



Edvard Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. V

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Recording of the month

Sometimes you open up an innocent looking CD and discover a box of treasures. That's what this one is like. Not having listened to any Grieg for a little while, I was pleased enough to come across this recording but it turns out to be full of truly wonderful things. Plenty of variety too, with short orchestral works, incidental music, and songs with orchestra.

It's these last – the songs – that lie at the heart of this collection, and bring its most memorable experiences. The soprano Camilla Tilling is a rare talent, and is to be heard at her best in this Scandinavian repertoire. I first heard her in a fine CD of Strauss songs with piano, and was struck then with the freshness of her tone, the open, natural manner of her singing. That is again the case here, perhaps enhanced by the character of the Norwegian language though she herself is Swedish.

All the songs are sung with great beauty and an unsentimental strength of emotion. Solveig's Song from Peer Gynt is famously affecting, but I can't remember hearing it sung as perfectly as this. A Swan, to Henrik Ibsen's poem, is hauntingly elegiac, while The Last Spring achieves a remarkable intensity. Tilling has the ability to sing this often subtle and demanding music as if it comes straight from the heart, which I'm sure it does.

All through these songs, she is accompanied with the greatest sensitivity by Eivind Aadland and the WDR Symphony Orchestra. They are equally engaged for Tom Erik Lie's singing of The Mountain Thrall – the only Grieg song that was originally set for voice and orchestra. Matters of balance have been most carefully addressed by the performers, and the excellence of the recording simply facilitates that.

The first two tracks are items taken from the music Grieg wrote for Ibsen's play Peer Gynt. Neither of these is to be heard in the familiar suites; we have the Act 1 Prelude, quite an extended piece that incorporates Solveig's Song, while the second is the sensual Dance of the Mountain King's Daughter, with its Arabic colouring. The whole programme, which could have been a little disparate, is given a satisfying shape by 'book-ending' it with orchestral items, the final four tracks being the delightful Norwegian Dances of op.35. Again I was struck here by the very fine orchestral playing. The first Dance - which brings us Grieg in his 'Mountain King' mode evoking wicked dwarves and trolls - fairly rattles along, while the oboe playing in no.2 (Allegro tranquillo e grazioso) is beautifully phrased and full of gentle wit. The same characteristics are to be found in the two Lyric Pieces on tracks 9 and 10. I was

particularly taken with Evening in the Mountains, an atmospheric and moody little piece, that brings us an oboe 'ranz des vaches' reminiscent of the cor anglais solo in Tristan, followed by yet another example of Grieg's unsurpassed wiring for strings.

All in all, a disc of the highest quality. Grieg is a composer that it's far too easy to take for granted, and to think no further than the Peer Gynt Suites and the Piano Concerto. There is an awful lot more to him than that, and this CD, Volume 5 of a 'Complete Symphonic Works' project, demonstrates that in the most enjoyable way possible.

