

From the MusicWeb International Listening Studio: July 2018 Report
by John Quinn

Discs auditioned

Shostakovich – Symphonies 4 & 10. Russian National Orchestra/Mikhail Pletnev **Pentatone PTC 5186 647**

Shostakovich – Symphonies 4 & 11. Boston Symphony/Andris Nelsons ([details here](#))

Bruckner - Symphony No 7. Gewandhausorchester Leipzig/Andris Nelsons. ([details here](#))

Liszt – *Transcendental Studies*. Kirill Gerstein ([details here](#))

John Adams - *Absolute Jest & Naive and Sentimental Music*. Doric String Quartet: Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Peter Oundjian ([details here](#))

Elgar - Symphony No 2. BBC Symphony Orchestra /Edward Gardner ([details here](#))

Strauss – *Eine Alpensinfonie*. London Philharmonic Orchestra/Vladimir Jurowski ([details here](#))

Tchaikovsky – *Manfred* Symphony. Lucerne Festival Orchestra/Riccardo Chailly **Accentus ACC20438**

Pavel Chesnokov - *Teach Me Thy Statutes*. PaTRAM Institute Male Choir/Vladimir Gorbik ([details here](#))

Debussy - *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Soloists; London Symphony Orchestra/Sir Simon Rattle ([details here](#))

When David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn last assembled in the MusicWeb International Listening Studio, Spring was just in the air. On this occasion the English Summer weather was unusually hot and humid and rain had been a notable absentee for several weeks. The opportunity to sit in a cool lounge and listen to some music was, therefore, more than usually welcome.

To start us off we had not one but two new recordings of the **Fourth Symphony by Shostakovich**. First up was the version conducted by Mikhail Pletnev which is part of the latest instalment in Pentatone's cycle played by the Russian National Orchestra under a number of conductors. This present recording was set down in Moscow in February 2017. LM had already listened to all of it but it was new to DD and JQ. We listened to the opening of the first movement. The playing of the RNO is good and Pentatone's sound is big and powerful, offering plenty of clarity. Sadly, though, Pletnev's conducting is a grievous disappointment. His initial speed is slow – slower than any of us can recall hearing in other performances – and as a result the music sounds ponderous. JQ described what he was hearing as “dogged and lumbering”. LM was forced to admit that matters don't really improve as the symphony progresses. JQ will do a full review in due course but the initial omens are not promising.

We then turned to the same symphony – and the same passage – in the latest release in DG's cycle with Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony. Like the previous instalments, the performance was recorded at concerts in Symphony Hall, Boston; in this case the performances took place in March and April of 2018. What a difference! Where Pletnev was heavy and ponderous Nelsons is electrifying. JQ remarked that at the very start the tempo seemed decidedly brisk but within a minute of two he had easily adjusted. Even at this urgent pace there is great precision in the BSO's playing. LM thought that, by comparison with the Pletnev, this almost sounded like a different work; Nelsons' conducting is so much more interesting. We were unanimous in agreeing that both the performance and the sound are terrific JQ will be reviewing the set soon but on the very day of our listening session we published a [full review](#) by Dan Morgan and to judge from his comments the performances of both symphonies are on the exalted level that we experienced in our extract today.

We stayed with Nelsons and DG and turned to the third instalment of his **Bruckner** cycle with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, which contains the **Seventh Symphony**. This cycle, too, is taken from live performances. JQ, who has been following the emerging cycle, has been very impressed so far, not least when he [reviewed](#) this particular disc recently. We auditioned the previous release in this cycle – which includes the Fourth Symphony – in [our last studio session](#). Here we were once again impressed with the results. We listened to the finale of the symphony. We felt that the recording didn't seem to

have quite the same punch as the Boston recording but this may well be down to the acoustics of the respective halls – and, of course, Shostakovich’s music is ‘punchier’ than Bruckner’s. However, this Leipzig sound is still very satisfying. DD remarked that what we were hearing is “very much the sound I expect from Bruckner”. LM agreed and he noted the excellent dynamic range of the recording. As the movement unfolded LM expressed the view that this was “a recording with heft”, especially when the highly impressive Leipzig brass were to the fore. DD’s final verdict was that this is a very fine recording and seemed a lovely performance to him, even though Bruckner is not one of his Desert Island composers.

After several full-on orchestral recordings, we felt the need for contrast and we turned to a recent release which has Kirill Gerstein playing **Liszt’s Transcendental Studies**. This had been recommended to us by Dan Morgan following his recent highly complimentary [review](#) of the recording as a DSD download. We listened to three of the Studies: ‘Paysage’, ‘Feux follets’ and ‘Harmonies du soir’, the latter a particular favourite of DD. ‘Paysage’ we found pleasingly relaxing after Bruckner. Gerstein unfolds the piece beautifully and the Myrios Classics recording is a conspicuous success: the sound of the piano is ideally reported throughout its compass. LM noted how well the pianist’s dynamic contrasts come across. Both Gerstein and the engineers achieve great clarity in ‘Feux follets’. JQ felt that the recording gives the impression that we were listening to the pianist in the same room, which enabled us to appreciate to the full his great dexterity in this piece. ‘Harmonies du soir’ was just as successful. We noticed the firmness of the quiet bass notes right at the start. LM noted with approval that the distancing of the microphones from the piano has been expertly judged: the instrument is nicely present but not overpowering. JQ appreciated Gerstein’s beautifully calibrated and imaginative playing. This disc, we feel, is an outstanding example of how to record a solo piano – and the pianism is equally outstanding.

Next, we sampled a recent Chandos disc of orchestral music by **John Adams**. This is played by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Peter Oundjian and for **Absolute Jest**, the work we selected, they are joined by the Doric String Quartet. None of us had heard the disc before but LM and JQ had [enjoyed](#) a live performance of the work by the San Francisco Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas a few years ago and JQ [subsequently liked](#) the disc made by the same performers. As we listened to the first section of the work, however, neither of us was as impressed this time. LM expressed the view that this is “music to experience rather than hear” while on this occasion JQ felt that Adams was making his material go a long way. As for the recording, it’s a typical Chandos effort, not least in the clarity that the recording offers; that’s vital in a busy score such as this. The string quartet is nicely foregrounded but not so much that they dominate. The performance has the necessary rhythmic precision and maybe it will be more compelling on further acquaintance.

We stayed with Chandos and listened to something much more familiar to us. Back in [April 2017](#) we listened to Edward Gardner’s recording with the BBC Symphony Orchestra of **Elgar’s First Symphony**. We liked what we heard then very much, so it was natural for us to seek to sample the same team in the composer’s **Second Symphony** on a disc that has recently been released. We listened to the scherzo. We found that we needed to increase the volume level from the playback of the Adams disc but once we’d settled on the optimum volume level we were mightily impressed by what we heard. In the first place, it’s a very good performance. In addition, the Chandos recording, made in the Watford Colosseum, is excellent. There’s the usual Chandos detail and the sound achieved has presence and impact. JQ felt that the recording is bold and confident – ideally suited to the music – but also that the quieter stretches of music were winningly reported. The riot of orchestral pyrotechnics in the last minute or so of the movement is vividly captured here. LM spoke for us all in declaring this to be “a magnificent recording”.

From the sound of an Elgar orchestra in full cry we moved to the equally rich sound world of Richard Strauss and to a new release on the LPO Live label. This enticing package of works, all played by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Vladimir Jurowski, includes a performance of **Eine**

Alpensinfonie given at the Royal Festival Hall in April 2016. Lacking sufficient time to hear the whole hour-long work, we opted to listen to the opening and to the last few sections. In 'Nacht' we were very pleased to hear so much detail in the lower reaches of the orchestra; the music is hushed but well defined. The depiction of 'Sunrise' is suitably majestic, the sound opening up well, and we liked Jurowski's purposeful way with the 'Ascent' where the off-stage horns, sounding from the right-hand channel, are clear despite the distancing. Moving to the other end of the symphony, JQ was impressed by the tension Jurowski generates in the 'Calm before the Storm' episode. There's been a singular absence of rain in the UK in recent weeks but, my goodness, Strauss and Jurowski compensated for us in the 'Storm' depiction. The performance is dynamic and exciting and the LPO Live recording lets the listener hear lots of detail. Then the 'Ausklang' is played with a warm glow and the *echt*-Straussian long melodic lines are beautifully voiced – a special plaudit for the LPO's violins – and most sympathetically conveyed by the engineers. This is a very successful live recording, we feel, and, based on the extracts we heard, Jurowski's seems to be a very considerable performance.

Next, we considered another live performance and our only video recording of the session. Accentus has just released a DVD of an August 2017 concert in which Lucerne Festival Orchestra and Riccardo Chailly play a programme that includes **Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony***. (The performance is also available in Blu-ray format but we didn't have that version to hand.) We watched Chailly's traversal of the substantial first movement. The playing of the LFO is simply fabulous – we marvelled, for example, at the richness of tone offered by the strings and, equally, at their finesse in the quiet passages. LM observed, rightly, that Chailly is anything but exhibitionist in the way he conducts but he certainly gets results. He shapes the delicate episodes really well and elsewhere he brings out all the colour and drama in the music – the last few minutes are especially potent. Both the sound and the picture quality are very good.

We stayed with Russian music but our next choice was on an altogether different scale. JQ has been much taken with a new disc of the **liturgical music of Pavel Chesnokov** performed by the PaTRAM Institute Male Choir, a choir comprised of American and Russian singers, conducted by Vladimir Gorbik ([review](#)). We auditioned two pieces from their programme: 'A Mercy of Peace' and 'We Hymn Thee', followed by 'It is Truly Fitting'. JQ had previously been tremendously impressed by the quality of the Reference Recordings sound, engineered by Soundmirror. Here, however, the Nautilus loudspeakers brought an even greater definition and ambience. One has the sense of sitting in the first few rows of pews with the choir at a realistic distance away, on the sanctuary steps. The sound of the choir is superbly reproduced and the singing is marvellous; the choir sings with controlled fervour and complete unanimity. JQ felt that what we were hearing sounded extremely realistic. LM expressed mild disappointment that the sound of the deep bass voices was not more apparent but JQ felt that the Octavists made their presence felt, not least when they added a soft but firm foundation to the quiet chords to which the choir sings 'Amin' in 'We Hymn Thee'. The choir and engineers between them produce a terrific dynamic range in 'It is Truly Fitting'. LM felt that the music on this disc has "the quality of the eternal". DD's verdict was that the music was wonderfully sung and that the recording was very fine indeed.

Finally, we turned to Sir Simon Rattle's recent concert recording of **Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande***. The LSO Live recording has already been lauded in detailed reviews by [JQ](#) and by [Simon Thompson](#). This recording is offered in a package that includes CDs and a BD-A disc. On this occasion JQ suggested we should sample the CDs in order to benefit from the Meridian player. We listened to Act I, Scene 1 in which Golaud, lost in the depths of a forest, encounters Mélisande for the first time. The playing of the LSO is quite simply superb and the recording does it justice. The singing of Gerald Finley (Golaud) is on the same exalted level; from the start his portrayal is superbly detailed and very characterful. There's an argument to be made that Magdalena Kožená's voice is a bit too mature in timbre for Mélisande but there's no doubting her commitment to the role. Crucially, both soloists are very well balanced with the orchestra; they're sufficiently prominent but not to such an extent that Debussy's miraculous orchestral scoring is obscured. This is a very good recording indeed from LSO Live

Debussy's wonderfully original score brought us to the end of our listening for the day. Today's selection had been a rich crop indeed, with only one disappointment: as LM said, we'd listened to some superb discs. Overall, our sonic picks of the day were DG's Shostakovich Fourth, the Chandos Elgar disc and Reference Recording's selection of music by Chesnokov. The autumn releases will soon be upon us so we expect to have another bumper crop of new recordings to savour in a couple of months' time.

[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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