

**From the MusicWeb International Listening Studio: Another Audio Report
by John Quinn**

Discs auditioned

Berlioz – *Harold en Italie & Les Nuits d'été*. Les Siècles/François-Xavier Roth. Harmonia Mundi ([details here](#))

Berlioz – *Les Troyens* Soloists, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg / John Nelson ([details here](#))

Berg – Violin Concerto. Baiba Skride/Gewandhausorchester Leipzig/Andris Nelsons ([details here](#))

Shostakovich – Symphony No 7. Boston Symphony/Andris Nelsons **DG 483 6728**

Stravinsky – *Le Sacre du Printemps*. New York Philharmonic/Jaap van Zweden **Decca Gold 00028948179817**

Beethoven – Symphony No 3, 'Eroica' Pittsburgh SO/ Manfred Honeck ([details here](#))

Mahler – Symphony No 2. Minnesota Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä **BIS-2296 SACD** ([details here](#))

Mahler – Symphonies 2 and 3 Bavarian RSO/Rafael Kubelik **Deutsche Grammophon 483 5656**

Mahler – Symphony No 3. Gürzenich-Orchester Köln/François-Xavier Roth. ([details here](#))

With Spring fast approaching, David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn gathered in the Listening Studio for the first session of 2019. On this occasion, our agenda included an element of catching up with releases from 2018. We also went back in time to appraise a symphony cycle which has recently been reissued with the addition of a BD-A option.

2019 marks the 150th anniversary of the death of Hector Berlioz so we began with a couple of recordings of his music. First, we sampled a CD by the period instrument orchestra, Les Siècles. On this new release they are conducted by their founder, François-Xavier Roth in performances of *Harold en Italie* with violist Tabea Zimmermann and the song cycle, *Les Nuits d'été*. The latter is unusual in that the songs are all sung by a baritone, for the first time on disc, we believe. The soloist is Stéphane Degout. JQ has been listening to the disc for his recent [review](#) and had been seriously impressed by the performances of both works. We listened to the first movement of *Harold en Italie*, which depicts Harold wandering in the mountains. In the *Adagio* opening we noted the grainy sound of the lower strings and relished also the way the woodwind lines cut through. When Tabea Zimmermann begins to play the recording captures perfectly the nutty tone of her viola; the accompanying harp also registers well – LM commented how much he likes Berlioz's "self-effacing" style in this opening. During the subsequent *Allegro* Zimmermann is given an ideal prominence – in other words, not excessive but her presence is clear. JQ noted a good deal of space around the sound of the orchestra – the venue, the Philharmonie de Paris, seems to have a large, quite resonant acoustic. We all agreed that the performance has admirable vitality. LM summed up the performance as "very alert, very engaging". DD wondered if the dynamic range is not somewhat exaggerated but, overall, we felt this is a conspicuous success, both as a recording and performance. If the rest of the disc is of a similar quality – and JQ assured us that such is the case – then we can understand why this was selected as one of MusicWeb International's Recordings of the Month in February.,

JQ is an ardent Berlioz fan and a little while ago he had invested in the live recording of his epic opera *Les Troyens*. This set, recorded in concert in Strasbourg in April 2017 has been widely acclaimed. Stephen Barber, who [reviewed](#) it for MusicWeb International found much to admire and summed up the recording as "a tremendous achievement" although we noted that Ralph Moore was much more guarded when he included the recording in his recent [survey of the opera on disc](#). The opera plays for some four hours and our time was strictly limited so we had to content ourselves with two extracts from Act III: the celebrated 'Chasse royale et orage' followed by the duet, 'Nuit d'ivresse et d'extase infinie'. The former gave us a chance to evaluate how the engineers deal with a large ensemble while the duet allowed us to hear Michael Spyres as Énée and Joyce DiDonato as Didon, the Queen of Carthage. Opinion was somewhat divided. JQ liked the way the different perspectives of the horns are conveyed early on in the 'Chasse royale' and later he felt that the storm itself was exciting: when the chorus is heard their voices have a good presence and the engineers have conveyed the percussion

well. However, he felt that either side of the storm the musical depiction of a sultry landscape seemed to lack the atmosphere that Sir Colin Davis – and the Philips engineers – achieved in his 1969 studio recording: The Nelson performance seems a bit too ‘present’ in these passages. LM and DD had a more fundamental concern: both of them felt that the sound of John Nelson’s orchestra, as recorded, had a veiled quality. It was as if the orchestra had been placed in an opera house pit although, in fact, for these live performances in Strasbourg’s Salle Érasme, the orchestra was placed on the stage in front of the chorus. LM was pleased by the way that the sound of the choir projected over the orchestra. DD described the orchestral sound as being akin to hearing the players “through a thin mist” In the duet we liked both the sound of the singers – Joyce DiDonato and Michael Spyres – and the way in which their voices were balanced against the orchestra in the recording. However, the sound of the orchestra remained a problem for LM. For him, the contributions of the soloists were fine but he wanted more from the orchestra; even though he acknowledged that they were playing quietly he felt that, at least as recorded, the playing lacked edge and was “over-delicate”, certainly in comparison to what we’d heard in the *Les Siècles* recording. It would be unfair to draw too many conclusions from a brief sampling of a recording that plays for some four hours but we do have some reservations.

Next, we listened to the opening of Berg’s Violin Concerto, as played live in the Gewandhaus, Leipzig by Baiba Skride and the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig under Andris Nelsons. This is part of a 2018 concert captured on a DVD that Jonathan Woolf [reviewed](#) recently. LM is a particular admirer of Miss Skride although, until now, he had only heard her play on CD; watching her deliver a committed performance on DVD added an extra dimension. The mysterious opening of the first movement is delivered with fastidious care by Nelsons and the orchestra and the recording captures their collective sound very well. Miss Skride plays with great finesse and feeling and she opens up to excellent effect as the movement gathers pace and energy. We were impressed by the excellent quality of both the pictures and the sound.

Andris Nelsons leads two orchestras, one on each side of the Atlantic, and we were able to sample next his work with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Their ongoing cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies is one that we have been following with keen interest and admiration and the latest instalment is hot off the press. This release couples the Sixth and Seventh symphonies and from it we selected the slow movement of the ‘Leningrad’. The opening makes a strong impression: the woodwind chorale is suitably tart and the strings play with passion. The recording, made at live performances in Symphony Hall, Boston, is very fine indeed. We approved strongly of the firm bass sound – the pizzicato double basses are ideally reported – and a few minutes into the movement the passage where the high woodwinds are accompanied by pizzicato strings struck us as very realistic. When the tempo picks up (around 9:30) Nelsons and his players ensure that the music is full of urgency - the brass sound crisp and, a little later, very powerful. The climax around 11:00 is very strong and the engineers have caught it expertly. We felt that the DG recording achieves a very realistic concert hall balance and we liked the sense of space around the sound. DD, who had already heard the whole performance, commented that, unlike some performances of this symphony that he’s heard, there’s no sense of congestion in the performance and the listener is always aware of the “skeleton” of the work. This was the best sound we’d heard so far during our session. We feel that if the rest of the set is as good as this then it will be a notable addition to an already impressive cycle. JQ will be doing a full review shortly.

We stayed on the same side of the Atlantic for our next choice. Decca Gold is a new imprint, very recently launched by Universal Music Group. It’s a US imprint which is intended “to serve as the permanent American home for all new classical artists”. One of the new label’s partners will be the New York Philharmonic and among the initial batch of releases is a pairing of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* and Debussy’s *La Mer*, played by that orchestra under their Music Director, Jaap van Zweden. We listened to the opening sections of *Le Sacre*. This recording is cut at a somewhat higher level than the previous DG/Boston disc, so we trimmed the playback level slightly. LM admired the “crystal clear” recording though JQ wondered if the woodwind were not a bit too closely recording in

the ‘Introduction’. We liked the weight of string sound at the start of ‘Augures printaniers’ and we liked the abundance of audible detail in this section. As we listened on, DD commented that he was interested by the performance because he could hear so much of what was going on. Though the standard of the recording and playing remained high, one or two doubts began to arise about Jaap van Zweden’s way with the score. LM suggested that the accented beats in ‘Rondes printanières’ lacked sufficient weight and JQ felt that, for all the excellence of the sound and playing, the performance didn’t have him on the edge of his seat. Despite huge percussion contributions and brass glissandi during this section we felt that the performance is insufficiently brazen. Full evaluation will have to wait for JQ’s impending review but we can certainly give full marks to the engineering on this release.

We stayed in the USA but moved away from the East coast to hear a recording from Pittsburgh. We had intended to listen to Manfred Honeck’s live performance of the ‘Eroica’ Symphony during our last session in December but the clock defeated us. Now we were able to make amends. JQ had been able to listen to the whole performance and recommended that we hear the *Marcia funèbre* as this would give us the chance to experience the dynamic range of the performance and also offered a fair sample of Honeck’s approach to the work as a whole. This was another performance that divided opinion. LM felt that Honeck was holding back emotionally and DD viewed the performance as “very carefully shaped”. JQ was much more admiring, feeling that Honeck’s conducting is penetrating, though LM felt it was a very mannered performance. DD was undecided about the performance at a single hearing but felt it was certainly not run of the mill. The fugue part-way through the movement is very powerfully projected – the Pittsburgh horns ring out superbly at the peak of this passage - and JQ suggested that Honeck’s way with the music compels the listeners attention, drawing him or her along from first bar to last. He described the recorded sound is “fuller fat” when compared to the New York recording. DD liked the spread of the soundstage and declared that the recording scored 8 or 8.5 out of 10. We admired the very firm bass – though credit for this is shared by the Pittsburgh players and the engineers. Also, both performers and engineers deserve credit for the very well managed dynamics. The disc is issued by Reference Recordings in their Fresh! series and the sound certainly makes a strong statement.

Yet another American orchestra came under our scrutiny as we sampled the latest instalment in Osmo Vänskä’s BIS cycle of the Mahler symphonies with the Minnesota Orchestra: the ‘Resurrection’ Symphony. This is a disc to which all of us had listened previously, including JQ for an imminent review. This, too, was a performance that occasioned some lively conversation as we listened to the huge first movement. JQ pointed out that Vänskä does not conduct the first five bars in accordance with the score: these bars are rushed. Later on, when Mahler slows the pace for a nostalgic interlude (5:58) some of us felt that Vänskä simply takes the passage far too slowly – though LM admired the nice way in which he slows down in preparation for that passage. LM also liked the treatment of that slow episode: Vänskä makes it seem like a prayer, he believes. JQ, on the other hand, felt that far too much momentum is sacrificed. DD’s verdict on Vänskä’s traversal of this movement was that he felt he was hearing “‘Resurrection’ lite”. The playing of the Minnesota Orchestra is very impressive; so, too, is the BIS SACD sound though, in all honesty, we did not feel that the DG or Decca Gold CDs, already discussed, were at all inferior sonically. For us, the jury remains out on Osmo Vänskä as a Mahler conductor.

Next, we went back in time – to 1969, to be precise. Rafael Kubelik’s cycle of the Mahler symphonies, recorded between 1967 and 1971, have long been a staple of the catalogue and widely admired. DG have recently reissued them in a box of 10 CDs – each disc sleeve carries the original LP artwork - and have made the package even more attractive by including also a BD-A disc containing the entire cycle of nine symphonies plus the *Adagio* of the Tenth. JQ had not been able to resist this opportunity to add the Kubelik cycle to his collection and, though he’s only been able to dip into the set so far, he brought the box along for us to sample. It was logical for us to audition the start of the ‘Resurrection’ Symphony, recorded in early 1969 in the Herkulesaal in Munich. We put the BD-A disc into the player. What a revelation! To use an old cliché, the performance seemed to leap out of the speakers. The

sound is clear, vivid and has tremendous presence. It's true that there's a slight edge to the analogue sound but that's the only way in which the recording betrays its five decades. The BRSO attacks the opening in a terrific fashion and though we didn't have a score to hand we're pretty sure that, unlike Vänskä, Kubelik conducts those opening bars accurately. There's weight, drive and drama in Kubelik's reading of the music and the well-defined recording does the performance justice. LM spoke for us all in declaring the sound "fabulous" and we were equally impressed with the performance itself. We played the opening passage on the CD as well and, to get a like-for-like reproduction, we played the CD through the same machine, the Oppo. The CD sound is good but nowhere near as well defined. The BD-A sound, by comparison is cleaner, has more bite and is more imposing than on CD – we also had to increase the playback level for the CD. JQ noted that on the CD there was more of an impression that the performance was being played in an empty hall. We are not sure if the CDs have been remastered for this reissue – we suspect not – but the superb BD-A is the clear winner.

We also sampled the opening of Kubelik's performance of the Third symphony. This was recorded in the same venue but a couple of years earlier: the sessions took place in May 1967. This time we only listened to the BD-A. We thought that the results are again excellent, though the sound is not as impressive as was the case with the 'Resurrection'.

At LM's request, we went back to the 'Resurrection' recording and played the end of the vast finale, staring at the hushed first entry of the choir. Naturally, we reverted to the BD-A. Though the choir is properly hushed, the recording is sufficiently clear that you can hear the individual voice parts, something that isn't by any means the case on all recordings of this work. When the two soloists sing their 'O Glaube' duet the voices of Edith Mathis and Norma Procter come across as clearly as bells – and the singing of both is excellent, too. In the final pages the organ is well reported. The last choral/orchestral ensemble is truly fervent and splendidly recorded. The purely orchestral closing pages sound resplendent and true grandeur is achieved even though, unlike many conductors, Kubelik doesn't draw out the last great chords. On the basis of what we were able to sample, the appearance of this Kubelik cycle on BD-A is a cause for rejoicing. However, we do wonder about the marketing strategy. Why is it thought necessary to offer CDs as well as the BD-A, especially if the CD sound hasn't been remastered? Many Mahler collectors will already have some or all of these Kubelik performances in their CD collection. We can well understand that they would want to upgrade to BD-A with all its advantages, but do people really want – or need – CDs as well, especially if the CDs involve duplication? It seems to us that it would make much greater commercial sense simply to issue the BD-A disc singly; that should be a hugely attractive proposition for collectors. That said, our advice is unequivocal: if you're an admirer of Kubelik in Mahler you should invest in this set without delay in case it is not available for long. ([Purchase here from Amazon](#)) The upgrade to BD-A represents a very significant enhancement.

Finally, we returned to present day Mahler. Among the Mahler cycles currently under way are projects on both sides of the Atlantic. We've already considered the Vänskä cycle from Minneapolis. Another cycle is being set down by François-Xavier Roth in Cologne for Harmonia Mundi with the Gürzenich-Orchester. Having opened his account with the [Fifth](#), Roth has now turned his attention to the Third. Dan Morgan was very impressed with the performance when he [reviewed](#) it as a download; indeed, it was one of our February Recordings of the Month. JQ has just received the CDs for review and he brought them along. This is a live recording, made in the Philharmonie in Cologne as recently as October 2018. We auditioned the opening and right at the start the striking horn tune makes its presence felt. LM commented within about a minute that he liked the sound immediately. It's not just the imposing horn tune that comes over well; the soft bass drum tattoo a couple of minutes later is ideally discernible. As the movement progressed, it became clear that all sections of the orchestra have been expertly recorded – the ear-catching string *tremolandi*, for example. Roth conducts marvellously: the performance is full of life, colour and imagination. In the extended extract we heard, all his tempo selections seem just right. LM commented that the recording is quite forward – though not aggressively so – yet all the subtleties are there too. The magisterial trombone solo (6:40) is projected

superbly and the engineers ensure that the instrument has the necessary presence. We admired the perspectives and clarity of the recording and also the wide dynamic range: it's all very realistic. Both performance and sound have definitely whetted JQ's appetite to listen to the symphony in full for his forthcoming review.

By a neat piece of symmetry, our session began and ended with performances conducted by François-Xavier Roth. That wasn't intentional: we ran out of time and will have to leave consideration of Vaughan Williams symphonies conducted by Bryden Thomson and the Beethoven piano concertos from Mitsuko Uchida and Sir Simon Rattle for another day. The two Roth performances could not be more different from each other: period instrument Berlioz and Mahler played by a modern symphony orchestra in full cry. Both recordings – and performances – are excellent, as, indeed, are most of the discs we auditioned today. We know there are other fine new recordings in the pipeline so we intend that our next session in the Listening Studio will not be long delayed.

[John Quinn](#)

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

[Previous Listening Room Reports](#)