

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

Discs auditioned

Bruckner – Symphony No 8 – Berlin Philharmonic / Zubin Mehta ([details here](#))

Sibelius – Violin Concerto – Tetzlaff/ Deutsches SO / Ticciati ([details here](#))

Sibelius – Violin Concerto – Kyung Wha Chung / LSO/ Previn **Decca 425 080-2**

Sibelius – Symphony No 4 – Hallé / Sir Mark Elder ([details here](#))

Schoenberg – *Gurre-Lieder* – BBCSO / Pierre Boulez ([details here](#))

Shostakovich - Symphony No. 15. Philadelphia Orchestra / Eugene Ormandy **2CDLX 7370**

Ravel – Piano Concerto – Perianes / Orchestre de Paris / Pons ([details here](#))

Mahler- Symphony No 8 – Philadelphia Orch / Yannick Nézet-Séguin **DG 483 7872**

Mahler - Symphony No 8 – London Philharmonic /Klaus Tennstedt ([details here](#))

Amid all the unpleasant weather which has battered the UK during February, David Dyer, Len Mullenger and John Quinn sought shelter in the MusicWeb International Listening Studio to catch up with a number of releases, mostly recent ones, with an ear in particular to their audio qualities.

JQ has recently been immersed in the latest de-luxe boxed set from the Berlin Philharmonic's own label. This set presents live performances of the nine **Bruckner symphonies** conducted by eight different conductors. The lavish presentation offers the performances in no less than three formats: 9 CDs, each of which contains a single symphony; three Blu-ray video discs; and a single Blu-ray audio disc which contains all nine performances. Among a number of excellent performances, his attention had been caught strongly by the performance of the great 'Adagio' of the Eighth Symphony, conducted by Zubin Mehta. We listened to the BD-A disc. LM admired the playing of the BPO but felt that Mehta's tempo was too slow; at this pace he found it hard to get into the music. DD felt the orchestra was playing the music "almost reverently" and enjoyed what he heard. We briefly sampled a second recording in the box: Bernard Haitink's 2014 performance of the Fourth Symphony. With much listening still to do, we could listen only to the first few minutes of the first movement. Again, LM felt the pace was a little too broad but JQ disagreed, thinking Haitink's pace to be ideal. We were unanimous in our praise for the fabulous playing of the BPO in both performances. Equally, we felt the sound quality is top-notch. The bass is very well defined and the overall sound is most realistic and truthful. The engineers have conveyed excellent perspectives, both front-to-back and from left to right and the sound does full justice to the wonderful dynamic range of the orchestra.

We moved on to a recent Ondine disc on which Christian Tetzlaff plays the violin concertos by Beethoven and Sibelius in partnership with the Deutsches Symphony Orchestra Berlin under their conductor, Robin Ticciati. We listened to the first movement of the **Sibelius** concerto. Right from the start the soloist is very 'present'. It's a fine performance but increasingly LM and JQ wondered, as the movement unfolded, if everything, especially the soloist, was not too much under the spotlight. It's fair to say, though, that listeners who are untroubled by the close balance (as it appeared to us) will appreciate – as we did – the clarity and impact. DD, who has heard the disc two or three times, took a different view: he thought the balance between soloist and orchestra was very good and he liked the sound very much. JQ, however, said that he had the impression of sitting in the front row of the stalls with the soloist right in front of him, up on the stage. The recorded balance, however, does mean that the listener can enjoy fully Tetzlaff's virtuosic playing.

Briefly, we turned to a much older recording, long a favourite of LM's, which he had brought along specifically for comparison. This is the version set down in June 1970 in London's much-missed Kingsway Hall by Kyung Wha Chung, André Previn and the LSO. This brought back memories for JQ: he had owned this recording, paired with the Tchaikovsky concerto, on LP but had never upgraded to CD; consequently, he was returning to the performance after many years. We listened to the opening minutes. We were struck at once by the more intimate and hushed opening as compared to the Tetzlaff

performance. The Decca analogue recording, produced by Christopher Raeburn and engineered by Kenneth Wilkinson, achieves an excellent balance; the soloist is well-positioned but not too prominent. JQ and LM felt that this offered a more natural and warm sound than the Ondine disc – LM suggested the Decca sound was closer to a concert hall experience. While enjoying the Decca recording, which offers a different style of performance, DD expressed a preference for the Ondine version. We also voiced differing views about the two soloists, both of whom we greatly admired as players. JQ and LM noted a “guttier”, more rounded sound from Chung. As recorded, Tetzlaff’s sound seems edgier, though DD regarded it as sweeter than Chung’s.

Staying with **Sibelius**, the final instalment of the symphony cycle from the Hallé and Sir Mark Elder has just been issued and JQ recently reviewed it. The Fourth and Sixth symphonies are paired and we decided to hear the first movement of the Fourth. LM praised the playing of the Hallé. However, he felt that the upper strings sounded “silky smooth”, which isn’t what he prefers to hear in Sibelius. At the other end of the compass, he would have liked a more edgy and rugged sound from the double basses. DD found the performance “stunning”. It is compelling and he admired the coherence which Elder brings to this eerie, contemplative music. He also admired the recorded sound; of the recordings we’d heard so far, this was his favourite. He described it as “open and detailed” and liked the fact that details – such as a small intervention from a muted horn – were apparent without being thrust into the listener’s face. JQ agreed that the recording is very truthful and the performance excellent.

The Dutton Epoch label has been issuing a number of items of back catalogue, mainly from CBS/Sony, we believe. We had a couple of their most recent releases in which recordings originally issued in Stereo/Quadraphonic sound have been released as SACDs. Although some previous releases have been reviewed on MusicWeb, this is the first time that any of these Dutton issues have come our way for a Studio session. Schoenberg’s massive **Gurre-Lieder** would seem a prime candidate for either the Quadraphonic or SACD formats. Dutton has released Pierre Boulez’s recording, made with BBC forces and first issued in 1976. We are not sure but we think this may be the first release of this recording on CD or SACD. We listened to the passage beginning with the tenor solo ‘Du wunderliche Tove!’ and carrying on through the Song of the Wood Dove. We noted a very wide left-to-right sound stage and a sense of space around the sound. Jess Thomas can be heard clearly though there are times when the orchestra seems to envelop him – as opposed to overwhelming him – and JQ commented that this was a realistic representation of what might happen in a concert hall. The recording, engineered by Bob Auger in 1974, may not have quite the depth of modern recordings but still sounds mightily impressive. The voice of Yvonne Minton, who takes the part of the Wild Dove, has good presence and she offers ardent singing. DD was very impressed by the recording. It seemed to him that the vocal soloists were placed forward of the orchestra – in a successful way – and he also commented that the sound of the orchestra suggested a semi-circular layout. (He made this comment without having seen the booklet, in which a session photo confirms exactly such a layout.) LM admitted that he hadn’t liked the sound at first but it grew on him as he listened. In summary we thought that the SACD presentation is extremely successful; it’s astonishing that this recording is nearly 46 years old.

Also possibly new to CD/SACD are the 1970s recordings which Eugene Ormandy made in Philadelphia of the Fifth and Fifteenth symphonies of **Shostakovich**. These now achieve an SACD release thanks to Dutton. We listened to the second movement, an *Adagio*, of the Fifteenth Symphony. This recording was made in October 1972 in Philadelphia’s Scottish Rite Cathedral. The imposing brass chorales at the start are very imposing. The cello solos in these opening pages are closely recorded; indeed, both DD and JQ felt the player was balanced almost as if in a concerto. Both LM and DD approved of the vivid sound and they also liked the space round the sound. JQ was less sure, feeling that the often sparsely scored passages in the opening and closing pages were rather spot lit. The big climax (from 9:41) is towering but JQ posed the question: are the opening and closing pages in scale with that climax? He noted, for example, that the vibraphone, heard near the movement’s end, is more prominent than should be the case. On reflection, DD agreed with him that there might have been some manipulation at the mixing desk but in his view the end justified the means. JQ will be reviewing these discs shortly

and will see if any of his reservations are overcome on further listening. LM and DD, though, thought that the sound quality is very good: you get to hear everything that's going on.

Coming right up to date in recording terms, we took the emotional temperature down several degrees and listened to part of a disc that contains 2017/18 performances of music by **Ravel** given by the pianist Javier Perianes and the Orchestre de Paris under Josep Pons. This release has the happy idea of presenting two piano works which Ravel later orchestrated and both versions are offered. As the centrepiece of the disc there is a performance of the G major Piano Concerto. From that work we selected the central slow movement which, in JQ's view, is the epitome of classic grace. He noted the very natural and mellow sound of the piano in the long opening solo, which is played sensitively by Perianes. We all admired the excellent balance between piano and orchestra and also the natural warmth of the sound. The episode where the cor anglais takes over the melody, accompanied by delicate filigree figurations from the piano, is beguiling: here both the performance and the recorded sound are glowing. We all agreed that this is a lovely and wholly successful recording. DD wondered if the cor anglais might have been just a degree more prominent in the aforementioned passage but this reservation was not shared by LM and JQ. Subsequent to our session, this disc has been selected as one of MusicWeb International's five Recordings of the Month for February, a well-deserved accolade.

Earlier in our session we'd heard the work of the Philadelphia Orchestra in the 1970s. To close, we sampled the very latest recording by the current membership of that orchestra under their present conductor, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. DG has just released a live recording of **Mahler's Eighth Symphony**. This was made at performances, given in Verizon Hall, Philadelphia in March 2016 to mark the centenary of the work's US premiere, which was given by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. JQ has been listening to the performance in connection with a forthcoming review and suggested we should listen to the end of Part II, beginning at Mater Gloriosa's distant solo: this, he feels, shows the performance at its best. We liked the orchestral and choral contributions to 'Blicket auf!' The hushed chorus entry at 'Alles vergängliche' sounds wonderful. Sadly, though, the forensic examination of the Studio loudspeakers detected several faint extraneous audience noises during this magical passage. It's only fair to say that JQ hadn't heard these through his own loudspeakers but listening again, later, through his headphones, the sounds, though faint are audible. The ending is majestic and at the close we hear the Philadelphia brass in all their pomp, though the organ is not as discernible as one would have wished. LM liked the sound overall but DD was less impressed, feeling that the sound lacks impact. He contrasted this recording with the results which DG have obtained with another US orchestra: in his opinion the recordings by Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra have been much better from an audio perspective.

In preparing his forthcoming review of the Nézet-Séguin recording, JQ chose as his comparison another live performance. This was given by **Klaus Tennstedt and the LPO** back in 1991. The recording was made by the BBC for a television broadcast (the film was subsequently released on DVD by EMI) and the audio recording was eventually released by the LPO on their own label back in 2011. We were running out of time so couldn't listen to the whole of the same passage; instead, we picked up Tennstedt's account at the hushed 'Chorus Mysticus' entry. It soon became apparent that this is a much more dramatic, red-blooded performance than Nézet-Séguin's. At the *fortissimo* statement of 'Alles vergängliche', JQ expressed the view that this is what fervour sounds like in music. The very end of the work is a blaze of sound and, praise be, the organ makes a sonorous contribution. We recognise that we are dealing with two very different recordings here – the DG sound, benefitting from 25 years of progress in digital recording, is more sophisticated than what we hear from LPO Live. The London recording, made in a drier acoustic, is more close-up – LM thought that the singing in the Tennstedt version was too closely recorded by comparison with the DG. However, DD felt that the 1991 sound was arguably more appropriate to the inherent rawness that one often encounters in Mahler's music. There's no doubt that the Tennstedt version has more impact, both as a performance and in terms of the recorded sound. JQ summed up his feelings by saying that the difference between the Nézet-Séguin and Tennstedt performances was the difference between good and great.

The heaven-storming conclusion of Mahler's Eighth is very difficult to follow and we decided not to try. It's been particularly fascinating to hear in this particular session, how well some older recordings stand the test of time.

[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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