

**From the MusicWeb International Listening Studio
by John Quinn**

Discs auditioned

John Adams – *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* Berliner Philharmoniker/Gilbert ([details here](#))

Christopher Cerrone – *Memory Palace*. Los Angeles Percussion Quartet ([details here](#))

Debussy – *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Soloists/LSO/Rattle **LSO Live LSO0790**

Karayev – *The Seven Beauties Suite* – Bournemouth SO/Karabits ([details here](#))

Ligeti – *Mysteries of the Macabre*. Hannigan/LSO/Rattle **LSO Live LSO3028**

Mahler – Symphony No 3. Budapest Festival Orchestra/Iván Fischer ([details here](#))

Mahler - Symphony No 8. Utah SO/Thierry Fischer. **Reference FR-725**

Prokofiev – *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*. Staatskapelle Weimar/Karabits ([details here](#))

Respighi - *Vetrata di Chiesa*. Orchestre Philharmonique de Liège/Neschling ([details here](#))

Sibelius – *Tapiola*. Finnish RSO/Lintu ([details here](#))

Vaughan Williams – *Sinfonia Antartica*. Bergen Philharmonic/Sir Andrew Davis **CHSA 5186**

Vaughan Williams - *Scott of the Antarctic*. RSNO/Yates ([details here](#))

It was necessary to postpone a planned session in December so when David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn gathered in the MusicWeb International Listening Studio at the beginning of February they had quite a lot of catching up to do.

Diving straight in, we were keen to sample a lavish boxed set on the Berliner Philharmoniker's own label. This is devoted to the music of John Adams and preserves performances given in the Philharmonie in season 2016/17 when he was the orchestra's composer in residence. We felt that *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* would get our session off to a lively start and so it proved. The set offers the performances on four audio CDs and on a pair of Blu-ray video discs. We watched the Blu-ray video of the performance, conducted by Alan Gilbert. We appreciated the presence, clarity and definition of both the sound and the pictures. As usual with this label, the camera work was unobtrusive and expertly focussed on the music. The performance itself is very good and we felt that the label's technical presentation did the performance full justice. JQ has appraised the whole set for a forthcoming review and assured us that the quality of performance and recording was absolutely typical of the set as a whole.

We stayed with American music to experience a piece from the extraordinary disc, *Beyond*, by the Los Angeles Percussion Quartet. JQ reviewed this not long ago and had been particularly taken with *Memory Palace* by Christopher Cerrone. The piece was entirely new to LM and DD and both were impressed. The five sections of the score each focus on different sets of instruments. The sounds produced are often very subtle and consistently intrigue the ear, As LM put it, this is music that keeps you listening. The Sono Luminus engineers have produced a wonderful sense of space around the instruments – in addition to the excellent left-right spread and a fine front-to-back perspective, LM felt that the recording conveyed the height of the studio as well. The many instruments employed are reported with stunning realism. The playing of the LAPQ displays jaw-dropping virtuosity and Sono Luminus have provided sound that is wholly worthy of the performers' skills. We listened to the Blu-ray audio disc; the set also includes the programme on two CDs, which JQ says are of equally excellent quality. LM's verdict was that this was a very interesting listening experience.

Another Blu-ray followed. This was a 2016 concert performance of Debussy's opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The LSO is conducted by Sir Simon Rattle and the soloists include Magdalena Kožená as Mélisande and Gerald Finley as Golaud, both of whom we heard as we listened to Act I, scene 1. We were struck from the outset by the ravishing orchestral textures. Gerald Finley's voice registers beautifully in the recording; the engineers have so balanced the sound that the listener can relish the subtleties of his singing without the voice obscuring the orchestral contribution. Magdalena Kožená's voice also comes through extremely well and though it would be unfair to judge her performance on

the basis of a few minutes of singing she does not sound like a young girl. However, we hope that the excerpt we heard will prove to be typical of the recorded sound; LM felt there was a “very real feel” to the recording. The LSO Live package presents the performance on three hybrid SACDs and on a single BD-A disc. JQ will be doing a full review of this set shortly.

We moved on to a Chandos SACD which has been much praised by Dan Morgan and by several of his colleagues. Chandos have made many recordings with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra but to the best of our knowledge this is the first Chandos disc that the BSO have made with their current Chief Conductor, Kirill Karabits. He’s chosen for his Chandos debut a selection of the orchestral music of the Azerbaijani composer Kara Karayev (1918-1982). We sampled the 1949 suite, *The Seven Beauties*. This is very colourful music. The opening waltz reminded us of Khachaturian or Prokofiev. We were not entirely convinced by the quality of the music, which is enjoyable but which LM described as “unexceptional”. We felt the sound seemed a bit veiled but perhaps it was unfortunate – or unfair – that this SACD was heard in the wake of three Blu-rays. We noted that MWI reviewers had been very appreciative of the Chandos sound.

We reverted to a Blu-ray video and to the LSO Live label to view part of a 2015 concert of twentieth-century music by the LSO and Sir Simon Rattle. They were joined by the astonishing advocate of contemporary music, Barbara Hannigan, for an excerpt from Ligeti’s opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1977). The sound and vision are excellent. The piece calls for pinpoint accuracy on the part of both singer and players and that’s certainly on display here. Miss Hannigan evidences formidable technique and she is superbly partnered by Rattle and the LSO. Sadly, none of us was won over by Ligeti’s music despite the advocacy – and histrionics – of the performers. We can only admire Barbara Hannigan for tackling this demanding music with such commitment but it’s not for us. Having watched the performance, we felt sorely in need of a break for lunch.

Resuming after lunch we were on more familiar territory with **Mahler’s Third Symphony**. JQ had bought these discs after reading Dan Morgan’s highly enthusiastic review of the recording in download form. Though he had consumed nothing stronger than sparkling water at lunch JQ made the error of loading the SACD into the Meridian CD player, a mistake we only realised after listening to the first movement for several minutes. Even though we were not listening to the Super Audio layer, the quality of the Meridian player is such that we felt this didn’t matter; the recording still made its mark. The Channel Classics recording is simply outstanding. There’s a very wide dynamic range which means that the brass sound imperious – the horns leap out of the speakers at the start – while at the other extreme of the dynamic spectrum the soft bass drum and tam-tam strokes register in an ideal fashion. We admired the sense of depth and also the width with which the engineers have conveyed the orchestra. DD described the sound as “very honest” while LM’s description was “truthful”. DD also felt that the recording gives the listener an excellent sense of what it must have been like to be present in the hall. The performance itself – described by LM as “very compelling” - is every bit as fine as the recorded sound and once Mahler’s great march gets into its stride we loved the swagger than Fischer and his players impart to the music. This is one of the best Mahler recordings to come our way in a long time.

Meanwhile, over on the other side of the Atlantic Thierry Fischer has been Music Director of the Utah Symphony since 2009. He and the orchestra went to Salt Lake Tabernacle in Salt Lake City in February 2016 to join forces with soloists and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for two live performances of **Mahler’s Eighth Symphony** from which a recent Reference Recordings issue derives. These performances were given during the 2015/16 season in which the Utah SO celebrated its 75th anniversary. This recording is on SACD but, for the sake of consistency we decided for once to play all the remaining discs – all of them SACDs – on the Meridian player rather than the Oppo on which we usually play SACDs. We listened to the last section of this Mahler Eighth starting at the Mater Gloriosa solo. The recording was made by Soundmirror Inc who have produced many impressive recordings in the past but we were not entirely won over by the results on this occasion. DD said that the recording “did nothing for me” He felt that the sound was too amorphous – homogenised and smooth. He had the impression he was hearing the performance from a seat in the rear stalls. The choir seemed to be

too closely balanced, we felt, and while we were pleased to hear the various choral lines clearly defined this seems to interfere with the bigger picture. At the end the addition of the organ to the scoring didn't really register as it should. It didn't help that Fischer's performance didn't really grab our attention. A performance of the Eighth – and especially the big moments such as the very end – should bowl the listener over. That happens on such recordings as Solti (studio), Tennstedt or Dudamel (both live) but neither LM nor JQ felt that Fischer achieved the same impact. First impressions of this release, therefore, are lukewarm but JQ will be doing a full review in due course.

Next up was a rather shorter work but one which also requires substantial forces: Prokofiev's ***Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution***. This is another performance conducted by Kirill Karabits, but on this occasion he was working with Staatskapelle Weimar and recording for the Audite label. The recording was made live at a concert marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution. We listened to the first five of the cantata's ten sections. At once we pricked up our ears: this sound was much more immediate than the sound we'd experienced in Mahler's Eighth. There was plenty of impact during the Prelude and in the second section, 'The Philosophers', we liked the rich, firm sound of the bass drum. In that section, too, the choir came across very clearly. LM thought the sound was lifelike and when JQ let him see the booklet picture which shows the full forces assembled on stage he felt that the recording conveyed an excellent aural image of the massed forces, not least through the excellent width on the sound. DD admired the appropriate degree of edge that the engineers have achieved. In the last section to which we listened, 'Interludium', the brass and percussion sounded terrific. The recording is realistic and potent: a definite success.

We moved on to the opulence of Respighi's ***Vetrata di Chiesa***. This is the latest in the series of recordings conducted by John Neschling for BIS and once again he's working with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Liège. JQ has been listening to the whole SACD for a forthcoming review and urged us to sample the last of the *Vetrata* which depicts San Gregorio Magno. Goodness, what a recording this is! The engineers – and the orchestra - have achieved truly impressive depth of sound in the opening pages. The recording has an abundance of presence and despite the rich orchestral textures plenty of detail is conveyed. Neschling handles the gradual crescendo most successfully to the point when the organ makes its mighty entry. LM felt that the sound is "very clear". We all felt that the sound is magnificent and does full justice to Respighi's opulent scoring. At the spectacular conclusion the huge thuds on the bass drum and tam-tam really tested the Nautilus loudspeakers. LM's verdict was that "this is a recording that amazes you and then amazes you even more" We concur.

From the magnificence of Rome, we travelled to the sparser climes of Finland for Sibelius' chilly evocation of ***Tapiola***. This is from a recent disc by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and Hannu Lintu. The Ondine recording is at a higher level than the preceding BIS offering and we had to tame slightly the volume control. We were in full agreement about this performance and recording. Lintu leads a super and highly atmospheric account of this demanding score while the recording itself is a fine one. The sound is very tangible and the engineers convey a great deal of detail but at the same time have achieved a good sense of space around the orchestral sound. This is a very fine SACD.

For the remainder of our session we stayed in a cold climate but moved to the Southern hemisphere. Sir Andrew Davis has completed the Chandos Vaughan Williams symphony cycle on SACD with a recording of the ***Sinfonia Antartica*** played by the Bergen Philharmonic. To get the best results we had to adjust the volume control upwards from the level used for the Ondine Sibelius disc. However, once we'd settled on the volume level – similar to the level for the Respighi disc – we found the results were very satisfactory. JQ has been listening to this disc for a forthcoming review and felt that the third movement, 'Landscape', with its wide dynamic range, would be a good test of the sonics. The mysterious opening of the movement was rated "very atmospheric" by LM. The orchestral playing is very well controlled and the music-making has excellent tension. The massive climax to the movement, at which point VW adds full organ, came across with impressive potency. In this movement VW's music encompasses a very wide dynamic range and we feel that the Chandos engineers have handled this most effectively.

During the autumn, following an enthusiastic review on MusicWeb International, JQ bought the Dutton disc which offers the first recording of VW's complete music for the film **Scott of the Antarctic**. When reviewing the Chandos disc of the *Sinfonia Antartica* he'd found it fascinating to compare the symphony with the film music on which it was based. In particular, it's revelatory to discover how much of the excellent film score *didn't* find its way into the symphony. The Dutton SACD was new to LM and DD and they were intrigued as we listened to the first few numbers from the score. Martin Yates leads a fine performance and we felt that Dutton have recorded the RSNO extremely well. Even though the individual numbers are quite short LM felt that the listener can readily get a mental picture of what the music is describing. This is an important and revelatory VW release.

VW's epic evocation of the forbidding Antarctic landscape was the last disc on our agenda and, in many ways, it would have been difficult to follow. We'd heard several outstanding recordings during the day and we are looking forward to sampling more of the best recent recordings in the Listening Studio very soon.

Equipment used

- Meridian 808 Series 5 CD player with integral digital pre-amplifier.
- Jeff Rowland Continuum S2 integrated amplifier. (Power output: 400 watts/channel into 8 ohms)
- B&W Nautilus 802 Diamond loudspeakers
- Blu-Ray player: Oppo BDP-105D

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