



E. Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works Vol. 1

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Fine performances of familiar and less-familiar music are the hallmarks of these recordings. The re-release of Douglas Bostock's Carl Nielsen cycle concludes with very well-played and idiomatic versions of Nielsen's first and last symphonies. No. 1 is essentially Romantic in approach but less so in scale: it is smaller and less grandiose than many other works of its time – it is roughly contemporaneous with Brahms' Fourth and Mahler's First. Among its more interesting characteristics are its typical-for-Nielsen uncertainty of keys (G minor and C major), its interesting interpretative conceptualization (the first movement is marked *Allegro orgoglioso*), and a scherzo whose rhythmic swing presages Nielsen's later symphonic writing. None of this, however, prepares listeners unfamiliar with Nielsen for his Symphony No. 6, whose composer-given title of "Sinfonia semplice" may have been Nielsen's idea of a joke: the work is anything but simple and is nothing like his first five symphonic entries. First performed in 1925, the symphony has many elements of devilry, some of warmth, and a few of outright oddity – notably in the finale, which sounds like a pastiche of musical forms and ends with a bassoon figuratively thumbing its aural nose at the audience. This is a very odd and very intriguing work, and Bostock does a fine job of letting its often-contradictory elements come to the fore at appropriate times. Also on the CD is Nielsen's very early (1887) *Andante Tranquillo* and *Scherzo*, an attractive little work for strings that marked the composer's public debut – with Nielsen playing the violin in the orchestra that first performed it.

Unlike Nielsen, Edvard Grieg was no symphonist, although he did write one work in that form (which he suppressed but which is still played from time to time). Grieg was essentially a miniaturist, and even his longer pieces, such as the well-known Piano Concerto, tend to sound like enlargements of beautifully formed small pieces, artfully strung together. Norwegian violinist/conductor Eivind Aadland, who grew up near Grieg's villa in Bergen and has performed chamber music with pianists using Grieg's own piano, has a longstanding interest in his country's folk music, which was a major influence on Grieg and appears in a variety of guises – some clear, some less so – in Grieg's music. Aadland is therefore an excellent choice for Audite's planned cycle of all Grieg's symphonic works, and the first volume is everything a listener could hope for. Aadland makes the most familiar music seem remarkably fresh, such as "Morning Mood" at the start of the first Peer Gynt suite, by emphasizing the folkloric elements and bringing out the middle voices as prominently as those of the main theme. There is lightness and transparency in all the music here, even when the works are weighty, as is the bleak Funeral March in Memory of Rikard Nordraak for winds and percussion (which Grieg also wanted played at his own funeral). The rhythms of the Symphonic Dances snap along very effectively, and the contrasting moods of the short works that make up the suites from Grieg's music for Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt are beautifully communicated. Aadland has a sure sense of just

how much emotion to wring from this music – and not wring: “The Death of Åse,” for example, is rendered all the more effective by being played without the hugely swelling intensity that most conductors bring to it. It becomes a tender and lovely lament, not a deep tragedy, and that is entirely appropriate, since Peer Gynt is a picaresque satire, not a Shakespearean exploration of humanity’s depths. Aadland is a remarkably fine exponent of the Grieg works heard on this SACD, which boasts exceptionally clear sound that further enhances the conductor’s approach. If the other discs in this series are at the same high level, these SACDs will be must-haves.

Naxos’ Sousa series is already a must-have for those who enjoy the music of the March King. And while Sousa’s works are in many ways quintessentially American, the ninth volume of the series has a distinctly Norwegian touch, being played not by the Royal Artillery Band (which Keith Brion led in the first eight volumes) but by Kongelige Norske Marines Musikkorps, the Royal Norwegian Navy Band. And a top-notch band this turns out to be, with a very strong military orientation among its 29 members and a long history of excellence in performance (the band was founded in 1820). Certainly Sousa did not write only military music, but when he did – as in the U.S. Field Artillery March (1917), heard on this recording – he offered bands a real chance at grandeur, which the Norwegian ensemble fully embraces. Indeed, although this march is now the official march of the United States Army, Norway’s navy-band members make it their own with tremendous spirit and excellent playing. They do an equally fine job with the other marches on this CD: From Maine to Oregon (1913), Flags of Freedom (1918), The Man behind the Gun (1899), The Chantyman’s March (1918), Harmonica Wizard (1930), and University of Illinois March (1929). Most of the titles show the overt American focus of these works, but this recording confirms their universality and considerable attractiveness. And the CD, like other entries in this excellent series, also includes some of Sousa’s non-march music: the overture to *The Charlatan* (a musical show from 1898); *Nymphalin* (a salon piece from 1880 in which Sousa includes a lovely violin solo, here played affectingly by Sarah Oving); *The Dwellers of the Western World* (a three-movement suite from 1910 depicting American Indians, European settlers and America’s African population); *The Lily Bells* (an 1895 arrangement of a charming love song from an 1880 Sousa comedy); and *When My Dreams Come True* (a 1929 set of variations on popular songs of the day, one of which is “He’s Going to Marry Yum Yum” from *The Mikado*). Fortright and mostly good-humored, Sousa’s very American music has continued appeal even in our more cynical age, and Brion’s conducting of the Royal Norwegian Navy Band makes it clear that it has international appeal as well.