



Edvard Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works Vol. III

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International Record Review (Robert Matthew-Walker - 2013.09.01)

RECORD REVIEW
I have been much impressed with Eivind Aadland's earlier volumes in this ongoing series of Grieg's complete orchestral music (reviewed in July/August and November 2011). In the main this new release continues in a similar excellent manner, with beautifully prepared and finely proportioned performances that go far beyond the familiar 'rehearse-record' production line of many earlier recordings.

I would not recommend discarding the first complete set of Grieg's orchestral works, on the BIS label, played by the Bergen Philharmonic under Ole Kristian Ruud (a set that was made at my instigation) – for those discs are consistently fine and remain the only set recorded by a Norwegian orchestra (of which Grieg himself was Music Director for a time). However, this superbly original music can certainly withstand more than one approach, and I warmly welcome Aadland's views on this music.

The disc opens with Grieg's earliest work for orchestra, the overture in Autumn. Early it may have been in original creation, but the only edition we know is the edited and reorchestrated version made 22 years later, in 1888, which was first performed in Birmingham. It is a problematic work, in that it can so easily appear rather bland and uninspired: not even Beecham could wholly rescue it from such a fate, although his 1955 recording is probably the best interpretation overall, but Ruud and Aadland run him close (and their recording quality is so much better). Although I am not much of a conductor, I feel that the work would surely benefit from an interpretation which ever so slightly exaggerates the inherent changes in the score – those of tempo, dynamic and phrasing – for it seems as though the music would respond better if it were considered along the lines of a Lisztian symphonic poem, rather than (as all three conductors do, to some degree) applying a 'sonata-form' approach to adjust the music to a form which does not quite suit it. What I am saying, of course, is that no recording entirely convinces me that the conductors are fully certain of the music's worth, but of the later recordings Aadland edges it.

Aadland has the advantage of truly firstclass orchestral playing: the Cologne WDR Sinfonieorchester is a fine orchestra indeed, and its account of the Lyric Suite is notable for its excellence and the apt tempos Aadland adopts. To those who remember it, this is the equal of Erik Tuxen's Decca account with the Danish State Radio Orchestra from 1953. Another outstanding track here is 'Klokkeklang' ('Bell-Ringing'), that unbelievably forward-looking masterpiece from 1891, which surely opened Debussy's ears, and which in the orchestral version must have also inspired Diaghilev to give Stravinsky the Russian's first commission – to orchestrate a few of Grieg's piano pieces for the Ballets Russes. Aadland's performance here is the finest I have ever heard and the orchestra plays superbly throughout.

Grieg's Op. 51 was first published as Old Norwegian Melody with Variations for two

pianos: in that version, it greatly impressed the young Delius, and around a dozen years later Grieg produced an orchestral version, tightening the structure by omitting one variation and shortening the finale. He also subtly retitled it as Old Norwegian Romance with Variations but I think he missed a trick here: in the new version, it is actually a set of Symphonic Variations: had he applied that title to the new version I am convinced it would have received many more performances. As it is, the revised work's title is redolent of late-Victorian pictorialization, suggesting something that our great-grandparents might have listened to with a smile on their faces: but it is a far stronger work than that implies, and is one of the first major orchestral works to bring folk music, as the basis for a large work, into the concert hall – the piece was surely a major inspiration for Delius's Brigg Fair of 1908.

Beecham also recorded these variations and I can pay Aadland no greater compliment than to set his alongside Beecham's recording as an interpretation: the younger man's control of structure and quality of his orchestra make this a first choice for the work, yet there is something in the Bergen orchestra's turn of phrase, its almost instinctive response to this music, which cannot be gainsaid. The three orchestral studies from Sigurd Jorsalfar are fully up to the interpretative standards of the other music on this disc; the conductor holds the myriad tempos of the concluding 'March' together admirably and the balance Aadland achieves from his orchestra throughout is first-class.

The recording quality is of the highest standard, yet the booklet notes, although adequate, are not quite in the same league. Nonetheless, this is another highly successful issue in an important series.