

Leopold MOZART (1719-1787)

Peasant Wedding [14:29]

Cassation ex G (with 'Toy Symphony') [16:44]

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791)

Fugue from Gallimathias musicum K.32 [3:32]

Twelve Variations in C on the French song "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" K.265 [14:23]

Symphony No.1 in E flat K.16 [10:24]

Tini Mathot (fortepiano)

Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra/Koopman

rec. Waalse Kerk, Amsterdam, 2006

CHALLENGE CLASSICS CC72266 [59:42]

It is a well attested fact that classical music is a serious business where sprucely dressed ladies and gentlemen of the orchestra gather to impress their rich audiences with long and dull symphonies. Nothing lively ever happens, which is why nobody under 70 goes to concerts. Fortunately nobody told the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra that they should not be seen in public playing rattles, bird-callers, toy drums, hurdy-gurdies and bagpipes. Be warned, this CD is fun to listen to and very silly.

It is surprising that Leopold Mozart, well known slave-driver of his young son, should have indulged in such foolery, but here is the evidence. The Peasant Wedding is full of good tunes, as is the long misattributed Cassation ex G, parts of which were previously known as Haydn's Toy Symphony. There was demand for easy listening even in the 18th century and Leopold was not above using such additional colours as produced by the list of instruments above. Heleen van den Bos notes that, since court music making was not open to the public, there was a demand for compositions suitable for amateurs. Also included on this disc is Wolfgang Mozart's First Symphony, composed at the ripe old age of 9, and a set of variations he composed many years later as a newly-wed. This is based on a still well known French folk tune "Ah, vous dirai-je, maman", and displays how clever the young composer had become in the variation form. It is played on a period fortepiano from 1803, arguably a bit too recent for this 1781/2 work, but it sounds much more of the period than it would on a modern Steinway. A final chip from the workbench is Gallimathias musicum K.32, the manuscript of which was heavily marked by Leopold to correct the weaknesses of his eleven-year old son, who at least had the decency to exclude rattles and cuckoos from his youthful fugue.

A question might arise as to whether all this is worth actually listening to and indeed paying for. Ton Koopman writes a brief foreword for the unwary, noting that the orchestra had a lot of fun making the disc. It certainly sounds like it, and you should certainly buy it. Remember to dress correctly, this is classical music.

Dave Billinge

Fantasia

Einojuhani RAUTAVAARA (1928-2016)

Fantasia, for violin and orchestra (2015) [13:41]

Karol SZYMANOWSKI (1882-1937)

Violin Concerto No. 1 (1916) [24:29]

Maurice RAVEL (1875-1937)

Tzigane (1924) [9:57]

Anne Akiko Meyers (violin)

Philharmonia Orchestra/Kristjan Järvi

rec. 2016, Air Studios, London

AVIE AV2385 [48:09]

American violinist Anne Akiko Meyers is a prolific artist with thirty-five studio albums to her name. Her newly released album “*Fantasia*” comprises three works, including the world première recording of Rautavaara’s *Fantasia*, a work she commissioned.

The Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara wrote *Fantasia* for violin and orchestra in 2015 but he sadly died in July 2016 aged 87 before hearing the work. It was Meyers, its commissioner, who introduced the score in March 2017 with the Kansas City Symphony under Michael Stern. Meyers has described the score as “transcendent and has the feeling of an elegy with a very personal reflective mood”. She outstandingly delivers a near-endless flow of gloriously and moodily atmospheric music. Especially notable throughout is the soloist’s adroit control of the challenging dynamics.

Although brought up and taught mainly in the Austro-German tradition, Polish composer Karol Szymanowski took inspiration from music and cultures of the Mediterranean, especially Italy and North Africa which he had experienced on his travels. He also held a passion for French music. Szymanowski wrote his *Violin Concerto No. 1* in 1916. It is one of several masterpieces he composed during the time of the Great War, especially his *Symphony No. 3 “The Song of the Night”* and [First String Quartet](#). In the *First Concerto*, Szymanowski was inspired by lines from “May Night”, Tadeusz Miciński’s symbolist poem with a fantasy element. The *Concerto* is a lyrical single-movement work with individual parts. Meyers plays it ravishingly, with the utmost care and attention, and the results are impressive. In the opening section marked *Vivace assai* it is hard to resist the meltingly tender beauty of the writing contrasted with shimmering colour and thrilling drama.

The final work on the album, Maurice Ravel’s *Tzigane*, rapsodie de concert, often gets tagged onto the end of an album, as it does here. It was commissioned by celebrated British-Hungarian violinist Jelly d’Arányi who in 1924 premièred the score in London. Ravel [orchestrated](#) the piano part, and the version for violin and orchestra was introduced at Amsterdam the same year by Samuel Dushki and [Concertgebouw](#) under [Pierre Monteux](#). A virtuosic work with a distinct Hungarian Roma character sees Meyers respond with considerable assurance, providing colour and no shortage of style.

Recorded at Air Studios, London, the warm sound is first-class, clear, detailed and well balanced. My only grumble is with the timing which at under fifty minutes is meagre by current standards. There is room, for example, to have accommodated either the Rautavaara *Violin Concerto* or the Szymanowski *Second Violin Concerto*.

Meyers is on sparkling form. Her intonation is flawless and the lavish amount of tone colour she produces from her 1741 *Vieuxtemps* Guarneri del Gesù violin is remarkable. The outstanding Philharmonia provides model support. Kristjan Järvi draws playing of impressive warmth together with convincing feel for the music.

Michael Cookson

Ketil HVOSLEF (b. 1939)**Chamber Works No. IV**

Sekstet (1972) [12:33]

Beethoventrio (1997) [16:02]

Nordisk Kontrapunkt for Feler og Flasker (1973) [3:48]

Klaverkvintett (2003) [26:39]

Hvoslef Chamber Music Project

rec. Gunnar Sævig's Sal, The Grieg Academy, Bergen, 2015

LAWO CLASSICS LWC1130 [59:02]

This is the fourth in a series of discs (see [review of Volume 3](#)) aiming to present the complete chamber music of the Norwegian composer Ketil Hvoslef, and in many ways it is the most entertaining, it is certainly the most approachable. I have enjoyed the three previous releases in this series, but if I was to suggest a single disc to someone interested in getting to know his chamber music it would be this one, the composer's sense of humour shines through here making this disc more memorable than the others.

The disc opens with Hvoslef's Sextet which is scored for the unusual combination of oboe, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, violin and cello, and is the earliest chamber work to feature in the series. The composer talks of the work being influenced by his background as a jazz/pop pianist, but most importantly by the music of Stravinsky. The piece is cast in a single movement with each of the instruments has a starring role at one point or another; it has a rhythmic intensity that drives the music along through its various changes in tempo and thematic material, making this a very accessible work, a work that I feel would accompany a silent film of a cityscape well, with its hustle and bustle and monumental structures.

The Beethoventrio is not set for the usual instrumentation of a piano trio with the violin being replaced by a clarinet, but is not unique; indeed Beethoven set his Trio No. 4 in B flat Op. 11 for the same combination, and it is the light hearted motif from the final movement of this trio that Hvoslef quotes in his own work. This theme is treated in various ways throughout the trio, some blatant others as a variation on the theme, the result is exciting and humorous, although there is a sense of tension throughout. Hvoslef composed his Nordisk Kontrapunkt for Feler og Flasker, or Nordic Counterpoint for Fiddles and Bottles, as an intermission in a television program. Scored for two violins and Hansa beer bottles, this short piece is bound to bring a smile to your face.

The final work on the disc is also the longest and most recent, dating from some thirty one years after the Sextet. This is the most modern sounding work on this disc, with Hvoslef stating that "...I have, in this quintet, dared to approach the very limit the very limit for how minimalist it is possible to be. The piano part contains almost nothing!" This is not however, minimalism as you might have become aware, rather this is music cut to its bare bones. Opening with pizzicato strings there are also periods of silence which heighten the listening experience, with the piano joining the strings rather than having a leading role. The Quintet, as with all the pieces here, is in a single movement, although the second half of the piece restates and builds upon material used in the first half, this is music driven once again by changing rhythms, and in some ways is reminiscent of Messiaen. This is an impressive and strong work, and although it might not be as accessible as the other three works on this disc, it is the most impressive.

The Hvoslef Chamber Music Project is a group of musicians based around Bergen, the composers home that have been brought together by Ricardo Odriozola and Einar Røttingen specifically for this project. Their performance is excellent throughout, with this series growing in stature and my esteem as it progresses, performances like this only makes me long for the next instalment. The recorded sound and booklet note are also first rate.

Stuart Sillitoe

Gioachino ROSSINI (1792–1868)

Amor Fatale

Marina Rebeka (soprano)

Julia Heiler (mezzosoprano); Levy Sekgapane (tenor); Gianluca Margheri (baritone)

Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Münchener Rundfunkorchester/Marco Armiliato

No libretto.

rec. 2016/17, Bayerischer Rundfunk Studio 1, Munich

BR KLASSIK 900321 [68:43]

Latvian soprano Marina Rebeka has recorded a compilation of “powerful women” arias from Rossini’s operas. The theme is a good idea: there is in his corpus a plethora of female characters torn between love and loyalty, making a rich and homogeneous seam to be mined in a judiciously selected anthology. However, I have listened to it several times and find myself mostly unmoved by the experience, constantly longing to return to previous divas’ versions.

This has something to do with what I hear as a harsh, metallic quality of sound in her voice. I started with a favourite Rossini moment: Desdemona’s “Willow Song” from his *Otello*. There is simply no comparison between her version and that of Frederica von Stade in 1978. The old Philips sound was quite good, but the very clarity of the new recording merely serves to emphasise the brittle, Slavonic quality of Rebeka’s soprano compared with von Stade’s plangent, oboe-tones. Similarly, her ornamentation sounds exterior and applied compared with von Stade’s simpler, more vulnerable and deeply felt account. Von Stade lives the role, Rebeka sings it. Sometimes mere intellect – Rebeka wrote the coloratura herself based on studying Rossini’s manuscripts – is no substitute for heart and her elaborations are excessive to the stark misery of the simple, strophic song, which needs only some increasing complication to indicate Desdemona’s increasing distress and unhappiness if the melodic line is not to be disturbed. As a dramatic coloratura soprano, Rebeka rises to a top B flat whereas von Stade rise only to A flat but again, I find the slightly lower tessitura apt to the dark foreboding of the aria. Given that the distinction between mezzo and soprano was blurred in Rossini’s time, it is perfectly legitimate for a modern dramatic coloratura soprano to undertake these arias, but I find that Rebeka’s voice lacks the burnished colour that singers like Callas, Horne, Podles and Baltsa bring to them.

Furthermore, Rebeka’s Italian is occluded and “ingolata”; her swallowed French is equally incomprehensible. I find her voice simultaneously harsh and cloudy because of those homogenised vowels. Von Stade’s diction is much better and Rebeka’s intakes of breath are distractingly loud. She sings an abridged arrangement of Desdemona’s aria, excising the exchanges with Emilia about the wind, which add so much to the dramatic tension; why, when a mezzo was on hand for the *Moïse* quintet?

I turned next to arias made famous by such as Callas, Sills, Sutherland and Caballé and again, found myself wondering why I would choose to listen to Rebeka when I can hear those singers in *Semiramide* or *La donna del lago*?

I enjoyed her accounts of Mathilde’s arias from Rossini’s masterpiece, *Guillaume Tell*, more than anything else in this album as they were devised for a soprano of a lighter, more lyrical style and timbre. Rebeka sings them with a good line and some sweet top notes, her vibrato even and well controlled with none of the beat or wobble which is anathema to good Rossini singing. The *Armida* aria is also attractively, if a tad anonymously, delivered. Rebeka’s runs are fluent and unspirited but there is some shrillness in alt, little beauty in her voice and none of those moments which make you stop and gasp; everything is neatly executed but, accomplished as she is, much of what she does is for me devoid of interest.

Ralph Moore

Previous review: [Michael Cookson](#)

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Boris PAPANDOPULO (1906-1991)

Piano Concerto No. 3 (1959) [29:32]

Violin Concerto (1943) [45:49]

Oliver Triendl (piano)

Dan Zhu (violin)

Rijeka Opera Orchestra/Ville Matvejeff

rec. 2016, HNK Ivan pl. Zajc Rijeka

CPO 555 100-2 [67:31]

Papandopulo's father was a Russian aristocrat whose name discloses his Greek ancestry, whilst his mother was a famous Croatian singer, Maja Strozzi, admired by Thomas Mann for possessing what he called 'perhaps the most beautiful soprano voice of our time'. His family was profoundly cultured and steeped in the artistic milieu of Croatian creative life. His music is tremendously exciting and invigorating and draws on a wide corpus of influences, as the two concertos show.

One of his most devoted contemporary exponents on disc has been Oliver Triendl, one of the world's hardest working and yet under-appreciated recording artists. The 1959 Piano Concerto No.3 opens with some insinuating impressionist elements but these are soon dismissed in a welter of lilting melodies played first orchestrally and then extrapolated by the garrulous soloist. The ethos is droll, the mood filmic, with giocoso freedom pervasive. There is much made of the mock-brass attacks, the opening movement ending with the solo piano reflecting on earlier material. The central slow movement's lyric poetry and generous warmth is interrupted on occasion by Gershwin-esque paragraphs, though perhaps the model was the similar central movement in Ravel's Concerto. With a Boogie start, the finale ensures the concerto continues to cover stylistic bases – there's some more Gershwin in the solo passages – which makes the rather madcap cadenza all the more acceptable, as well as the very brash final furlong. This headlong, whimsical, pan-stylistic concerto has a great deal of heat and attractive, if necessarily derivative features. It's a bizarre joy to listen to.

The companion concerto is very different. For one thing it was completed in 1943. It's a much bigger structure, though once again crafted in three movements, full of texture and colour. It opens with a threnodic hymnal introduction and introduces a quasi-cadential passage for the soloist, whose throaty tone down in the lower strings is balanced by fluty upper voicings. There's some lovely contrapuntal writing for the winds and a vein of deep nostalgia running throughout over the extended span, as well as orchestral grandeur. The slow movement is a sweetly gentle fantasy on a Croatian song – beautiful, softly textured, the orchestra supplying a supportive tissue for the fiddle's spinning lied and its elfin, almost otherworldly elegies. The buoyant folk-inclined finale is bright and exciting.

These concertos are full of infectious rhythmic brio and exciting melodic and lyric panache. They have outstanding advocates in Triendl, Dan Zhu and the ever-perceptive marshalling hand of Ville Matvejeff, whose orchestra plays with intense commitment throughout in a well-judged acoustic. Documentation is excellent too, so if you fancy something fresh and zesty, lend an ear to this disc.

Jonathan WoolfPrevious review: [Rob Barnett](#)

Elizabeth MACONCHY (1907-1994)

Héloïse and Abelard

Hannah Francis (soprano), Tom McDonnell (baritone), Philip Langridge (tenor)

Croydon Philharmonic Choir

English Symphony Orchestra/James Gaddarn

rec. 3 March 1979, Fairfield Halls, Croydon, England

LYRITA REAM.1138 [72:04]

Described in the very extensive and detailed booklet note by Paul Conway as her “Magnum Opus” and a “consummate achievement”, Elizabeth Maconchy’s *Héloïse and Abelard* was first performed in Croydon on March 3 1979, recorded on that occasion by the BBC and broadcast eight months’ later. This mono recording is taken from that broadcast.

It is over a quarter of a century since I last reviewed a recording featuring music by Elizabeth Maconchy – on that occasion it was a disc of four of her 13 string quartets (which Conway describes as being “central to her output”) - and I certainly can’t recall having heard any of her music in the concert hall in all of that time. The 2000 edition of *Grove* assessed her place in history somewhat patronisingly as an “English composer of Irish descent, mother of Nicola Lefanu”, and while the BBC occasionally trots out recordings of her music, they are usually in programmes devoted to women composers. There was a flurry of releases (mostly, it has to be said, re-releases) around the time of her centenary, a decade ago, but very little of her music has since appeared on disc. Which is a great pity for not only did she produce a very substantial and wide-ranging output, but it is characterised by a firm and determined hand and fine workmanship.

Although it seems not to have been performed live since 2008 there is much to admire about *Héloïse and Abelard*. This takes the form of a nine-section cantata tracing the tragic love between a philosopher and his student. Maconchy stresses that she has drawn up a libretto which deals only in factual sources without romantic embellishment, but if the words tell the story without elaboration, the music more than makes up for it. Maconchy’s powerful, emotionally-charged, erotic, and intense writing, especially in the last five sections of the work, is anything but dispassionate.

Héloïse and Abelard opens with high drama, the chorus singing Latin words about the “pleasant spring time” but the music telling us that some great and terrible drama is about to unfold. We then move to the cloister of Notre Dame where Abelard, having just completed a lecture to his students, is confronted by Héloïse who begs to study philosophy with him. Here we are introduced to the three soloists. Hannah Francis is ideally cast as the young, innocent and admiring Héloïse, although her diction is often quite cloudy. Her instant admiration for her tutor sounds like the hero-worship of an adolescent girl, yet as the work proceeds, her strength of personality and her very adult approach to love and passion are conveyed equally convincingly. Convincing is not a word I would use to describe Tom McDonnell’s portrayal of Abelard. He certainly does have impeccable diction, but vocally he sounds too elderly and hearty to be the convincing object of a young girl’s affections, and there seems no real conviction behind his later declarations of love (“I desire to keep you, whom I love beyond measure”). Totally convincing in the role of Canon Fulbert (Héloïse’s uncle and Abelard’s eventual nemesis), Philip Langridge brings authority and substance. If there is a problem it lies in a voice which we have come to associate rather closely with Benjamin Britten’s music; but more of that later.

In the third section – “In Canon Fulbert’s House” – the love between Abelard and Héloïse is beautifully conveyed through some sumptuous orchestral writing and, not least, by Francis’s gorgeous vocal purity, especially as she recounts her feelings when alone in the woods. It is the orchestra in a brief, sparse and at times strident Interlude which conveys Fulbert’s fury at both learning that teacher and pupil are lovers and that his niece is pregnant. But this is immediately countered by the next scene, “In Brittany”, in which the chorus women and Héloïse nurse the young baby before Abelard’s return from Paris. Again, though, while the text says one thing, the music says

another; this is not a joyful birth nor a love which can survive. An acidic undertone informs just about everything the orchestra plays in this outwardly gentle movement, although there is a lurking sense that McDonnell is not best vocally suited to the role of ardent lover – it is hard to accept as sincere when he sings “When we are together I can think of nothing but our love”. However, there is a noticeable hardening of tone as Francis asks “Why did neither you nor my uncle think to consult me [about this proposed marriage]?”, and the hefty brass adds real venom to her outburst, “I prefer love to wedlock, and freedom to chains”. When she does eventually concede to the marriage, ominous orchestral chords tell us that things are not going to be good.

Fulbert’s anger with Abelard is vocally explosive in the next movement – “In Fulbert’s House in Paris” – and here we have perhaps the musical highlight of this performance; a brilliant virtuoso display from Langridge, whose hatred of Abelard, we learn, is fuelled more by his own desire for his niece than Abelard’s own treachery. His final command to have Abelard castrated leads directly into the next section where the crowd bewails Abelard’s fate and calls for vengeance against Fulbert in a remarkably controlled piece of choral writing – with an undercurrent of mob rule created by some background choral speaking.

Once again Maconchy shows a deft hand at dramatic pacing by following this outburst of violence with the peaceful chanting of nuns “At the Convent”, although a gritty woodwind undercurrent tells us that Héloïse is far from at peace with herself. Two of Abelard’s own texts follow, sung as choral hymns but with bitter harmonic underlay and desolate oboe descants. The final part is the funeral oration sung over Abelard’s grave, and it is just unfortunate that at the very end, Francis has a bit of a pitch wobble and sinks unconvincingly below the body of the chorus.

Buried deep within the very extensive and informative booklet notes which come with this release is a quote about Maconchy being concerned with “forceful, logical argument rather than emotion”. If that is true of some of her purely instrumental music, it is certainly not the case here. And while much of the music in the earlier sections of the work sounds barely distinguishable from the music of Benjamin Britten (something which this performance does nothing to disguise) as we move towards the ultimate tragedy, Maconchy’s music takes on a very different hue. There is passion and emotional depth here, showing a composer profoundly involved with the text and its repercussions on contemporary society. It could be suggested that this is a musical telling of a famous love story seen very much from a female perspective, but that would be to undermine the very intensity of Maconchy’s music, which depicts more the harshness and cruelty of a heartless moral code than the individual actions of men in their dealings with one particularly forceful female.

And what of the recording and performance? As always with a mono recording, there is that initial shock when a large sound seems horribly condensed within a single sound source. In this case, however, that shock is not merely the result of the recording, but of the performance. With the best will in the world, the Croydon Philharmonic Choir in 1979 cannot be said to have been one of the world’s leading choral societies, and it is perhaps unfortunate that they are at their most exposed in the very opening. Ragged ensemble, shaky intonation and muffled diction all give this a slightly shambolic feel; and while there is no significant improvement in their singing in later choral sections, by the time those later sections arrive, we have become so attuned to the musical idiom that it is both difficult and wrong to isolate the choral singing. What James Gaddarn achieves is a level of intensity and focus which this recording captures. I would wish to hear this work in a more fuller and broader sound, but as it stands this is a highly valuable release of a major choral work by a British composer, both of whom have fallen into relative obscurity.

Marc Rochester

Antonio STRADELLA (1639-1682)

Lagrime e Sospiri

Chantal Santon Jeffery (soprano)

Galilei Consort/Benjamin Chénier

Full Italian texts with translations in English and French

rec. 2017, Temple du Bon Secours, Paris, France

ALPHA CLASSICS 297 [58:05]

Antonio Stradella is an important – and perhaps still overlooked – link between the initial development of Italian opera by the likes of Monteverdi and then Cavalli and Cesti on the one hand, and high opera seria of the next generation on the other. Despite a sizeable body of other vocal and instrumental music, he may be more familiar to some listeners for the lurid details of his personal life, as dramatised partly in Friedrich von Flotow's stage work, which involved several love affairs, ending in his murder by hired assassins. This disc offers a welcome and more sober opportunity to assess his own contribution to the theatrical genres of opera and oratorio.

Extracts from five such works are given here, interspersed with some bright and adroit readings of their overtures, as well as that to *Le gare dell'amore eroico*, from Benjamin Chénier and the Galilei Consort. In general Chantal Santon Jeffery sings with great nobility and freshness of voice, full-toned and generous with vibrato in 'A che tardi a morir, misero core' from *Moro per amore* for example, but using less in her more emotionally raw and direct interpretation of the outer two portions of the four given here from *La forza dell'amor paterno*. In contrast, when treating the Biblical subject of St John the Baptist in 'Deh che più tardi... Queste lagrime' she is plangent and yearningly radiant, rather than hysterical, in a high vocal register on assuming the formidable role of Salome; or when taking up the faster middle two extracts from *La forza* here, her singing comes under no strain at all.

The liner notes rightly argue that the oratorios are effectively religious operas, composed and performed under circumstances that did not permit fully-fledged staging. Those who saw the Guildhall School's production of *San Giovanni Battista* in June 2014 will already have witnessed the theatrical possibilities of Stradella's score, and Santon Jeffery certainly realises the dramatic aspects of the extracts from that work and the other oratorios here. In the two scenes from *Santa Pelagia* she evokes the ambivalence of the saint as she comes to terms with the luxury and pleasures she has formerly enjoyed, but now seeks to put behind her in order to embrace a life of holiness and modesty. The bright vivacity of her singing for 'Strugge l'alma' is followed by an intense focus and control for 'Quanto mi alletta' which almost sounds like a different voice. In that oratorio's overture, Chénier instils a colourful, peppery timbre in his ensemble that surely sums up the saint's earlier life of richness. Purity and innocence are the marks of the singer's performance from *La Susanna* – the figure from the Biblical Apocrypha, who is wrongly accused of adultery – as she asks who will vindicate her.

Santon Jeffery is recorded quite closely, but her voice projects cleanly into the wider acoustic without obscuring the instrumental forces behind her, providing an ideal balance between dramatic spaciousness and immediacy. The one cause for regret is that, with the disc's running time a little shy of an hour, more extracts are not programmed. Even so, fans of Baroque vocal music should hear this, both for the singer and the engaging repertoire.

Curtis Rogers

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Richard STRAUSS (1864 – 1949)

The Complete Songs – 8

Nicky Spence (tenor: 1–16)

Rebecca Evans (soprano: 17-20)

Roger Vignoles (piano)

rec. 2016, All Saints' Church, East Finchley, London

Sung texts with English translations enclosed

HYPERION CDA68185 [64:23]

This ultimate volume in Hyperion's series of Richard Strauss's complete songs is an act of mopping up odd songs and groups of songs that had for various reasons been overlooked. It also represents a departure from the original decision "to record all of Strauss's 174 songs for voice and piano, but to ignore any that were composed directly for orchestra". The departure is the *Vier letzte Lieder*, the composer's Swansong. Of course there was a very last song, the beautiful *Malven*, never published in Strauss's lifetime and premiered in 1985 by Kiri Te Kanawa. It was included in volume 6, sung by Elizabeth Watts. And why shouldn't the *Vier letzte Lieder* be included, even though they are so very orchestrally conceived and Strauss never wrote a piano score? I'll come back to that and concentrate on the "real" piano songs first.

The opening song is one of the great ones, *Cäcilie*, which belonged to the four songs he presented to Pauline on their wedding day in 1894. The others were *Heimliche Aufforderung*, *Morgen!* and *Ruhe, meine Seele!* – and what a wedding present they were! Strauss may not be regarded as quite the equal of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf when looking at his total oeuvre, but these four definitively are equals, and *Cäcilie* stands out on this disc as a beacon surrounded by distant stars against a sky black as night. Close familiarity with a piece of music naturally makes it stand out from lesser known works, but the song has stature, a personal address you can't avoid. This is not to say that the other songs here are without interest. On the contrary, there are several attractive ones that I will return to with pleasure. A lot of music is agreeable and worth hearing over and over again, even though one hardly can classify them as masterworks. The lively and humorous *Bruder Liederlich* is one such, and the soft and inward *An Sie*, written two days earlier in August 1899, is memorable. It is sung mostly in half-voice, really memorably. This song should be performed more often! *Die sieben Siegel* is delicate, light and airy, *Ich sehe wie in einem Spiegel*, likewise. And *Morgenrot* with its transparent accompaniment is unmistakably Straussian. Several of these songs composed in the autumn and winter 1899/1900 are settings of Friedrich Rückert, who no doubt was inspirational to him. *Sie wissen nicht* (Oskar Panizza), written a year and a half later. It's a sweet little song about a bird who doesn't know that she is a beautiful nightingale.

From the turn of the century there is a jump in time to 1918. In the meantime Strauss had devoted much of his time to opera. *Salome* (1903-1905), *Elektra* (1906-1908), *Der Rosenkavalier* (1909-1910), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1911-1912), the second version of *Ariadne* (1915-1916) and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1914-1917) had occupied him and The Great War had shattered Central Europe forever. The songs he produced then are more elusive but of course not without merits. And Nicky Spence sings throughout this programme stylishly and beautifully – and with expression. Occasionally his bright high notes can be rather penetrating, but by and large this is excellent Lieder singing.

Finally we move to the year 1948, when Strauss created his last four songs between May and September. The piano transcription of the orchestral score of *Im Abendrot*, the earliest of the four but usually as here, placed last in the cycle, was made by Ernst Roth, Strauss's publisher at Boosey & Hawkes, while the other three was the work of Max Wolff. The transcriptions are sensitively made and run as close as possible to the orchestral score. In spite of that, and in spite of Roger Vignoles's excellent playing, the effect is a little like seeing a colour photo in black and white. Knowing the original colours of the full score it is still possible to conjure up the colours anyway and experience the flute trills, exquisitely played by Vignoles. But it is the singing of Rebecca Evans that really works magic. With the piano accompaniments she can hold back further and create an intimacy that makes

this reading stand out from all orchestral versions. Her hushed soft singing is truly magical and makes this disc required listening for all Straussians – and they will find a lot to admire in the largely little known songs that fall on Nicky Spence's lot.

The recording is out of Hyperion's top drawer and Roger Vignoles, who is the mastermind behind the whole series, provides one of his deeply illuminating essays in the booklet.

A glorious finale to this series!

Göran Forsling

Track listing

1. *Cäcilie*, Op. 27 No. 2 (1894) [2:21]
2. *Wenn ...* Op. 31 No. 2 (1895) [2:01]
3. *Bruder Liederlich* Op. 41 No. 4 (1899) [3:20]
4. *An Sie* Op. 43 No. 1 (1899) [3:36]
5. *Die Ulme zu Hirsau* Op. 43 No. 3 (1899) [4:53]

6. *Ein Obdach gegen Sturm und Regen* Op. 46 No. 1 (1900) [2:20]
7. *Gestern war ich Atlas* Op. 46 No. 2 (1899) [2:57]
8. *Die sieben Siegel* Op. 46 No. 3 (1899) [2:14]
9. *Morgenrot* Op. 46 No. 4 (1900) [3:33]
10. *Ich sehe wie in einem Spiegel* Op. 46 No. 5 (1900) [5:30]

11. *Sie wissen's nicht* Op. 49 No. 5 (1901) [2:31]
12. *Junggesellenschwur* Op. 49 No. 6 (1901) [2:24]

- Drei Lieder aus den Büchern des Unmuts des Rendsch Nameh (1918) [4:51]
13. *Wer wird von der Welt verlangen* Op. 67 No. 4 [1:44]
14. *Hab' ich euch denn je geraten* Op. 67 No. 5 [2:11]
15. *Wanderers Gemütsruhe* Op. 67 No. 6 [0:57]

16. *Der Pokal* Op. 69 No. 2 (1918) [1:30]

- Vier letzte Lieder Op. posth. (1948) [20:20]
17. *Frühling* (piano transcription by Max Max Wolff) [3:30]
18. *September* (piano transcription by Max Max Wolff) [4:40]
19. *Beim Schlafengehn* (piano transcription by Max Max Wolff) [5:11]
20. *Im Abendrot* (piano transcription by Ernst Roth) [7:00]

Richard STRAUSS (1864-1949)

***Salome*, Op. 54**

Birgit Nilsson (Salome); Eberhard Wächter (Jochanaan); Gerhard Stolze (Herod); Grace Hoffman (Herodias); Waldemar Kmentt (Narraboth); Josephine Veasey (Herodias' Page); Liselotte Maikl (A Slave); Paul Kuen (First Jew); Stefan Schwer (Second Jew); Kurt Equiluz (Third Jew); Aron Gestner (Fourth Jew); Max Proebstl (Fifth Jew); Tom Krause (First Nazarene); Nigel Douglas (Second Nazarene); Zenon Kosnowski (First Soldier); Heinz Holecek (Second Soldier); Theodor Kirschbichler (A Cappadocian)

Wiener Philharmoniker / Sir Georg Solti

rec. 1961, Sofiensaal, Vienna

BD-A in Dolby True HD LPCM 2.0

Hardcover booklet in English, French & German, including synopsis & libretto

DECCA 483 1498 CD/BD-A [100:36]

***Elektra*, Op. 58**

Birgit Nilsson (Elektra); Regina Resnik (Klytämnestra); Marie Collier (Chrysothemis); Gerhard Stolze (Aegisth); Tom Krause (Orest); Tugomir Franc (Orest's Tutor); Margareta Sjöstedt (Confidante); Margarita Lilowa (Train-bearer); Gerhard Unger (Young Servant); Leo Heppe (Old Servant); Pauline Tinsley (Overseer); Helen Watts (First Maid); Maureen Lehane (Second Maid); Yvonne Minton (Third Maid); Jane Cook (Fourth Maid); Felicia Weathers (Fifth Maid)

Wiener Philharmoniker / Sir Georg Solti

rec. 1966, Sofiensaal, Vienna

BD-A in Dolby True HD LPCM 2.0

Hardcover booklet in English, French & German, including synopsis & libretto

DECCA 483 1494 CD/BD-A [107:50]

There's an old adage in law and politics that you should never ask a question you don't already know the answer to. This has wider reach, as I found to my embarrassment when co-convening a seminar on music and sound recording in the late 1970s. The principal guest was John Culshaw, producer of these recordings of *Salome* and *Elektra*. I was managing the technical side of the discussion, and decided on a whim to ask John to explain Decca's 'SonicStage', which is touted for both productions. Expecting some elaboration about singers moving about on numbered squares to achieve a kind of virtual reality, John simply looked bemused and replied "well, it doesn't mean anything, really" and adding, in effect, that it was just an advertising slogan [1].

Such are the myths and misconceptions of sound recording and reproduction. Add the dopamine buzz of music, and a strange chemistry happens which makes listeners want to believe a whole lot of things they rationally shouldn't. It soon sank in what John was talking about, as by then having accumulated some experience in sound engineering myself, I realised that especially in the early days of stereo, what Decca were doing was really the only practical way of achieving natural perspectives, and indeed its competitors were doing much the same thing. More on that later.

The enduring success of both these recordings is not surprising when you consider their makeup. Within the charged atmosphere of Strauss's operatic realisations of Wilde's play for *Salome* and Hofmannthal's libretto for *Elektra*, there is a synergy between conductor, orchestra, soloists and production team that delivers something uniquely special. Georg Solti was very much in his element, especially in *Salome* where his natural instincts for precision, relentless tension and irresistible drive pull the listener almost bodily into the dystopian aura of Herod's court, never letting go until the anti-heroine is crushed beneath the soldiers' shields. For that part, Birgit Nilsson is *sui generis*; whether or not one feels in the aural presence of a seductive teenager, the glorious singing and sonic fantasy of it all create their own spectacle. Her voice's typically hard edge only enhances Salome's wickedness, and its maturity and power leave you in no doubt her depraved temptress means business. Nilsson's final scene is a *tour de force*, one of the greatest in recorded opera, where you cannot help but be in Salome's thrall; she is as eerily alluring as she is repulsive, and you are a willing voyeur to this scene of

morbid horror, a piece of sensual *grand guignol* as John Culshaw described it. At its culmination where Salome kisses the lifeless Jochanaan's lips, Nilsson is spotlighted to be almost whispering in your ear – or are you now Jochanaan? – an effect some might say is a touch of genius, others perhaps cheap and tacky, but it's there, and a reminder of one of the most creative periods in gramophone history for the recording of opera, when producers such as Culshaw believed that special measures were needed to bring the full impact and imagery of opera into the home.

With much the same venomous atmosphere and of similar scale, Solti's *Elektra* is also a vivid experience. Likewise, a hard-edged Nilsson as the eponymous *femme fatale* brings out all the dominant brutality of the role. But while there is nothing conciliatory in *Salome*, the later work is more emotionally layered, and here Solti and his principal star are rather caught out when the venom recedes for the Recognition Scene between Elektra and Orestes. In softening her voice, Nilsson goes a little flat while Solti, gung-ho elsewhere in pouring on the orchestral bile, fails to fully convey the languorous warmth of this moment, suggesting instead thwarted adrenaline. And speaking of the orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic play superbly throughout, with the cohesion of a single organism.

If it appears I'm neglecting the other elements, my purpose here is to highlight the core common features that define these recordings. Suffice it to say that the casts for both could hardly be bettered; witness, for example, singers of the calibre of Helen Watts and Yvonne Minton in minor roles. What's possibly more important is how well suited these singers were to the production approach, in amplitude and power throughout their ranges, to achieve natural balances and sustain dramatic flow. In this they succeed handsomely, and were it not for some minor hiccups in *Elektra*, it would be difficult to separate the two productions. As it is, I believe *Salome* to be the greater achievement.

Both operas were recorded in Vienna while Decca was also engaged in the Wagner *Ring* project. Between *Salome* and *Elektra*, the same team recorded *Götterdämmerung*, using a refurbished control room in the Sofiensaal, so there were differences at least in the technology supporting each production, if not in the production approach. A very good behind-the-scenes glimpse is given in Humphrey Burton's *The Golden Ring*, made during the recording of *Götterdämmerung*. The frequent criticism of recessed voices in these recordings, which I admit doesn't bother me, did apparently trouble the singers, as Burton observes during a control room playback scene that they "are more concerned with being heard through the orchestra". As the vision shows, the singers are on a stage (the 'sonic stage', if you like!) behind the orchestra, covered by three spaced microphones at the front, and being guided by assistant producers to pre-determined positions to deliver their lines. As I understand it, Decca preferred going straight into stereo even when multi-tracking was available (a multi-track machine is shown in the Sofiensaal footage, presumably for back-up [2]), rather than adjusting balances post-production. What you essentially hear, therefore, is two overlaid stereo images, one for the voices and one for the orchestra, balanced and preserved in real time for all time [3]. It strikes me that the singers in *Elektra* are a little more forward in the mix, but that may be due to the sparser orchestral textures – the sound in general is not as sumptuous as it is for *Salome*. Certainly the 'special effects', such as the over-dubbed voices of anguish during *Orest is tot!*, leap out rather alarmingly and unnaturally.

Decca were also renowned for driving their tape technology hard, and the generally high levels with frequent hints of tape saturation suggest these are highly modulated recordings. The natural compression kept up a high level of intensity, a forerunner perhaps of today's 'loudness wars'. The sustained impact worked well in LP days, keeping surface noise relatively subdued, with the occasional congestion nothing unexpected as end-of-side distortion was the norm anyway. Digital technology ruthlessly exposes such imperfections, but for the most part, the recordings hold up very well.

As best I can tell, this is the third time these recordings have appeared in digital format, following previous reissues of *Salome* in 1985 and 2006, and *Elektra* in 1986 and 2007. For new buyers or collectors who do not already have these performances on their shelves, this is not a problem – if you have any regard at all for these Strauss operas, these recordings couldn't be more strongly

recommended, not only on musical and production grounds, but as significant pieces of gramophone history.

For those who already have the previous releases, however, there may be perplexing questions. The 2006/7 reissues were in the Decca *Originals* series, promoted as high resolution (hi-res) digital transfers of the original analogue mastertapes which, by implication, the 1985/6 transfers were not. How so? Leaving resolution aside for the moment, I recently came across a 2015 *Guardian* [article](#) on the CD's history, in which an industry executive is reported as saying: "We're making a huge mistake. We're putting studio-quality masters into the hands of people." I'd suggest in fact this penny dropped industry-wide from the outset, as indications are that copy-masters were used instead of originals for many early reissues [4]. The majors would have been awash with these copy-masters, having been produced for making LPs, pre-recorded cassettes and the like, and were ready-made for transfer to CD. Copy-masters, though, can have significantly greater noise, distortion and compression than the originals, sounding more strident, muddled and opaque. Is that the case with the 1985/86 transfers?

Comparing different transfers of the same recording with any rigour requires, at least, that it be done blind, and at identical volume levels for each sample. Too often I read about listeners, including reviewers, doing comparisons in such a casual way that preconceptions and existing beliefs will overwhelm good judgement, not to mention group-think in collective situations. Cutting to the chase, I compared samples of my 1985/86 transfers with the current CD transfers (I'll get to the BD-A later). Blind comparison [5] on loudspeakers showed the earlier transfers to be at a slightly lower level, but once equalised to the same volume, I couldn't reliably distinguish them from the new transfers. Only on headphones could I detect some consistent differences, relating mainly to image instability on the earlier transfers which I would attribute to some tape dropout – if indeed the 1985/86 transfers were from copy-masters, they were very good ones. Omnipresent was the trademark Decca stridency of that era, which I've [commented](#) on elsewhere. Here, at least, it adds to the shrill and sinister atmosphere.

Now, you might be saying, surely the hi-res remastering would make a difference? Well, not necessarily – as a CD at least, you're still hearing it in standard format. And further, considering just the transfer of stereo analogue tapes from this era to digital media, the CD is *prima facie* more than adequate, comfortably exceeding both the frequency and dynamic ranges of the older technology [6], and effectively transcribing without error. This assertion can be extended to all stereo sources, as indeed it has been vigorously argued [7] in the online trenches, and largely supported by the research studies [8] about the limits of human hearing and what listeners can and can't differentiate. Nothing defines the quality of what you hear better than the quality of the original source material, but 'remastered' [9] is such a magic word for some, anticipating all sorts of miracles that, frankly, won't happen, but you can't stop people hearing what they want to hear. In this case, what more would you want than an exact transcription of the original Decca tapes as heard during playback in the Sofiensaal control room? No tricks, really, just use the *actual* original masters, in carefully managed digital transfers [10]. Personally, by the way, I don't mind tape-hiss.

Which leads to the BD-A disc included with both sets. With its hi-res content, BD-A contains a lot more information than CD [11], and is technically a more 'perfect' copy of the analogue source, but can you hear it? The research mentioned above suggests the audible difference of any hi-res source is marginal at best, so the largely anecdotal claims about BD-A transfers, such as 'revelatory', seem rather extreme. If it were true for these releases, it would be fair to ask whether different sources or signal processing had been used. Comparatively, the main functional advantage of BD-A in this case, being of a stereo source [12], is that the whole of each one-act opera can be accommodated on its BD-A disc, and heard without a break. Artistically and emotionally, this is a considerable advantage, although in the case of the *Elektra* BD-A, there is a pause (effectively between the first and second CDs) which deviates from Strauss's score. For those however without a score in hand, the pause, lasting barely more than a second, would hardly register were it not for the sudden loss of ambience following *Elektra's* *Worüber freut sich das Weib?*, momentarily creating a kind of a sonic vacuum.

Blind comparison of BD-A versus CD sources is a physically fraught matter unless you're organised for it, including tolerant, helping hands. An indirect [13] but less onerous test of whether BD-A sound differs from CD is to run the Blu-ray player (or DAC) outputs alternatively through a 'CD quality' A/D/A chain, carefully equalise the levels, and have someone switch between them, noting the listener's preferences. This I did [14], sampling both PCM and Dolby True HD layers, and could only differentiate between the two signals at high levels on very quiet passages by the slightly higher noise in the CD simulation, which had no added dither. No revelations, I'm afraid, which is not to say definitively there are no audible differences between the BD-A and CD versions of these reissues, but my general listening contained no 'Eureka' moments of added enlightenment. Indeed, if there were any, my first hunch would be that there were differences in the mastering of the two versions, including interventions to subliminally suggest a difference – some subtle EQ, for example.

Reviewing recorded music is by and large a subjective business. On both performance and sound, it's more about what is *liked* than whether any absolutes are satisfied. When it comes, however, to comparing transcriptions of the same original recording, stricter methods and criteria can be applied which are meaningful both in the objective assessment of the result, and the validation of any claims made for it. Or as Vernon Handley said about his side of the music game: "you shouldn't fraudulently convince people that they have heard what they haven't" (*Sunday Times*, 1984). I can understand why the recording companies manage these classic archives as they do, for example to keep copyright control and to maintain a reasonable income stream from them, but I do wish they would be a little more upfront about what they are actually offering for sale. Too often, it appears, we're getting the 'same old, same old' material, possibly a fresher generation of the original master, cynically dressed up as a technological advance. How would we actually know when we've struck gold [15]? As with the imaginary 'SonicStage' [16], we now have Blu-ray 'Pure Audio' dangled evocatively before us. Pure audio? Well, I suppose there are no pictures – moving ones, anyway. What next for *Salome* and *Elektra*? Why, vinyl of course! Nothing actually, objectively, superior there, but riding a wave of public sentiment never hurt any entrepreneurial spirit, or to quote another old adage: follow the money.

If I appear to have strayed from my mission here, it's only to underline that recordings such as these are so important that everything about them now deserves to be heard. Perhaps it is, but my experience in the audio game and as a record collector has bred both knowledge and scepticism which look critically at all such reissues and ask 'is this it?'. The signs that we are at last hearing the studio originals can be confusing, particularly with highly modulated Decca tapes such as these. But I'm reassured at least by the rock-steady, well-defined stereo images of these new releases that they're about as close as we are likely to get. In answer to my earlier hypothetical to collectors who already have the previous issues, as well as a Blu-ray player, the advantage of playing each opera without a break is considerable, and for whatever other virtues you perceive for the BD-A medium. The new sets are also attractively packaged and should take up less shelf space. In short, buy them.

Des Hutchinson

Previous reviews: [John Quinn](#) (Salome – Recording of the Month) ~ [Paul Corfield Godfrey](#) (Elektra)

Notes:

- [1] In his later memoir *Putting the Record Straight* (Secker & Warburg, 1981), John Culshaw relates that this 'spoof' originated when he suggested, dead-pan, that in Decca's *Rheingold* recording, the voices of the Rhinemaidens could be heard coming from *below* the Rainbow Bridge. This was swallowed by most of the music press and, now emboldened, Culshaw's team suggested for *Salome* that they had invented an entirely new approach to operatic recording, calling it 'SonicStage'. Decca's advertising machine embraced the slogan, and it became unstoppable. But as Culshaw reflected "there was not a jot of difference between *Salome* and any other opera we had recorded in Vienna for the past three years". While he somewhat regretted the episode, he

saw it as “a kind of private revenge on those critics who persisted in parading their prejudices”.

- [2] According to Mike Gray in [The Decca Sound: Secrets of the Engineers](#): “Decca always wanted to mix to two tracks, although they had four-track backups as early as the late ’50s”. This begs the questions: What happened to these four-track and other multi-track masters of this and the later analogue era? How many are still available for re-mixing and re-mastering, or were the majority destroyed or re-used once the original stereo master had been produced?
- [3] Once multi-tracking became the industry norm, opera recordings usually involved one microphone per singer, with its own track, and then mixed with pan-and-fade to the stereo master in post-production. If the multi-track tapes were retained, these could potentially be re-mixed to a new, and superior, digital stereo master, since the original analogue stereo master was effectively a tape copy.
- [4] My *Exhibit A* for this practice is the first CD reissue of Otto Klemperer’s Beethoven symphonies on EMI. As an experienced recordist, I suspected from the flat, lifeless and steely sound that these were not from original masters, but the real tell-tale signs that these were from the copy-masters used for cutting the LPs (SLS 788/9) were the rapidly truncated reverberation at the end of each movement, and other artefacts such as switching ‘clicks’ in identical places on both the LPs and CDs. Later re-issues of these recordings by EMI (e.g. in the Klemperer Legacy and GROC series) had none of these issues, and sounded noticeably ‘fresher’.
- [5] Tracks used for comparison: *Salome* CD1: (1) & (11), CD2: (3) & (4); *Elektra* CD1: (1) & (8), CD2: (1) & (8). My selection was limited by differences in the cueing of several tracks between the 1985/86 reissues and the new ones, which eliminated those tracks from blind comparison. The earlier sets were cued with greater precision. I had wanted to use the same *Salome* track referred to in the September [Listening Studio](#) report (*Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund*), but the new transfer begins with a fragment from the previous track. I also noted this track has frequent tape overload which is manifestly audible on all digital media.
- [6] For example, the Studer A62 professional stereo tape recorder, introduced in 1965 and a common standard at the time, specified a frequency range of 15kHz and a signal-to-noise ratio of 55dB at 15 inches-per-second. Fully modulated, this gave an effective dynamic range of about 65dB. This is comfortably covered by the 16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling rate of the CD, which provides for a dynamic range (effectively a dynamic window) of 96dB and a frequency range of 22.05kHz. With dither (see first article referenced in note [7]), this can be further improved.
- [7] For example, a widely cited 2012 [article](#) on 24/192 downloads, and “why they make no sense”, by Christopher Montgomery, a digital audio engineer who heads the non-profit Xiph.org Foundation that’s responsible for the Opus, Ogg Vorbis, and FLAC digital audio codecs. As with any article of this kind, self-interest must be taken into account, but I find his arguments to be based on solid science and research evidence, and generally free of hyperbole. Note particularly his coverage of anti-aliasing filters and intermodulation effects. Readers however may prefer to side, say, with the 2010 [paper](#) on hi-res audibility by Dr. Hans R.E. van Maanen.
- [8] Among a plethora of studies on hi-res audibility, the Audio Engineering Society (AES) has in recent years published two widely discussed papers: the [2007 study](#) by the Boston Audio Society (BAS) entitled “Audibility of a CD-Standard A/D/A Loop Inserted into High-Resolution Audio Playback”, and the [2016 study](#) by the Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) entitled “A Meta-Analysis of High Resolution Audio Perceptual Evaluation”. The BAS study, involving actual listening tests, found that subjects effectively couldn’t differentiate between hi-res (SACD) and CD quality, while the QMUL study, a meta-analysis of several smaller, less conclusive studies, found that subjects who’d received “extensive training” were able to differentiate better than those who hadn’t. The overall difference in statistical significance reported by the studies is not large, the BAS result of

50% implying subjects were simply guessing, while the QMUL result of 51% (untrained) and 62% (trained) suggests subjects were still guessing much of the time. The QMUL study devotes some effort to critically scrutinising the BAS study, noting that its results had been disputed, including through the online forum www.hydrogenaud.io. But equally, the QMUL study has been [disputed](#) on the same forum. The AES Journal has [plans](#) for a special issue on hi-res audio, with a target publication date of July/August 2018. As they say, watch this space.

- [9] Not to be confused with 'restored', 're-imagined' or other verbal sophistry the recording industry is prone to use. I simply refer to a digital transfer that gives the home listener, in this case, an audibly accurate, warts-and-all reproduction of the original analogue stereo masters, or a replication of the original stereo mix if original multi-track masters are still available.
- [10] For one brief, shining moment this may have happened with the earliest CD reissues of Bruno Walter's stereo recordings with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, allegedly digitised directly from the original mastertapes. I don't believe they've ever sounded so good. This maybe caused the industry to take fright, and thence exercise 'quality control' on its own terms. Their saving grace may have been the relatively low demand for these particular reissues, and that the original recordings were good but not great.
- [11] The 24-bit, 96kHz sampling rate cited for these transfers gives a frequency range of 48kHz and dynamic range of 144dB which, as observed in note [6], would greatly exceed the requirements for covering the frequency and dynamic ranges of the original tapes. Arguably, therefore, a large portion of digital data on the BD-A is of no musical or sonic value. There appears to be a misconception of associating audio resolution with video resolution, i.e. 'pixel density', when in fact it is quite different. In particular, the expansion above 16 bits was primarily to give engineers more headroom for digital recording (Decca, I understand, were using 18 bits from the outset). In a fully modulated 24-bit recording, only the first 14 to 16 bits are likely to be musical signal, with the rest occupied by sub-audible noise (the 17th bit is at -102dB). Shaving off the lowest 8 bits and perhaps adding dither should therefore make no difference for normal listening. Those wishing to challenge this are advised to first take out hearing insurance.
- [12] I am excluding any 'special features' of coding formats or players, such as the fabrication of subwoofer information, from my strict stereo-vs-stereo comparison for both types of media, to be consistent with the configuration of the original source material.
- [13] This is the method used for the BAS study (see note [8]).
- [14] Sadly, I can only offer a sample of one, namely myself. Why doesn't the assistant also do the listening test? Usual response is "Who cares?"! I'll also add that those enquiring after my listening equipment will be disappointed. To quote the old sales response about the horsepower of a Rolls-Royce, it's "adequate". As I've also designed and built much of it myself, indulging in 'brand wars' will be unproductive. There's also futility in me saying I can't hear any revelations on System X, when you will say "Oh, but you can on System Y" - perchance I then get to hear System Y and, rigorously tested, I still record a null result, you'll then likely say "Oh, but you need a hearing test". And so it goes on and on. I'm open to discussion, though, on the related science, technology and research methodology issues.
- [15] Without knowing what I'm actually getting in terms of originality, my preference is always to purchase the SACD or BD-A version of a reissued recording, if available. Two principal reasons: access to multichannel sound (if so encoded), and potentially better production values. Especially for older analogue recordings in multichannel, the companies are compelled to go back to original studio masters instead of just digitising another n^{th} generation stereo copy for the next CD release, and calling it 'remastered'. The BAS study (see [8]) noted that poor production values had contributed to the CD's bad reputation and, conversely, that hi-res equivalents are "made with

great care and manifest affection ... that sound as good as they can make them". The authors further conclude, as a result of their findings, that "all of these recordings could be released on conventional CDs with no audible difference."

- [16] Curiously, the new booklet for *Salome* contains an abridgement of John Culshaw's essay on 'SonicStage' from the original LP set, apparently oblivious to what he later said about it (see note [1]). (No mention of 'SonicStage' is made in the 1985 CD reissue.) This, together with the rather imprecise cueing on both new sets and the unscripted gap in the *Elektra* BD-A, suggest some lack of care and artistic oversight.