listener's experience. We noted lots of details that register with just the right degree of impact, such as harp and timpani playing together at one point or the moment when deep piano notes reinforce a soft gong stroke to telling effect. This is a super performance during which, as DD put it, there are moments when the listener hardly dares breathe.

For our final selection we returned to Liverpool and another recent recording by that city's orchestra. The music in question couldn't be more different to the Bernstein we'd heard earlier. This time we were listening to the latest instalment of Andrew Manze's Vaughan Williams symphony cycle for Onyx. This instalment couples the Fifth and Sixth symphonies. JQ has been listening to this disc for a [review](#); impressed, he was keen for LM and DD to hear it and, in particular, the *Romanza* from the Fifth. We admired the lovely sound and the beautiful, sensitive playing of the RLPO. The Onyx engineers have achieved a very natural sound and the recording has an excellent dynamic range, qualities that are essential in this music.

The serenity of VW's music made the ideal, tranquil conclusion to our session. Once again, we hadn't managed to audition all the discs we had on our agenda. We'll hope to catch up with those releases when we reconvene in the Studio. The only "snag" being that by then the record labels will no doubt have issued yet more outstanding releases which claim our attention. It's a nice problem to have.

[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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