

## Phil's Classical Reviews

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Midsummer Serenade

August, 2019



Sibelius: Lemminkäinen Suite, Spring Song, Belshazzar's Feast - Sakari Oramo, BBC Symphony Orchestra (Chandos)

Sakari Oramo takes the BBC Symphony Orchestra, of which he is chief conductor, through another program of music by his fellow countryman Jean Sibelius. On the menu are the Lemminkäinen Suite, Spring Song, and the suite of incidental music for Belshazzar's Feast. Other than The Swan of Tuonela, which is often performed on programs independently of the three other tone poems that comprise the Lemminkäinen, none of these items are likely to be overly familiar even to Sibelius buffs, a fact which makes them all the more welcome.

The Lemminkäinen Suite, also known as Four Legends from the Kalevala) is based on the exploits of Finland's legendary hero. It is in the following four parts: Lemminkäinen and the Maidens, Lemminkäinen in Tuonela, Swan of Tuonela, Lemminkäinen's Homeward Journey. The scoring is vivid and the tempo slow and gloomy or else heightened to an extreme, as befits the subject.

In the first part, our hero (who is something of a sexual athlete) journeys to a remote island and seduces all the maidens while the men are away hunting. At the outset, gradually unfolding melodies and a rising scale figure in the horns paint a portrait of the lusty young adventurer, while sharp interjections from the brass characterize the dismay of the

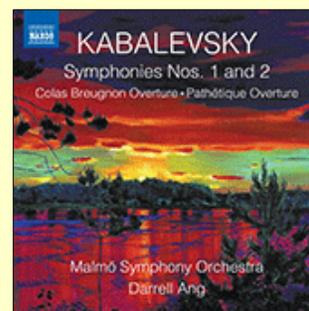


Schumann: Symphony No. 1, "Spring," Schubert: Symphony No. 3  
Mariss Jansons, Bavarian RSO (BR Klassik)

Once again, we find Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (*Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks*) in fine mettle, in performances of works by Schubert and Schumann that turn out to have more in common than we might have imagined. Jansons conducts the present program with flair and imagination, inspiring the musicians to heights that capture the excitement in both works.

Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 1 in B-flat major is popularly known as the "Spring" Symphony although the name does not appear in the printed score. Schumann, who personally disliked "program" music because he considered it a limited concept that inevitably led to triviality, *did* make use of the following 4-movement schema as scaffolding for his original draft, but dropped it after it had served its purpose: (1) Beginning of Spring, (2) Evening, (3) Merry playmates, and (4) Spring in full bloom. It helped him determine the character of the themes and the flow of events in a work in which he felt free to depart from sonata-allegro form as it suited his purpose.

Jansons leads the BRSO in a spirited performance with many highlights. He tempers the almost obsessive impact of the fanfare and the main themes in the opening movement, and stresses a formal development



Kabalevsky: Symphonies 1 & 2; Colas Breugnon Overture  
Darrell Ang, Malmö Symphony Orchestra (Naxos)

The Malmö Symphony Orchestra, under energetic young Chinese conductor Darrell Ang, give a smashing account of themselves in a program of music by the Russian composer Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904-1987). These performances capture the vaunting energy, drive, and vivid scoring of the composer's music.

Kabalevsky remains an equivocal figure, in part because of the times in which he lived. He did not have the trouble that other Soviet-era Russian composers experienced after the notorious Zhdanov Decree of 1948 because he was already well regarded for his film scores and theatre music that appealed to a mass audience, and he eschewed the more politically dangerous forms of musical experimentation. He wrote little of importance after the '60's and is remembered today chiefly for his suite *The Comedians* (1940), his Cello Sonata (1960), and his Cello Concerto No. 2 (1962).

So, what kind of animal was Dmitri Kabalevsky. What sort of jungle did he live in? Did he have fangs, such as we might be led to believe from the high-flown emotional rhetoric of his First Symphony (1932), heard on this program? He seems to have been more than merely a poor-man's Shostakovich or a compliant Soviet artist, but how *much* more? The afore-mentioned First Symphony

returning menfolk, angry to discover what has happened while they were absent. Receding echoes of a dance heard earlier reflect the sad but tender memories of the island girls after the hero has been obliged to sail away.

In Lemminkäinen in Tuonela a lot happens, all depicted vividly, as our hero descends to the underground land of the dead on a mission to kill the swan that glides on its black waters. The dark sounds of string tremolos suggest the gloom of Tuonela itself, while ominous chords in the brass warn of danger. Accelerating tempi and a sensational downward plunge accompany the death of Lemminkäinen, who is cut into pieces by the denizens of the underworld. No worry: the hero's mother intervenes to the sounds of high divided strings and a really expressive melody for cello and woodwinds. She cunningly sews him back together by her magic (!) and then solemn brass and a rising solo cello depict his return to life.

The Swan of Tuonela is pure expressionism, a depiction of the black swan, a symbol of death that glides majestically upon the waters, singing a long, slow dirge (played by cor anglais above harp arpeggios) providing welcome light amid the gloom. Finally, frothy, energetic rhythms, sudden key changes, and expanding fragments of motifs describe the high emotions in Lemminkäinen's Homeward Journey.

Virtually all melody and hymn-like in character, the seldom-heard tone poem Spring Song depicts what Sibelius' colleague Axel Carpelan described as the "slow, laborious arrival of the Nordic spring and wistful melancholy," but the tonal warmth is a hint that it is on its way!

Finally, the suite of incidental music from Belshazzar's Feast embodies a lot of Orientalism in its exotic instrumentation and unconventional scales. That is appropriate to the nostalgic longing and passionate sensuality of the biblical subject from the Book of Daniel. In the movement "Solitude," a quiet dialogue between solo viola and cello against a backdrop of first and second violins

which ends in a curious coda. Annotator Egon Voss terms this coda "a foreign body" in terms of the form of a traditional symphony, but one that seems immensely satisfying. The middle movements are neatly related in that the trombones at the end of the Scherzo anticipate the theme of the Larghetto.

Under Jansons' direction the passion for striving for something not yet attainable that we associate with Schumann is clearly present in the minor passages of first and fourth movements. For many listeners, the highlight of the finale will be the really energizing use the composer makes of the last piece, *Schnell und spielend* (fast and playful) from his piano collection Kreisleriana.

Jansons makes more of Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 3 in D major than I have heard in any previous recording. An astonishingly mature and inventive 1815 work by the then-18 year old composer, it astonishingly had to wait until 1881 in order to receive its posthumous world premiere. The only explanation for this shocking neglect is that Schubert almost totally lacked the genius for self-promotion that most composers manage to acquire sooner or later of sheer necessity.

As the present performance reveals, Schubert handled his material with much ingenuity and imagination. For example, the way he uses the woodwinds anticipates the Romantic era in the first movement in which a cheerful dotted melody on the clarinet and an oboe melody that begins on a downward third are both evocative of the call of the great outdoors.

The next movement is a dancelike Allegretto with pounding accents in the middle part and no fewer than four different rhythms that are simultaneously interwoven in the violins, the lower strings, and in a melody for flute and clarinet, with cheeky responses from beneath by horn and bassoon.

Still more hijinks occur in a very fast Minuet with pounding *sforzato* (punch-like) accents that will unsettle many people's fixed notions of the

may provide clues.

Typically for Kabalevsky, there are a great many emotionally compelling incidents packed into a fairly brief duration, in this case two movements with a total timing of just 18:49. The first begins with a brooding theme for bassoons, and later clarinets, over undulating strings that builds in intensity to a peak before sinking into the depths of a somber processional. The second is characterized by an impassioned theme in the trumpets and lower brass, a probing melody for cor anglais, and mounting excitement in the entire orchestra, hurtling toward an impressive climax. We can easily infer this was a tribute for a momentous occasion, namely the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1917 Revolution.

The Second Symphony (1934), which was championed in the West by such maestros as Toscanini and Sargent, is on the whole a more regular work with strains of lyricism and poignancy. In three movements with a total duration of 23:14, it begins with a plaintive clarinet melody, then builds to a powerful climax and an indisputable non-nonsense ending. The second, more lyrical, movement features a lovely episode for woodwind over pizzicato strings before the mid-movement climax, and then ends in a subdued, regretful mood.

The third movement begins with a capricious theme for solo woodwind over pulsating strings, and ends in a noticeable mood of jollity with sardonic undertones beneath the surface. One may question how sincere the mood is, considering the tendency of Soviet composers to speak in code as a means of self-preservation, but said jollity does have the last word as the symphony rushes toward a decisive conclusion.

The Overture to the opera *Colas Breugnon* (1938) is full of fun, in the spirit of other 'party-pieces' for orchestra from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* to Bernstein's *Candide*. Like them, it keeps up an exhilarating pace to the very end. The Pathétique Overture (1960) by turns eloquent, ardent and agitated, has a lot of material packed into a small space.

exchanging pairs of notes creates a magic moment of longing reminiscent of the words of the Psalm *By the Waters of Babylon*. Finally, Khadra's Dance, depicting Belshazzar's cast-off concubine contemplating a bloody revenge, creates an entirely different mood!

minuet as a staid formal dance. A Trio section in the character of a Ländler-like duo for oboe and bassoon brings us back to the call of nature. The finale is harmonically inventive and impetuous, a Rossini-like Tarantella increasing in velocity and excitement as Jansons steers us toward its smashing conclusion.

In the last analysis, the question of Kabalevsky's final place in the pantheon of classical composers remains tantalizingly open. He could write undeniably effective music, getting right to the point in the manner of a film score, but how long does it remain with the listener?

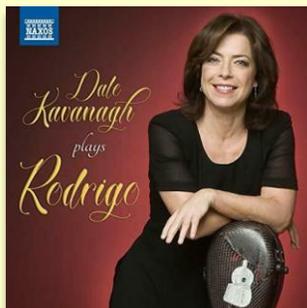


Tchaikovsky: Romances  
Natalia Petrozhitskaya, soprano;  
Dmitri Zuev, baritone; Antonina  
Kadobnova, piano (Melodiya)

**Note:** This review appeared in *Phil's Classical Reviews* for November, 2014.

Melodiya, the once almost moribund Russian label that had not released new recordings in almost 20 years, has taken on a new look and a new purpose as it celebrates its 50th year. Typical of the encouraging trend at Melodiya is this great new CD of Tchaikovsky romances (songs) by Moscow Conservatory graduates Natalia Petrozhitskaya, soprano; and Dmitri Zuev, baritone. Given the revival of interest in the composer's songs, it couldn't have come at a better time.

Russians themselves will tell you that song is the glory of their nation. For their emotional expression, color and sheer beauty, the best Russian songs will transcend the obvious language barrier and reach out to the world. That is particularly true of Tchaikovsky, whose sensitivity to the poetic text, as shown in these performances, was unerring. A song such as *Wait!* will serve to make the point about the way the songs get right to the heart of the matter: "Wait! Why must you hasten? Life is speeding like an arrow. You will have time for saying good-bye when the

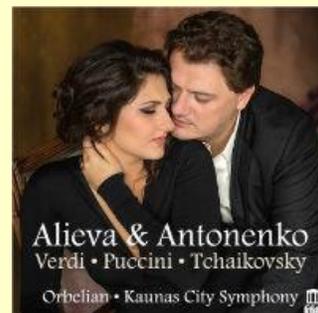


Dale Kavanagh plays Rodrigo:  
*Fantasia para un  
Gentilhombre*, *Tres piezas  
españolas*, other pieces  
(Naxos)

Canadian guitarist Dale Kavanagh again demonstrates her wonderful facility in capturing the dramatic rhythms and the clear harmonies of Spanish music, in particular the gloriously vivid, atmospheric music of Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-1999). Under her nimble fingers, the passionate love of beauty and the sadness and warmth of Rodrigo's music come to instant, vivid life.

The major work in this program is the *Fantasia para un gentilhombre* (Fantasia for a Nobleman), based on themes by the Spanish baroque composer Gaspar Sanz. There is a perfect balance of forces here between Kavanagh's guitar and the State Philharmonic of Arad, Romania under Horst Bäcker. Soloist and orchestra interact as friendly rivals savoring the work's elegiac melodies and trenchant Spanish rhythms. This sharing is established right from the opening movement, *Adagietto*, in the form of a *Villano* characterized by its warmth and expansiveness.

Following this are an *Adagio* in the manner of an *Españoleta* whose haunting melody is interspersed by the drumbeats and fanfares of the



Dinara Alieva, soprano; Aleksandrs  
Antonenko, tenor; Kaunas City  
Symphony and State Choir under  
Constantine Orbelian (Delos)

**Note:** This review appeared in *Phil's Classical Reviews* for July, 2015.

One of the unlooked-for but definitely positive results of the breakup of the USSR is that a raft load of musical talent from the former Soviet republics has found its way into opera houses and concert halls all over the world. It is nowhere more in evidence than on Delos Productions from California, which is in the process of establishing itself as the singer's label par excellent. Latest fruit of a very productive east-west connection is the present album of choicest arias and duets by Verdi, Puccini, and Tchaikovsky, rendered in absolutely breathtaking detail by Baku, Azerbaijan native Dinara Alieva and Riga, Latvia native Aleksandrs Antonenko. Regardless of their place of origin, they constitute a duet that might have been made in Heaven.

Alieva, with her dark velvet voice and dramatic intensity that led one of her teachers, the great Montserrat Caballé, to describe her as "a singer who possesses the gift of Heaven," gives a stirring account of herself early in the program in "*Ritorna vincitor*" (Return triumphant) from Verdi's *Aida*, revealing the ambivalence in the heart of the captive Nubian princess who is torn between love of her own country and

rays of the east are fiery red, but will we ever see another night like this?"

*Again, As Before, Alone* captures another aspect of love, the sadness of separation, as pictured by the nocturnal setting: "A poplar reflects in the window, lit up by the moon. It seems to gaze at the panes of the window. It whispers to the leaves. The stars are bright in the heavens. Where are you now, sweet one?"

Included here are seventeen songs with eight each distributed to Zuev and Petrozhitskaya and a duet, *Tears*, in the center of the program. Petrozhitskaya's voice is radiantly beautiful, capably of soaring to exalted heights with apparently seamless ease in such songs as *If Only I Had Known* and *Was I Not a Little Blade of Grass in the Meadow?* Zuev's solid, honest baritone compels respect in *Why?* that is set to a Russian translation of the lyric by Heinrich Heine, and *Don Juan's Serenade* (Aleksey Tolstoy).

And let's not forget the contribution of pianist Antonina Kadobnova, as Tchaikovsky's piano parts are seldom "mere" accompaniment. In a song such as *The Love of a Dead Man*, the setting of a remarkable poem by Mikhail Lermontov, the piano carries on for a number of measures amounting to more than half a minute's duration with an answer for the mood of anguish and desire for oblivion in the baritone's song. A wonderful moment!

Allegretto. The two movements may be considered as one for all intents and purposes. The next movement, Allegro con brio, a lively *Danza de las Hachas* (Dance of the Axes), is followed by the finale, marked Allegro ma non troppo, in the form of a jaunty Canario, which was originally a dance of the Canary Islands.

*Tres piezas españolas* are typical Spanish dances: a Fandango that invites improvisation-like passages in the upper part, a Passacaglia distinguished by Rodrigo's free imagination in writing variations of rare beauty over a pre-determined bass, and a Zapateado, a clog dance in which one may still hear the echoes of stamping feet.

*Invocacion y danza* (Invocation and Dance) is an altogether remarkable piece in which a tranquil and profound statement, the Invocation, is followed by a Fandango which is interrupted by really fantastic waves of arpeggios and tremolos. These exaggerated figurations dissipate and lead back into the dance, ending in the initial mood of peace and profundity. Listening to the textures in this marvelously expressive piece, it is hard to believe it is played by a solo guitar, and not a guitar duo.

Other works heard here include *Junto al Generalife*, evocative of the Gardens of the Alhambra, a Ricercar-like *Tiento* in which the 15<sup>th</sup> century form is enlivened by 20<sup>th</sup> century harmony, and a hauntingly beautiful *Zarabanda lejana* (Distant Sarabande) in wonderfully clear harmonics that evoke the perception of distance and mystery.

her Egyptian lover Radamès. Her duet with Antonenko in the Entombment Scene, with the ritual chanting of the priests in the background, does full honor to one of Verdi's most effective final scenes.

Good as Alieva is as Aida, she is even better as Leonora in the Scene, Aria and Miserere from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, where she vows to either give her life for the imprisoned Manrico or descend united with him into the grave. With Manrico proclaiming his undying love and a chorus of monks chanting the service for the dead, Alieva rises to incredible heights of passion.

In Puccini's *Tosca*, Antonenko scores serious points as the condemned patriot Cavaradossi, sentenced to die by the cruel Baron Scarpia, as he fondly recalls the bliss of a former rendezvous with his lover Floria Tosca in "*E lucevan le stelle*" (The stars were shining, / and the earth was sweetly scented. / The garden gate creaked / and a footstep touched the ground." For her part, Alieva is wonderful in *Tosca's* aria "*Vissi d'arte*" in which she confronts the lecherous Scarpia, who has promised to spare Cavaradossi's life if she will give herself to him (thought we should know from our previous experience of Verdi that tyrants never keep their word). "I have lived for my art, I lived for love only," she sings, all the while preparing a surprise for Scarpia should he fail to halt the execution.

Finally, we have three numbers from Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*: Hermann's aria as he vows to kill himself over Lisa's engagement to another, Lisa's Act III aria as she waits for a rendezvous with Hermann on the banks of a canal, filled with doubts of her lover's constancy and her own guilt at betraying her family, and finally the stunning duet when Hermann and Lisa meet at last.

*Continued below*

In Tchaikovsky's opera based closely on Pushkin's tale of greed and its corrosive effect on love, the parts of the lovers are beautifully characterized by Alieva and Antonenko and rendered with a searing intensity that might very well mark these singers as the premiere operatic duo of our time. Antonenko's Hermann, driven to the point of insanity by his obsession to discover the identity of the three playing cards that constitute an unbeatable combination, has threatened the elderly Countess, Lisa's guardian, with a pistol if she does not reveal the secret to him, causing her death from fright. The callous lover's only defense, that the pistol wasn't loaded, hardly convinces Lisa. She is tortured by her guilt in having admitted Hermann to the Countess's chambers and dismayed to realize her own fate is entwined with that of a murderer. Passion versus conscience, desire versus betrayal: this is the stuff great operatic duets are made of.



Bruckner: Symphonies 7 & 8  
Evgeny Mravinsky, conductor  
Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra  
(Urania)

Urania Records does some of its best reissue work to date in treasurable performances of the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies of Anton Bruckner by the immortal Evgeny Mravinsky, for more than half a century the celebrated conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. Though they are of greater historical than audiophile significance, the sound isn't bad, particularly in the 1959 recording of the Eighth, which has a spaciousness that allows Bruckner's magnificent orchestrations to make their desired effect. The Seventh, though of later date (1967), seems more confined sonically, and was probably intended for archival purposes rather than commercial release. Even here, Mravinsky is given sufficient opportunity to make his marks in interpreting the score.

These two works represent Bruckner's symphonic style in its fullest flowering. Symphony No. 7 in E Major requires, and receives from this conductor, the patience to slowly build up to the climax of a movement through a series of stages, as Mravinsky does in the opening *Allegro moderato*, which clocks in at 23:19) and the *Adagio* (20:41) which Bruckner marked "*Sehr feierlich und sehr Langsam*" ("very solemn and very slow," though "smoldering" might be a better translation for *feierlich*). Long, arching themes, almost of dancelike character, are a feature of the outer movements, while the *Adagio* seems to drift effortlessly upwards, supported by the strings, towards the heights that the opening movement had tried to storm. At the climax of this movement, Mravinsky tones down the sensational (or is it notorious?) cymbal clash with triangle that Bruckner had, perhaps unwisely, inserted at the urging of his friends.

Maybe that's as well, since playing down the importance of the cymbal crash lends greater significance to the subsequent deeply felt elegy for Wagnerian tubas and horns, concluding in a mood of peace, which Bruckner intended as a tribute to the soon-to-be-deceased Richard Wagner. The finale, marked *Bewegt, doch nicht schnell* (Moving, though not slow) is given just the right emphasis by Mravinsky to make it highly effective.

Symphony No. 8 in C Minor is, to my mind, an even more compelling symphony than the Seventh. It is the most complete affirmation of the striving for a mystic depth and



"Russian Romances"  
Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Glinka. Jozef Benci, bass;  
Jana Nagy-Juhász, piano  
(Supraphon)

There's nothing in the world quite like the Russian romance. The genre, of Iberian and Gallic origin, implies a lyric poem or song of strong personal emotion that comes across directly to the listener. To this, the Russians added their own unique brand of melancholy pessimism. The love sentiments in these romances are almost always achingly sad laments for loves that have been lost, never openly expressed, or else rejected, misprized by their object, or overcome by jealousy. It seems there shall be no happy love affairs if the poets and composers of these art songs can help it!

Sometimes, the love emotion simply cannot be uttered, as in the admonition in Mikhail Glinka's *Say not that your heart is pained*: "Be as silent as graves, no matter who suffers; and for the innocent do not summon God's power. The sacred sounds of your soul, your childish delirium – out of boredom, godless society will misinterpret everything." Often, the hidden or frustrated love sentiment is at odds with, or finds solace in, the deep beauty of the natural world as in Tchaikovsky's *Night*: "What are the stars to me, the moon, the sky, the clouds, this light hovering over the cold granite, transforming the dewdrops on the flowers into diamonds and running across the sea like a golden highway?"

In many ways, the genre reaches its apex in the Songs and Dances of Death by Modest Mussorgsky. Few in number but immense in power and sheer intensity of feeling, these settings of four poems by Arseny Arkadyevich Golenischev-Kutusov portray Death in four personifications: as an intruder who calms a distraught mother by telling her he knows how to comfort and bring peace to her fretfully sick child (*Lullaby*), a gallant lover wooing a no longer tender maiden (*Serenade*), as a beautiful lady whispering softly into the ear of an old man, a drunken peasant who has lost his way in the forest in a snowstorm, telling him she will keep him warm under a soft coverlet of snow (*Trepak*), and finally, as a military commander (*The Field Marshal*) reviewing troops of opposing armies, who turn out ironically to be one legion of the dead: "Life has made you quarrel, I have reconciled you. Stand up as one for the parade!"

In this release from Supraphon of Prague, two fine

solemnity in music that Bruckner had sought all his life. The composer must have known that he was on to something, as he laid aside the completion of what was to become his Ninth Symphony in order to work on the Eighth with a clearer mind. For the first and only time ever, he called for the use of the harp, "tripled, if possible." As the word got around that Bruckner was at work on a score of the greatest significance, no less a figure than Franz Josef II presented him a state subsidy and free lodging at the Imperial Palace of Belvedere overlooking Vienna, providing him the freedom from financial constraints, as well as the distractions of well-meaning critics, that he needed. (Not surprisingly, Bruckner dedicated the Eighth Symphony to the Emperor.)

It is a magnificent work, right from the opening, a majestic Allegro Moderato, while in the Scherzo, Bruckner's use of general pauses and a heightened duple-triple (2+3) rhythm (known, after him, as "Bruckner rhythm") creates palpable excitement, as well as peril, for any conductor less capable and disciplined than a Mravinsky. The expanded brass section adds a noticeable element of mystery in the Adagio, marked *Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend* (Moving and slow, but not somnolent). Here, Bruckner seems to envision a vaster world than we can imagine beyond the veil of this life. The finale? More *feierlich*, building in ecstasy to the end.

It is not easy for most people to contemplate, let alone speak of, the concepts of death and eternity without sounding either sanctimonious or icky, but Bruckner, we must remember, was a "natural" in this respect as well as a devout Catholic. Perhaps an excellent visual correlative in this respect would be the artwork on the front cover of the booklet for this album. Photographer and graphic artist Gianmario Masala presents us with a solitary figure approaching a dark, immense wood, surrounded by wraithlike figures in the mist that seem to invoke the spirits of the dead. If it is intended as a visual, metaphoric concept for the present account of the Eighth Symphony, one could not have done better!

Slovak artists, Jozef Benci. Bass, and Jana Nagy-Juhász, piano, give their all in performances that will remain with the listener for some time afterwards. Benci's honest, secure vocal production, drawing from deep within and with little or no recourse to vibrato, is complimented by his partner's sensitive participation. Always more than mere accompaniment, it reinforces and underscores the strong feeling and range of powerful emotions in the songs.

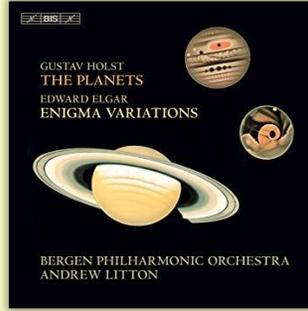
**Keep right on scrolling, folks, there's more to come on the next page!**

Andrew Litton, a New York City native and Juilliard graduate, has travelled far and conducted so many orchestras around the globe that one sincerely hopes he enjoys frequent flyer privileges. Here, he conducts the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra of Norway, of which he is Music Director Laureate, in performances of enduringly popular masterworks by English composers. They stand comparison with fondly remembered recordings of yesterday by maestros the like of William Steinberg and Leopold Stokowski (no small praise!)

The Enigma Variations of Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934), premiered in 1899 just as he himself had begun to despair of ever breaking through to the first rank of classical composers, satisfies (and also intrigues) on a number of levels. As purely abstract music, it meets all the criteria of a successful theme and variations, including the expected key progressions. Its warm and gently sighing theme, the first four notes of which scan rhythmically with the name "Edward Elgar," is soul-satisfying and simple enough to give rise to many variants, and the composer harmonized them with a master's touch.

He also let it be known there was an "enigma" in the form of a never-introduced melody that "went with" the theme, and which musical scholars have ever since racked their brains to discover, with no consensus of opinion.

Finally, the variations themselves are tributes to fourteen men and women who were Elgar's close personal friends, and were intended as *momentos* to that friendship. They also include witty observations of their personality traits, their abiding passions and eccentricities.



Holst: The Planets + Elgar: Enigma Variations – Andrew Litton, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra (Bis Records)

None are names known to history, any more than your friends or mine, but all were dear to Elgar, for whom warm affection and incisive wit go hand in hand in these brief sketches.

The Planets of Gustav Holst (1874-1934) were basically written between 1914 and 1916 and were strikingly unlike anything the English public had heard before from a native son. So much so that Holst introduced them piecemeal, one planet at a time, in order to ensure their acceptance by giving his listeners time to absorb the harmonic riches, stunning changes in affect, quirky rhythms, and ultra-wide dynamic ranges in his music.

These were Gustav Holst's vivid realizations of the characteristics he imagined for each of the planets – or rather human personalities and emotions as reflected in them. "Mars, the Bringer of War," for instance, is characterized by a march in a relentless and inherently unstable 5/4 meter, with the string players initially utilizing the wooden shafts of their bows while fanfare-like figures are heard in the tenor tuba and trumpets.

The inhumanity of the Mars tableau is contrasted vividly by "Venus, the Bringer of Peace," serene and undisturbed, its soft, chastely erotic beauty reflected in the healing sound of harps, flutes, celesta, and strings.

And so it goes, with each of the seven planets given distinctive sound palettes and vivid scoring: "Mercury, the Winged Messenger" (melodic fragments, elusive rhythms and bitonality, the last-named an ultra-modern innovation for its day), "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity" (a broadly-stated theme, with vigorous, full-bodied rhythms). "Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age" is characterized by a slow, cold, weary, and desolate procession that is interrupted twice by climaxes and the sound of bells. The first is disturbing and panicky, the second calmer, leading to a sense of resignation and a glimpse of the vastness beyond the veil of this life).

"Uranus, the Magician" is a fantastic scherzo with demonic energy and sudden changes, while "Neptune, the Mystic" has a distant affect that is conveyed by two harps in the purely instrumental sections, an impression furthered by the almost disembodied sounds of a wordless female choir, fading slowly into silence at the end.<sup>i</sup>

All these elements in *The Planets* are realized by the resources of an unusually large and varied orchestra, scored with the greatest intelligence and taste by the composer. To recreate the magic that Holst intended requires the keen sense of timing and discretion and an awareness of the sensual beauty in each tableau that Andrew Litton brings to the task. The result is a ravishingly beautiful and compelling listening experience that perfectly compliments the *Enigma Variations* on the same program.

<sup>i</sup> Holst went so far as to suggest that the choir be positioned in a separate room from the orchestra, with the connecting door closing slowly and silently at the very end. A dramatic visual effect, and not practical at all in most symphony halls. But the suggestion provides an alert conductor a clue as to the intended dynamics.