

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

Discs auditioned

Weinberg - Symphony No 21. City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra / Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla ([details here](#))

Bruckner – Mass No 3 in F minor. Houston Symphony Chorus / Franz Anton Krager ([details here](#))

Bruckner – Symphony No 9. Pittsburgh SO / Manfred Honeck ([details here](#))

Holst – *The Planets*. Kansas City Symphony / Michael Stern ([details here](#))

Korngold - Symphony in F-sharp. Sinfonia of London / John Wilson ([details here](#))

Sibelius – *Kullervo*. Finnish RSO / Hannu Lintu ([details here](#))

John Adams - *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*. Orchestre symphonique de Montréal / Kent Nagano ([details here](#))

Elgar – Cello Concerto. Sheku Kanneh-Mason / London Symphony Orchestra / Sir Simon Rattle (**Decca 4850241**)

Berlioz - *Symphonie fantastique*. Les Siècles / François-Xavier Roth ([details here](#))

Marx – *Eine Herbstsymphonie*. Grazer Philharmoniker / Johannes Wildner ([details here](#))

Bliss – *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*. BBC Symphony Orchestra / Sir Andrew Davis ([details here](#))

With Christmas fast approaching, there was just time for David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn to get together for one last session of 2019 in the MusicWeb International Listening Studio. First, we considered two recordings that time constraints had prevented us from assessing during our October gathering.

Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla has recently become an exclusive DG artist and the first release under that contract couples two symphonies by **Mieczysław Weinberg**: the Second and the Twenty-first. In the former she conducts Kremerata Baltica while in the much larger-scale Twenty-first both Kremerata Baltica and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra are involved. It was to that latter work that we listened, selecting the last of its six sections, marked *Lento*. The recording was made in Birmingham's Symphony Hall in November 2018 and we think it was taken down from a live performance, though we are not sure about that. The anguished music for full orchestra that opens this section of the work is arrestingly reported in this recording. Sonically, that's very impressive but just as ear-catching are the many passages of quieter music that follow. The recording is very clear and there's a good sense of space around the sound of the orchestra. Indeed, JQ and LM, who are regular concertgoers in Birmingham, agreed that DG have reproduced most faithfully what they would expect to hear in Symphony Hall. This portion of the symphony has prominent parts for solo clarinet (Oliver Janes, the CBSO principal) and for a wordless soprano; the latter part is taken by Ms Gražinytė-Tyla herself. Both solo instrument and solo voice come over most realistically in this recording. As the performance unfolded, we became increasingly aware that the recording makes the spaces *between* notes as telling as the music itself. LM praised the dynamic range of both recording and performance. To him, the recording was very realistic indeed; so much so that, as you would do in the concert hall, you end up holding your breath as the hushed ending plays out for fear of making a sound. DD liked the veracity of Ms Gražinytė-Tyla's vocal sound. He was very impressed with the recording.

It was our colleague Ralph Moore who drew our attention to a live recording, made in Houston, Texas, of **Bruckner's Mass No 3**. In his [review](#) Ralph was complimentary about the performance and very taken indeed with the recorded sound. The recording, taken from concert performances in Houston, Texas in 2013, is presented on a BD-A disc by the HDTT label. The performers are the Houston Symphony Chorus, the Moores School Symphony Orchestra and a quartet of soloists, all conducted by Franz Anton Krager. We listened to the whole of the Gloria. It wasn't long before we all become aware of something of an oddity in the balance. The choir is surprisingly prominent in relation to the

orchestra; indeed, at times the orchestra is almost swamped. The chorus is accomplished and sings with considerable commitment but we would have liked to hear more of the instruments. The soloists don't have a great deal to do in this movement but what we heard did not completely convince us: all of them sing with excessive vibrato. We listened to the 2.0 stereo layer. Apart from the balance issue, it seemed to both LM and JQ that the sound became somewhat constrained – even a bit “fuzzy” – in the loudest passages; perhaps the recording will sound better in surround sound. We were somewhat disappointed, feeling that neither the performance nor the recorded sound was particularly special. We intended to stop at the end of the Gloria but we weren't quite quick enough with the remote control and so noted that there is only the shortest of gaps before the Credo starts.

There was more Bruckner in the shape of a new recording from Reference Recording's 'Fresh!' imprint. On this SACD Manfred Honeck conducts a live account of the **Ninth Symphony**. This was warmly welcomed by Ralph Moore who declared that “its superb sound and flawless execution would make it as fine and rewarding an introduction to the work as any in the catalogue.” We listened to the huge first movement. It didn't take more than a minute or so for us to realise that this Bruckner disc was in a different league to the previous one, both as a performance and recording. The SACD recording is engineered by the Boston company, Soundmirror and they've done a terrific job. Immediately we noticed a welcome sense of space around the instruments while the sound of the Pittsburgh Symphony, which is on magisterial form throughout, is thrillingly captured at all dynamic levels by the microphones. The first big tutti (at 2;27) has tremendous impact and presence – DD described the orchestra's sound as “rock solid”. The recording offers warm sound with lovely depth and definition and the orchestra is shown off to optimum advantage. Honeck's conducting is highly persuasive in every respect. We would gladly have listened to the complete symphony but time did not allow that. As it is, this first movement indicates that this is an extremely distinguished performance of the symphony. JQ described both performance and sound as “compelling” while LM's verdict was that he'd heard “a performance of stature and total conviction, with a recording to match.”

We moved on to another Reference SACD, this time one that was engineered “in house” by Keith O. Johnson. Michael Stern and the Kansas City Symphony have set down for them a Holst disc, including **The Planets**. In October we greatly admired a new BIS recording of the same work from Andrew Litton and the Bergen Philharmonic. We were keen, therefore, to sample this American account of the work, recorded in January 2015 in the orchestra's home, the Helzberg Hall of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts in Kansas City. Our go-to movement when we audition a recording of this work is 'Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age. That's partly because it offers the potential for a wide dynamic range and also because it's the favourite movement of both DD and JQ. Unfortunately, we'd listened for less than a minute before JQ exclaimed “there's no mystery”. He was not alone in feeling this way. The clear recording is rather too 'present' but, more to the point, the performance itself doesn't seem to generate any real mystery. As the performance unfolded our disappointment grew. “Static” was LM's verdict on the interpretation, while DD felt the performance was “pedestrian and not ominous”. Perhaps our memories of Litton, not to mention Boult, are too strong but though the climax was powerfully played (and recorded) we felt it didn't sound frightening. As for the last two or three minutes, JQ summed up our feelings by declaring that what should be a mysterious close was instead prosaic. The recorded sound is good but arguably too clear-eyed. We explored the album just a little further, sampling the start of 'Mars, the Bringer of War', but we soon concluded that here the performance lacked the menace that's essential in this music. Based on what we heard, this release is a disappointment.

The recent **Korngold** disc from John Wilson and the Sinfonia of London came in for unanimous praise from three of our reviewers, including JQ. Indeed, Dave Billinge, who was able to listen to the surround sound option, not only admired the performance but also declared “I am tempted to say it is the best orchestral surround recording I've heard”. We listened to the first movement of the Symphony and were quickly drawn in to a biting, urgent performance that fairly crackles with electricity. The Chandos engineering is a major boon too. On this SACD, the splendid engineering greatly enhances the impact

of the performance. As well as conveying the 'big picture', engineer Ralph Couzens brings out a wealth of detail in his recording, allowing Korngold's inventive scoring to be fully appreciated by the listener. John Wilson leads a highly-charged, thrusting performance which is just as terrific as the recorded sound. We noted an excellent left-right spread and also an equally convincing front-to-back perspective. Though the recording has ample impact it's just as impressive in conveying the hushed close of the movement. This was a disc that was admired by us all.

Sibelius's large-scale early work, *Kullervo*, has been attracting quite a lot of attention from the recording companies in recent years. JQ was drawn to the latest offering, conducted by Hannu Lintu, because in 2015 he was very impressed by their cycle of the seven symphonies on DVD ([review](#)). DD and LM have subsequently heard those performances and we're unanimous in our regard for Lintu as a Sibelian. We listened to the finale of *Kullervo* in which the chorus tells of the suicide of the eponymous hero. It was quickly apparent to us that, working under studio conditions (we think), the Ondine engineers have achieved a very satisfactory balance between choir and orchestra. The sound is very clear and present. Hannu Lintu builds the tension in this extended narrative movement very successfully. The choir's music is almost entirely sung in unison at the octave and this is highly effective. We relished the depth and definition of the sound on this SACD; the engineers have definitely added to the impact of the performance through their expertise. LM declared the sound to be "magnificent" and DD and JQ wouldn't disagree for a moment.

JQ wanted us to listen to a disc of orchestral music by John Adams which had impressed him. This is a Decca disc of live performances conducted in Montreal by Kent Nagano. We decided to listen to *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*. Although it's a brief piece, JQ suggested it would be completely representative of the performance and engineering standards on this CD. Decca's sound is incisive and brilliant – just what the piece needs. We appreciated the fact that the engineers have achieved clarity even when Adams' textures are at their fullest. The one disappointment is that the important contributions of the bass drum are insufficiently prominent – they sound tame; of course, this may be nothing to do with the engineers.

We next considered another Decca release; this time one very hot off the press indeed. The young cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason has already attracted considerable attention and he's now recorded an album – his second, we think - which includes a rather mixed-bag selection of short pieces. At the heart of the programme, however, is one of the pinnacles of the cello repertoire, *Elgar's Cello Concerto in E minor*, for which he's joined by the LSO and Sir Simon Rattle. The recording was made in London's Abbey Road Studio as recently as June 2019. We listened to the finale, which is the most substantial movement. Kanneh-Mason's cello produces a big, full tone; we suspect that the microphone was quite close to the instrument but so clean is his technique that the listener isn't distracted by any noises of bow on string. That said, there are one or two extraneous noises around 6:45, where the introspective section begins; we wonder if this is the sound of the cellist's breathing. Decca have produced a big, bold studio sound, both from the cello when Kanneh-Mason plays loudly and from the orchestra in tutti sections. Technically, it's a good performance but JQ wondered whether the introspective music – and especially the reminiscence of the slow movement (from 10:01) – really came from the heart. Kanneh-Mason receives luxury support from the LSO and Rattle. A full review of this disc, which is to be released in January, will appear shortly on MusicWeb International

2019, the 150th anniversary year of Berlioz, has brought several outstanding discs of his music, several of which we've sampled in the Studio. Right at the end of the year, along came a recording of *Symphonie fantastique* by Les Siècles and François-Xavier Roth which JQ has [reviewed](#) recently, declaring it to be a winner. Dan Morgan was just as enthusiastic in [reviewing the download version](#); indeed, he made it one of his [Recordings of the Year](#). We listened to the finale, 'Songe d'une nuit de sabbat'. The crystal-clear recording brings out the quirkiness of the music and Berlioz's highly original scoring in a vivid fashion. The combination of the period instruments and the engineers' skill means that a huge amount of detail emerges, yet this is achieved without any unnatural highlighting. LM's

only reservation – a mild one – was that the recording doesn't give much sense of the acoustic in which the performance was given. Roth and his highly skilled musicians give a superb, swashbuckling performance, full of drama and élan. JQ knows the performance well, having reviewed it recently, but it was new to LM and DD. LM praised a "very agile performance" while for DD, who is not a Berlioz addict, the performance appealed to him much more than one on modern instruments. A highly impressive release.

François-Xavier Roth's Berlioz disc was nominated as one of MusicWeb International's Recordings of the Year. So too – by two of our reviewers – was the first complete recording of Joseph Marx's *magnum opus*, ***Eine Herbstsymphonie***. It was the enthusiasm of [Rob Barnett](#) and [Jonathan Woolf](#) that prompted JQ to acquire a copy earlier this year but though he liked the work and recording there hadn't been an opportunity until now to bring it into the Studio. Marx's symphony, which dates from 1921, is on a huge scale; its four movements play, without a break, for 67 minutes in this performance. With an eye to the clock, we listened to the first movement, 'Ein Herbstgesang', which at 8:52 is by some distance the shortest of the four. Neither DD nor LM had heard the piece before and first reactions were favourable. The opening pages put LM in mind of Ravel's *Daphnis*, a view endorsed by DD who admired the big, expansive landscape evoked by Marx's writing. The recording is a good one: the CPO engineers ensure that despite the opulent scoring, the sound doesn't become congested, even in the loudest episodes. However, after we'd listened for a while, despite the advocacy of Johannes Wildner and the Grazer Philharmoniker, a degree of *ennui* set in. LM felt that after a rich, upholstered start, it seemed to him that the music went on a bit and he didn't feel compelled to listen further. JQ suggested that, for all its ambience and rich scoring, the thematic profile of the symphony is insufficiently strong. Despite those reservations, it's good that the work has at last achieved a recording and we don't think it could have received better advocacy than on this CPO disc.

Sir Andrew Davis has been making a series of fine recordings of the music of Sir Arthur Bliss for Chandos. The latest one has just been released and it includes the orchestral ***Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*** which JQ has long thought is one of the composer's finest achievements. LM likes the music of Bliss so he was glad to have the opportunity to sample this recording. The clock was very definitely against us by this stage and so we had to content ourselves with a relatively short extract from the *Meditations*. At JQ's suggestion we settled on the last two sections of the piece: the Interlude, 'Through the valley of the shadow of death', and the Finale, 'In the House of the Lord'. We were very taken by the incisive playing at the start of the Interlude; the splendid Chandos recording emphasises the keen response of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The quiet, spooky passage (from 2:12) is very effectively scored by Bliss and it's extremely well recorded here. The finale is marvellous, beginning with syncopated writing that suggests joyful dancing; all the details of Bliss's scoring register very satisfyingly on this occasion. At 2:03 the brass finally reveal Blow's theme in all its glory and the resplendent Chandos sound does the moment full justice. Just as impressively handled, both by Davis and his players and by the engineers, is the tranquil conclusion to the work. LM spoke for us all when he declared that this is a "beautiful recording, forensically detailed." As with the earlier Korngold disc, this recording was engineered by Ralph Couzens and we feel he's produced another winner here.

The emphatic major-key chord with which Bliss concludes the *Meditations* struck us as a very suitable full stop for our listening. In the three sessions we've managed this year we've heard some extremely impressive performances and recordings and today had been no exception. The recording industry continues to issue a stream of high-quality releases, and so we are pretty confident that we will have more stimulating listening in 2020; indeed, we already have one or two choice candidates in mind for our first session of the New Year.

We hope that this report, and those which we produced in [March](#) and [October](#), will have given you some ideas for Christmas presents – perhaps for yourself. We wish all MusicWeb readers a Happy Christmas and plenty of good listening in the New Year

[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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