

From the MusicWeb International Listening Studio: Another Audio Report

by John Quinn

Discs auditioned

Berlioz – *Grande Messe des Morts*. Bergen Philharmonic/Gardner ([details here](#))

Berlioz – *Grande Messe des Morts*. LSO/Sir Colin Davis ([details here](#))

Musgrave - *Phoenix Rising*. BBC National Orchestra of Wales/Boughton ([details here](#))

Wordsworth – Symphonies 4 & 8. Liepāja SO/Gibbons **Toccata Classics TOCC 0480**

Stenhammar – *Sången*. Gothenburg Symphony/Neeme Järvi ([details here](#))

Langaard – Symphonies 2 & 6. Wiener Philharmoniker/Oramo ([details here](#))

Stravinsky – *Petrushka*. Mariinsky Orchestra/Gergiev ([details here](#))

Rachmaninov – Piano Concerto No 4. Trifonov/Philadelphia O/Nézet-Séguin ([details here](#))

Korngold – Violin Concerto. Baiba Skride/Gothenburg SO/Rouvali ([details here](#))

Samuel Jones Symphony No 3. London Symphony Orchestra/Friedel ([details here](#))

Bernstein - *Wonderful Town*. Soloists/LSO/Rattle ([details here](#))

Bernstein – Symphony No 2 – ‘The Age of Anxiety’. Zimmerman/Berliner Philharmoniker/Rattle ([details here](#))

Messiaen – ‘Dieu parmi nous’ (*La Nativité du Seigneur*) Richard Gowers ([details here](#))

Various diary clashes meant that a session in the Studio originally planned for October was postponed. Consequently, when David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn were at last able to get together Christmas was imminent. More to the point, we had a backlog of discs to consider, which meant our session was longer than usual.

We began with a monumental French work. The ***Grande Messe des Morts* by Berlioz** has recently been issued on SACD by Chandos in a performance conducted by Edward Gardner. The recording, involving several choirs and the Bergen Philharmonic was taken from live performances in Bergen’s Grieghallen in May 2018. We listened to the ‘Dies irae’ section. It took us a little while to find a suitable volume setting at which to play back the recording. At the initial volume level that we set both DD and JQ noted that the sound of the sopranos was a bit ‘fuzzy’ in their highest register and we are certain this was not down to the singers themselves. Having increased the volume we found that this problem went away and, indeed, at the higher level the sound in general came into better focus. The brass ensembles at the ‘Tuba mirum’ had body and the four separate brass groups were differentiated in the recording. However, DD in particular, felt that the recording gave the impression that the performance was taking place at something of a distance.

For a comparison we turned to the recording that Sir Colin Davis made for Philips in 1969. This recording was made under studio conditions in London’s Westminster Cathedral and the performers were the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. JQ had recently used this recording as his comparator when reviewing the Gardner release but then he’d used the original CDs – which still sound impressive. For this Studio session, however, he’d obtained a copy of the SACD re-mastering carried out a few years ago by Polyhymnia International and released by Pentatone. Reverting to the playback level we’d originally used for the Chandos disc, we noted that the performers were much more closely placed – but not excessively so. We listened to the same passage of music and immediately it was apparent that this is a very different type of performance. Davis adopts a broader tempo – he takes 13:46 over this section, compared to Gardner’s 10:58. That broader pace allows Davis to give the music far more space and detail is much more readily apparent – we noted, for example, how pronounced the string bass line is right at the start of the extract. When the brass bands make their appearance at ‘Tuba mirum’ there’s genuine grandeur in Davis’s performance – we remarked on the greater brightness and presence of the LSO brass. The ‘Tuba mirum’ is truly imposing - both the engineering and the conducting make the music properly dramatic – while the ‘Judex’ where Berlioz’s writing is even more apocalyptic, sounds absolutely superb in the Davis account. LM felt that by comparison the Chandos recording seems “amorphous”. DD is less familiar with the work as a whole, His verdict, based

on what he'd heard, was that the Davis scored 9 out of 10 in terms of making him want to listen to more of the work whereas his score for Gardner was only 4 out of 10. We felt that the wider Chandos sound stage makes the results seem more fragmented while the Davis version is much more cohesive. LM's verdict on the Davis was that it is "inspired and edge-of-the-seat". We were unanimous that the Davis recording in this SACD reincarnation is a hands-down winner compared to Gardner, both sonically and interpretatively. The Philips engineering wears its nearly 50 years lightly. JQ, who has listened to both versions in full, confirmed that the panel's verdict on this extract was valid for the entire work.

Next, we engaged with a new Lyrita disc issued to mark the 90th birthday of Thea Musgrave. LM had heard her orchestral work, *Phoenix Rising* (1996-7) at the 2018 BBC Proms ([review](#)) and had been seriously impressed. Lyrita's recording was made under studio conditions by different performers in the Hoddinott Hall in Cardiff in January 2018. We listened to the first six or seven minutes of *Phoenix Rising*. The Lyrita recording has terrific impact – the brass and percussion register vividly though, in truth, all sections of the orchestra are expertly captured by the engineers. The music is exciting and dramatic and it certainly makes a strong impression in this fine performance. We felt that the engineers – and the artists – have achieved commendable clarity, even when the textures are at their most dense. A few minutes in, when the music becomes calmer, the solo cor anglais, the principal set of timpani (Musgrave writes for several sets) and the horn section all make their mark. This is an excellent recording of an arresting piece. The disc also includes *Poets in Love* (2009), a substantial song cycle for tenor, baritone and piano (four hands). This was recorded in March 2018 in Wyastone Concert Hall by Nathan Vale (tenor), Simon Wallfisch (baritone) and pianists Simon Callaghan and Hiroaki Takenouchi. We had time only to listen to the first song. However, we felt that an excellent balance of the two voices and the piano accompaniment has been achieved.

Staying with recent British music we turned to the first volume in a projected series from Toccata Classics devoted to the orchestral music of **William Wordsworth** (1908-88). The release includes two symphonies: The Fourth (1953) and the Eighth (1986). We sampled both. At the start of the Eighth we admired the nice, clear and natural sound. Wordsworth's scoring is very effective, allowing all sections of the orchestra to register. Conductor John Gibbons and the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra play their part in achieving that clarity and so too do the engineers. The venue for these January 2018 sessions was the Great Amber Concert Hall in Liepāja. We then listened to the start of the Fourth Symphony. Here, the slow introduction put JQ in mind of the music of Arthur Butterworth and LM added the name of Sibelius to the mix. LM felt that this introduction piques the listener's interest: you sense that something is going to happen. However, the *Allegro* that follows doesn't quite live up to that promise. JQ liked the rolling second theme of the *Allegro* which put him in mind of Elgar. LM felt, however, that the music that follows the slow introduction is rather traditional and "lacks innovation". DD felt that the sound is satisfactory but rather bland after the Lyrita.

From Liepāja in Latvia it seems quite logical to move to Scandinavia for Swedish music played by Swedish musicians under the baton of a conductor from another Baltic state, Estonia. The music is by **Wilhelm Stenhammar**, the performers are the Gothenburg Symphony, along with four soloists and Gothenburg choirs, all conducted by Neeme Järvi. The main item on Järvi's all-Stenhammar SACD is one of the composer's last works, the symphonic cantata, *Sången*. BIS recorded this in Gothenburg's Concert Hall in February and March 2018. We listened to the second of the cantata's two parts. The extended orchestral introduction is spacious and sonorous here – LM thought the music sounded quite English. Once the voices enter the music soon becomes jubilant and the engineers seem to have captured the large forces very well. The tranquil conclusion also comes across very successfully. When the piece finished LM remarked that he'd been enjoying the music, which was new to him, so much that he'd rather forgotten to focus on the sound quality. That in itself is a compliment to the BIS engineering, though; their recording allows the music to speak very naturally for itself. DD felt the piece was more appealing in its vocal sections.

We stayed in Scandinavia for our next selection: music by the Danish composer **Rued Langgaard**. DaCapo have issued an SACD album of his music with the Vienna Philharmonic and Sakari Oramo. The disc, made in Vienna's Konzerthaus in 2017 and 2018, includes Langgaard's Second and Sixth Symphonies. We were alerted to this recording by Dan Morgan's laudatory [review](#) of the release as a Download. At his suggestion, we listened to the slow movement of the Second Symphony. There's a long opening passage for the strings and we were struck by the sumptuous sound of the VPO's string choir. Their tonal weight has been most successfully captured in this recording. The sound is lovely and most realistic – LM described it as “plush”. Much of the movement is expansive and hymn-like – the marking is *Lento religioso quasi adagio* – but there's a quirky short central section (from about 7:30 – 8:53) which has some fascinating instrumental textures. This, too, registers very well in the recording. LM eventually confessed to a degree of impatience with the slow music. He also felt that we ought to test the recording with a different – louder – aspect of Langgaard's music and so we auditioned the closing section of the Sixth Symphony. The sub-title of this score is 'The Heaven-Rending' and in the last section Langgaard really pulls out all the stops – for a start he doubles the number of trumpets from four to eight just for this portion of the symphony. The DaCapo recording really delivers. The percussion is suitably clangorous while the brass come across with exciting realism. The orchestral textures are very busy and the horns, later augmented by the trumpets, ring out nobly across the orchestral soundscape. The very loud closing pages sound most impressive here. This is a fine achievement by DaCapo.

Next, we turned to a more familiar piece but one that's also a tremendously colourful orchestral piece: **Stravinsky's *Petrushka***. This has just appeared as an SACD in a 2014 recording by the Mariinsky Orchestra and Valery Gergiev. The recording, set down in the Concert Hall of the Mariinsky Theatre, appears on the Mariinsky's own label. We listened to the opening tableau, 'The Shrovetide Fair' and soon found that this was another recording which was difficult to pitch at the right playback level. Both LM and DD felt that the very opening was sonically a bit of a mess; the busy textures seemed very unclear until the trumpets and drums make their forceful interjection (0:58). JQ wasn't quite so bothered by the “messy” opening but could understand why the others felt as they did. One problem we found was that if we played the recording at a level that clarified the opening textures the aforementioned trumpet/drum interjection was far too loud and, frankly, aggressive. Just out of curiosity we got out Bernard Haitink's LPO recording for Philips, made as long ago as 1973. The recording isn't as up to date as the Gergiev, of course, but we found that it presented a clearer aural picture of what is going on. Perhaps the number of microphones used by the respective engineers and the positioning of the microphones has much to do with the differences? DD's overall verdict on what we heard from the Mariinsky recording was that the sound was muddy except for the blaring, edgy brass. Whilst we readily admit we haven't heard more than an extract from this performance none of us felt drawn either to the performance or the recording on the basis of what we sampled.

More Russian music came next in the shape of a new **Rachmaninov** release from Daniil Trifonov, who plays the Second and Fourth piano concertos, accompanied by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Yannick Nézet-Séguin. This was a disc that had enraptured Marc Bridle ([review](#)), the live performance of the Fourth concerto especially. Thus, we decided to hear the first movement of that concerto and within a couple of minutes we could understand – and fully share – Marc's enthusiasm. It's a live performance captured by DG in the Verizon Hall, Philadelphia in October 2015. Trifonov's playing is simply dazzling. He displays amazing virtuosity and incisiveness and, where required, he can turn on the power without ever seeming crude. This is pianism of the highest order. The engineers have captured the performance expertly. The piano is forwardly placed, but in a wholly realistic and not dominant way, and the orchestral contribution – superbly delivered by the Philadelphians – comes over marvellously. The balance between soloist and orchestra is very well judged. We liked the brightness of the piano's treble register and, equally, the firmness of the instrument's bass. This is a stellar performance and the recording does it full justice.

From one musician exiled to the USA we turned to the music of another: **Erich Wolfgang Korngold**. Baiba Skride has included his Violin Concerto in a collection of American concertos recorded for Orfeo. JQ has been listening to the set for a forthcoming review and suggested we audition the first movement of the Korngold, an invitation that LM and DD were only too happy to accept. This recording gave us a second chance to hear the Gothenburg Symphony in their city's Concert Hall in a recording made in August 2017. This time the baton was wielded by their newly-appointed Music Director, the young Finn, Santtu-Matias Rouvali. The orchestral sound is very strong and rich, the bass lines satisfyingly firm. Baiba Skride is not dominated by the lush orchestral textures, though. Her tone cuts through clearly and LM found her a really persuasive soloist. He declared the performance "a delight from start to finish". Indeed, we all enjoyed it and we felt that Orfeo had made a very good job of the sonics.

From American concertos we moved seamlessly to American Symphonies. That's the title of a new BIS collection on SACD from the LSO and Lance Friedel. The repertoire is decidedly enterprising and unfamiliar, including symphonies by Walter Piston and Stephen Albert. The disc is completed by **Samuel Jones' Third Symphony, 'Palo Duro Canyon'**. JQ has listened to the whole disc for a recent [review](#) and suggested we sample the opening section of Jones' one-movement work. This starts with the pre-recorded sound of the Texas prairie wind. It sounds just right here: present, but not distracting once the orchestra starts to play. We were delighted with the sound of the orchestra. This recording was made in London's Henry Wood Hall in April 2017. Many of the LSO's recordings nowadays are made for their own label in the somewhat close acoustic of the Barbican Hall. Here, it was a pleasure to hear them in a more sympathetic acoustic. We felt that the BIS sound has body and presence and the climaxes open up splendidly. The quiet passages are no less successful – JQ remarked on a soft passage for sepulchral double basses around 5:50, where the instruments are really well defined. We liked the music too. DD thought the piece was "super". LM wasn't quite so sure, feeling that the opening was really inventive, though he became a little less sure as the music unfolded. However, we had no reservations whatsoever about the sound which LM described as "clear as a bell". Jones' music expresses the open spaces and the recording allows that to come through. Referring to the difference between hearing the LSO in the Henry Wood Hall and the Barbican, Dan Morgan rejoiced in his download [review](#) that in this recording he could hear "the LSO let off the leash at last" and we could fully endorse his sentiments.

It was a logical step, then, to listen next to the LSO in more American music but back in the Barbican. As part of the orchestra's centenary tribute to Leonard Bernstein, their former President, the LSO mounted concert performances of his 1953 musical **Wonderful Town** in December 2017. These performances, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle, have formed the basis of an SACD issue on the LSO Live label. We listened to the Overture, which is a *pot-pourri* of tunes from the show. The sound is up-close - and completely different to the results that BIS achieved in the Henry Wood Hall – but it suits Bernstein's bright and sassy music. LM felt that the LSO sounded like a theatre orchestra in a theatre and, like JQ, he loved the "smoochy" playing in the taster of the melody of 'It's Love'. Simon Rattle gets razor-sharp playing from the LSO and this overture is certainly a high-octane opener. To get a feel for how the recording of the voices sounds we listened to 'It's Love' from Act II. The voices of Danielle de Niese and Nathan Gunn are placed in a suitably forward perspective and, later on, when the London Symphony Chorus join in their singing is well-caught by the microphones. We admired the clarity of all the singers' diction. These extracts give the impression that the album as a whole is a lot of fun and JQ, who has listened to it in full, confirms that this is the case.

Just a few months later Rattle made one of his last recordings with what was then his 'other' orchestra, the Berliner Philharmoniker. In another Bernstein centenary tribute he and the orchestra performed Lennie's **Second Symphony, 'The Age of Anxiety'** in the Philharmonie. The concerts took place in June 2018 and the resulting recording has been issued by DG. The Polish pianist, Krystian Zimerman was on hand to play the crucial and highly demanding solo piano part. We listened to the final section, 'The Epilogue'. JQ suspects that the engineering was in the hands of a team from the orchestra's own Digital

Concert Hall enterprise; the results achieved suggest great familiarity with the venue and the sound the orchestra makes there. The sound is very good indeed – the firmness of tone of the BPO's double bass section provides an impressive foundation. The piano is well balanced. We particularly liked the truthfulness with which Zimerman's pensive solos are reproduced and we also noted just the right amount of hall ambience round the sound of the piano. We approved of the warmth of the strings when playing quietly and we admired the wide dynamic range of the recording – and the orchestra. The closing peroration comes over very strongly. All in all, we thought this was an impressive recording.

As the afternoon faded into dusk there was time to squeeze in just one more disc and, with Christmas fast approaching, something seasonal seemed appropriate. We had begun our session several hours earlier with spectacular French music and that's how we decided to finish. JQ has recently been listening to a new recording of **Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*** and was particularly keen to hear what 'Dieu parmi nous' would sound like on the Studio equipment. Richard Gowers is the organist, playing on the organ of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and the recording, made in July 2017, has been issued on the college's own label. At the start the cavernous sound of the descending pedal theme is terrifically imposing. The recording gives the listener excellent clarity between the different divisions of the organ. LM approved of the microphone placing and the balance; the instrument is not too distant from the microphones but neither is it so close that the sound is oppressive. He agreed with JQ that the engineering successfully conveys also the acoustic of the Chapel. The loud passages are truly majestic. JQ was particularly enthused by the bright-sounding, driving toccata with superb pedal weight underneath. The final bars, including the last, awesome pedal descent, is overpowering. This is a very fine achievement in every respect.

With the sound of Messiaen's final chord ringing in our ears, we packed away the discs. One or two remained unheard but we will try to squeeze them into our first session of 2019. That said, we are conscious that there are already several discs, as yet unreviewed, which have arrived in the last couple of weeks and which are likely to be on our agenda in the New Year. In 2018 we've listened to some very fine examples of recording engineering – and some marvellous performances – and we look forward keenly to what the record industry has in store for us next year. Happy Christmas from the Listening Studio!

[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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