

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

Discs auditioned

An English Coronation – Gabrieli / Paul McCreesh ([details here](#))

Mahler - Symphonic Poem 'Titan'. Les Siècles / François-Xavier Roth ([details here](#))

Mahler – Symphony No 9. Bamberg Symphony Orchestra / Herbert Blomstedt ([details here](#))

Mahler - Symphony No 9 and *Das Lied von der Erde*. Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra / Bernard Haitink (**Decca 483 4643**)

Berlioz – *La damnation de Faust*. Orchestre Lamoureux / Igor Markevitch ([details here](#)) **Berlioz** – *La damnation de Faust*. Les Siècles/François-Xavier Roth ([details here](#))

Sibelius - *Lemminkäinen* Suite. BBC Symphony Orchestra / Sakari Oramo ([details here](#))

Vaughan Williams – *Sinfonia Antartica*. Royal Liverpool Philharmonic / Andrew Manze ([details here](#))

Holst – *The Planets*. Bergen Philharmonic / Andrew Litton ([details here](#))

Strauss – *Salome*. Soloists, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra / Franz Welser-Möst ([details here](#))

Crowded diaries had prevented David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn from getting together for a listening session for some months. Therefore, by early October there was quite a bit of catching-up to do.

We began with a recording that has been greeted with acclaim by several MusicWeb reviewers, including JQ: Paul McCreesh's imaginative reconstruction of a Coronation service, using music that has been heard at the four 20th century English coronations. We listened to Walton's *Coronation Te Deum*. Despite the fact that both of them are Walton fans, neither DD nor LM were familiar with this score. What an impact it makes in this recording with its panoply of brass sounding resplendent and incisive. LM quickly commented on the enormous dynamic range of the recording and, a little later, that the engineers have been extremely successful in conveying the acoustic of Ely Cathedral. Coming back to the disc after a few months, JQ noted that the reverberation of the cathedral is readily audible yet the recording still has great clarity. Also, conspicuous amounts of detail are evident, such as the orchestra's pithy interjection at 'the sharpness of death'. Though the Walton alone was sufficient evidence for the excellence of this recording, JQ couldn't resist playing Vaughan Williams' celebrated setting of 'All people that on earth do dwell', the *Old Hundredth*. 'All available trumpets' is what VW asks for to play the imposing fanfares in the first and last verses and that's exactly what Paul McCreesh delivers here. The hymn is majestic and stately in this performance and once again there's a wide dynamic range, as is evident in VW's treatment of different verses. The large congregation assembled by McCreesh to take part in this recording make a sterling contribution. On the evidence of our sampling, this is a sonically spectacular album and we had no hesitation in awarding it full marks.

We moved on to Mahler and first sampled the latest instalment in François-Xavier Roth's symphony cycle for Harmonia Mundi. This is unusual in two respects. The two previous instalments – the Third and Fifth symphonies – had been recorded with the Gürzenich-Orchester Köln, using modern instruments. For this latest release, Roth has used his period instrument orchestra, Les Siècles and for this project the musicians forsook the French instruments on which they regularly play and have used Austrian and German instruments, mostly of Mahler's own time. Not content with using period instruments, Roth has also elected to record not the familiar four-movement version of Mahler's First but instead the 1893/4 version of the score as a two-part symphonic poem. 'Titan', which includes the 'Blumine' movement, later discarded. JQ covers these points in more detail in his [review](#) of the disc. We listened to an extended extract from the first movement, starting at the very beginning. We admired the clarity of the different orchestral voices in the opening calls and fanfares and JQ was delighted by the grainy double bass sound around 3:20. LM noted a darker orchestral tone, especially from wind and brass, as compared to the customary modern instrument performances. We all liked what we heard. We also sampled the first few minutes of the finale where the *divisi* fiddles are a

decided asset. The first three minutes or so are very exciting in this performance and thereafter, in the extended lyrical episode, the strings phrase their long melodic line beautifully; their sound is softer-grained than usual but there's no loss of ardour where needed. Summing up what we'd heard, DD liked the results, finding them quite different to a modern instrument performance. He appreciated the way in which different groups within the orchestra achieve, quite naturally, more prominence than is usually the case. LM felt that the differences as compared to modern instrument orchestras are not so marked when the music is loud. It's when Mahler is in quieter vein that the subtleties of the period instruments really make their mark. In this recording we feel Roth offers a fascinatingly different take on Mahler; the recording *per se* is very good indeed.

It seemed logical to stay with Mahler but to experience his music played on the modern instruments with which we're all familiar. JQ was keen for us to hear a live performance of the Ninth Symphony conducted by Herbert Blomstedt. Blomstedt has not recorded a great deal of Mahler's music but his account of this great symphony is one which JQ had found very rewarding when he [reviewed](#) it. We listened to a substantial excerpt from the start of the first movement. Unsurprisingly, we immediately noticed the extra power, weight and tonal brightness of a modern instrument ensemble. JQ noted that Mahler's orchestral polyphony comes across here with exceptional clarity. The recording has great presence and definition. The balance is quite a bit closer than on the Roth recording, but the closeness is not oppressive. LM liked the performance very much. He felt that Blomstedt's approach is akin to that of Bruno Walter's, whose 1961 recording was his first exposure to the Ninth; Blomstedt's pacing of the music is "beautiful", he declared. DD was also impressed with the performance. In his view the Bamberg Symphony's sound is more "densely packed" than the more "porous" sound of Les Siècles, but he hastened to add that his comment was in no way disparaging of either orchestra.

The previous two recordings were new to the Mahler catalogue. For our final Mahler recording we went back several decades. Earlier this year, to celebrate his 90th birthday, Decca reissued as two boxed sets the cycles of Bruckner and Mahler symphonies that Bernard Haitink recorded with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra for Philips in the 1960s and 1970s. Not only have these recordings been remastered on CD but each cycle is also contained on a single Blu-ray audio disc. We didn't receive either set for review but JQ, who collected several of these Bruckner and Mahler recordings on LP when they were first issued, invested in both cycles in their new incarnation and brought along the Mahler for us to sample. The box includes all Mahler's orchestral output with the exception of the *Rückert-Lieder*. The recordings were made under studio conditions in the Concertgebouw between 1962 and 1976. It was logical to listen to the same section of the Ninth, which Haitink recorded in June 1969. We used the Blu-ray disc and immediately we were struck by the more open sound as compared to the Blomstedt recording – for these sessions Grote Zaal of the Concertgebouw would have been empty apart from the musicians. We liked the sense of space round the sound but LM soon came to feel that groups of instruments were spot lit in the recording. Perhaps inevitably, given the age of the recording, the violin sound has a tendency to shrillness in loud passages. LM's verdict was that the recording, originally made by Philips, was "a bit artificial", lacking the warmth of the Blomstedt. DD didn't like the orchestral sound as much as the Blomstedt but preferred the greater spatial quality of the Haitink sound. The remastering and the use of Blu-ray gives a welcome new lease of life to these Haitink recordings but LM felt that the sound for the Ninth was a bit like seeing a computer image which has been over-sharpened. We also listened to the first few minutes of 'Der Abschied' from Haitink's celebrated recording of *Das Lied von der Erde*. This was set down in the same hall in September 1975. The recording brings out superbly the sense of foreboding in the orchestral opening, not least the soft, doom-laden tam-tam. Dame Janet Baker, on wonderful form, is the soloist and her voice is very well placed in this recording.

Another recording that has been given the BD-A treatment is Igor Markevitch's recording of Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*. He made this in Paris in 1959 with a largely Francophone cast and DG reissued it as a pair of remastered CDs plus a BD-A disc to mark the 150th anniversary of the composer's death. Using the BD-A disc, we listened to the last section of the work, beginning just before the Ride to the

Abyss with the exchanges between Faust and Méphistophélès ('À la voûte azurée'). JQ was familiar with the recording from his [review](#) but LM and DD, hearing it for the first time, were astounded by the impact of the sixty-year-old recording. The soloists' voices, forwardly placed, have excellent presence. The orchestra is vividly heard and Markevitch generates terrific, brazen excitement in the Ride to the Abyss. There's a certain edge to the sound, consistent with its vintage, but this edge of itself brings extra excitement to the Pandemonium. LM felt that the way in which DG have brought up what is, essentially, an historic recording is simply "astonishing". JQ suggested that the chorus is, arguably, a bit too prominent in the Pandemonium but this is a small price to pay when the musical and sonic results are so exciting. LM praised the "lovely, open sound" while DD felt that the listener is given the impression of actually being there. This is an outstandingly successful remastering.

For a modern performance of the same work we turned to a live performance, captured on film and issued as a DVD. This features François-Xavier Roth and the period instrument ensemble, Les Siècles. The performance was recorded live at L'Opéra du Château de Versailles in November 2018. We wanted to compare the same extract and immediately we came across a presentational flaw with the DVD. It is divided into only seven chapters, the last of which is the Épilogue. Chapter six begins with the start of Part IV so to get to the Ride to the Abyss we had no choice but to fast forward through a long section of the recording. This presentation makes no sense; by contrast, DG divide their BD-A of the Markevitch performances into 30 tracks. Once we'd got to the desired point in the score, DD was immediately struck by how "extremely natural" is the sound quality. We particularly noticed the ambience of the venue around the soloists and the orchestra. When it came to the Ride to the Abyss, LM, while admiring the Roth performance, preferred the sheer impact of the Markevitch performance. In this episode the low brass register with much more bite and snarl on the older Markevitch recording than is the case with Roth's period instruments. On the other hand, the Épilogue is soft-grained and sweet in Roth's performance and JQ feels that this episode is much more successful under Roth; the female voices make a lovely sound.

After the searing, red-hot drama of Berlioz's Ride to the Abyss we felt the need to head for cooler climes. Sakari Oramo has been making some impressive recordings for Chandos with the BBC Symphony Orchestra so we were keen to audition his recording of the *Lemminkäinen* Suite of Sibelius. From it we selected the first movement, 'Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Island'. For the first time today, this brought differences of opinion. LM expressed the view that the Chandos sound, while good, was not as open as the 1959 DG recording that we'd heard earlier. By contrast, JQ argued that the Chandos sound is really nice and open, conveying good perspectives. He liked the power of the BBC Symphony Orchestra's brass and felt that the engineers have defined all sections of the orchestra well. He also admired the dynamic range and the clarity. But it was the performance that really divided us. JQ was impressed but LM described it as "tepid". In his view, a performance of this music should have the listener on the edge of his/her seat – on which we all agree – but Oramo doesn't achieve that. On top of that, he felt the Chandos sound was "too rounded and smoothed over", reminding him of some early recordings of Neeme Järvi and the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra in their home hall. DD was in agreement; he would have liked more edge and attack, both in the performance and the sound.

Andrew Manze has just concluded his cycle of Vaughan Williams symphonies for Onyx Classics and we've sampled the cycle before. His final instalment is a pairing of the *Sinfonia Antartica* and the Ninth symphony. As before, the recordings were made with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and were set down under studio conditions in the city's Philharmonic Hall. We decided to listen to the third movement of *Sinfonia Antartica*, 'Landscape'. DD and LM had not heard this recording before so were somewhat taken aback to hear the voice of Timothy West reciting the superscription before the music started. (Later on, it was even more jarring to hear West's narration intrude into the quiet ending of the movement. We are unanimous in greatly regretting Onyx's decision to include these spoken passages, which aren't even separately tracked: there's no escape!) Once the music started, we liked what we heard. Andrew Manze paces the music very well and has a sure grasp of the movement's architecture. The recording is excellent – we noted in passing that the producer, Andrew Keener, also

produced 'Tod' Handley's fine VW cycle for EMI with the same orchestra and in the same hall. The recording lets you hear lots of detail – not least the glacial percussion – without any artificial highlighting. We all appreciated the soft, deep organ pedal contribution just after 4:00. (The organ was recorded in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral.) From 7:52 onwards the towering climax is most impressive and when the full organ is added to the mix the sound is majestic without totally obliterating everything else. LM's one reservation was that he would have liked more emphasis on the organ's treble register during the climax. Leaving aside our serious reservations about the spoken superscriptions, we otherwise consider both performance and recording a conspicuous success.

From Vaughan Williams' music it was a very natural step to the most famous work by his great friend, Gustav Holst. BIS have just issued a recording of *The Planets* by Andrew Litton and the Bergen Philharmonic. JQ is one of three MusicWeb International reviewers who have praised the release highly ([review](#)). We had a number of reasons for listening to 'Saturn', one of which was that it's the favourite movement of both DD and JQ. For once, we don't need to say a great deal about this. We were unanimous in regarding both performance and recorded sound as superb. There's a marvellous dynamic range so the hushed passages register firmly and truthfully, no matter how quietly the Bergen Philharmonic plays. On the other hand, the huge climaxes open up marvellously and have genuine weight and splendour. We regularly admire BIS recordings but even by their high standards this is something special.

For our grand finale we turned to Richard Strauss and a new DVD of his opera *Salome*. This has been [strongly praised by two of our reviewers](#) and also by LM, who has already watched it seven times and was so impressed – and intrigued - that he wrote an [article](#) about both the production and the performance. This combined enthusiasm encouraged JQ to invest in his own copy, a decision about which he has no regrets. The performance was recorded live in the Felsenreischule, Salzburg as part of the Salzburg Festival in July 2018. In the pit was the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, on tremendous form, under the baton of Franz Welser-Möst, who conducts marvellously. Salzburg had assembled a strong cast but the performance is completely dominated by the Lithuanian soprano Asmik Grigorian in the title role. Possessed of a slender physique and a magnificent voice which she uses to telling effect, Ms Grigorian is ideally cast and she grasps the opportunity with both hands, visibly *inhabiting* the role of the headstrong and infatuated young princess. We watched the end of the opera, starting at the point where Herod has granted Salome's awful wish for the head of Jochanaan. What follows, from 'Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund küssen lassen, Jochanaan!' is essentially a monologue for Salome. Grigorian's singing and acting is absolutely riveting here – JQ described it as the most compelling piece of singing-acting he can ever recall seeing. One notable feature of Grigorian's performance is her range of facial expressions. In this respect, the viewer of the film has a significant advantage over the theatre audience. We'd all seen the performance before so Romeo Castellucci's production did not come as a surprise. The staging is controversial. DD is not at all impressed, describing the production as a directorial "ego trip". While not going that far, JQ is puzzled by a number of aspects, some of which are relatively trivial, such as the appearance at one point of a pair of boxers; the fighters pose for an "action" photograph in the background. More seriously, despite LM's plausible suggestions in his [article](#), JQ remains perplexed by the involvement of a black horse in the proceedings and, even more so, by the decision not to stage the Dance of the Seven Veils.

However, questions about the production recede in the face of such a superb overall performance of the opera and, especially, in the face of so compelling an assumption of the title role. Asmik Grigorian was just 37 when she gave this performance – and she looks even younger. Hers is the performance of a lifetime and it is hard to think that any previous *Salome* has ever matched, let alone surpassed, her combined achievement of superb acting and consummate singing; certainly, the spot comparisons JQ has made with the [1961 Solti studio recording](#) suggest that Grigorian need not fear comparison even with the great Birgit Nilsson. Both sound and picture quality are superb in the Blu-ray version and no admirer of this great opera should miss seeing and hearing this searing performance.

Though we still had two or three unheard discs, it would have been impossible – and anti-climactic – to follow *Salome* with anything else. In any event, the clock had beaten us. Those discs will have to wait for our next session. As today's session drew to a close, we reflected that we had sampled some exceptionally fine recordings: the industry really does appear to go from strength to strength.

[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

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