

CD Review by Robert McColley

NIELSEN Violin Concerto. Flute Concerto • Dorrit Matson, cond; New York Scandia SO; Adele Anthony (vn); Lisa Hansen (fl) • CENTAUR CRC 2442 (53:03)

Carl Nielsen's Violin Concerto (1911) begins with an outburst from the orchestra, followed by a florid cadenza for the solo violin. It then settles into four highly original and effective movements, slow-fast, slow-fast, in the style of Baroque sonatas. By turns lyrical and virtuosic, the concerto is charged with the earthy vitality also represented in the great Dane's Third Symphony, "Sinfonia Espansiva," also of 1911.

Yehudi Menuhin was the first artist of international stature to record this wonderful concerto, some 45 years ago (on HMV, with Mogens Wøldike and the Danish State RSO). More recently it has been presented in fine recordings by Cho-Liang Lin, with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Swedish RSO (Sony), and an excellent one by Maxim Vengerov with the Chicago SO under Daniel Barenboim (Teldec). Over the years other fine recordings have come out of Scandinavia, two of them featuring Arve Tellefsen (EMI with Herbert Blomstedt, and Virgin Classics, with Yehudi Menuhin, here as a highly competent conductor).

"Does this leave the new release from Centaur superfluous?" I wondered as I unpacked the disc and entrusted it to my Harmon-Kardon deck. Not in the least: The performance immediately captivated me, and held on firmly for its entire 34-plus minutes; so too the brilliant performance of the late (1926) Flute Concerto. That ending, I played the entire disc again, fascination and pleasure undiminished. Some of the adjectives repeated through my notes: vital, idiomatic, vigorous, exciting, propulsive, gorgeous. The recording sessions took place in Trinity Church on Wall Street in lower Manhattan. It is a lovely old Gothic building, but by no means huge. It proves to be a surprisingly good recording venue, with plenty of warm but not overlong reverberation; it makes this (presumably) chamber-sized orchestra sound full and grand. Microphoning is quite close; one feels inside the performance. Adele Anthony, an Australian and winner of the 1996 International Carl Nielsen Violin Competition (which requires finalists to perform this concerto, with orchestra), not only commands the notes

and the style of this difficult work, but draws full and glorious sound from the 1735 Guarneri del Gesù instrument she has on loan from the Stradivari Society of Chicago. Danish conductor Dorrit Matson matches the soloists' intensity and draws from the (again, presumably) New York area players both the muscularity and ingenuity of this extraordinary score.

The Flute Concerto is half the length of its discmate. It is an enigmatic, truncated work, by turns lyrical and dissonant, cheerful and bitter, optimistic and despondent. It therefore relates to Nielsen's last symphony, the Sixth (1925), ironically called by the composer "Sinfonia Semplice." Audiences often find it a difficult work to enjoy, but good flutists and conductors love to try; oddly, I have heard it several times in public performance, but never the far more lovable Violin Concerto. Lisa Hansen meets the challenge of the solo, and conductor Matson and her ensemble support her brilliantly. This is the most enjoyable performance of the work known to me, either live or recorded.

In *Fanfare* 20:3 Robert Maxham lavished a long and informative review on Vengerov-Barenboim-CSO, equally praising the Nielsen as the best in a long series of generally recommend-able recordings, and the Sibelius Violin Concerto, a logical and worthy discmate. He found many ways to praise the recording, considering it "simply phenomenal." Here, only the Nielsen is at issue. How can one prefer the relatively unknown players on Centaur to Vengerov, easily compared with the greatest violinists of the century, and Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony at the peak of their considerable form? It is, for me, a matter of idiom; one can greatly appreciate the refinement and elegance of the Teldec recording, and the cogency, for example, of playing the slow movements in a relaxed, gentle, and understated way, to heighten the contrast with the extrovert and bravura fast movements. Without a doubt, there are breath-catching moments from Vengerov (playing a Stradivarius, c. 1723, on loan from the Stradivari Society of Chicago!) and Barenboim's superb orchestra. Yet my preference for Anthony-Matson is strong: Even in 1911 Nielsen's music had bite as well as beauty, roughness as well as elegance, and above all a sense of urgent forward motion. One appreciates the Vengerov-Barenboim as a polished, elegant, classical performance as one would enjoy it from the 20th row of Orchestra Hall. With Anthony and Matson one is inside the performance, in every sense, fully

caught up in the musical action. And though I adore the Sibelius Violin Concerto, there is no shortage of great recordings of it, starting with the first: Heifetz-Beecham (well known and loved by critic Maxham). A disc combining brilliant and idiomatic readings of the Violin and Flute Concertos of Carl Nielsen is harder to come by—until now. **Robert McColley**

This article originally appeared in Issue 23:4 (Mar/Apr 2000) of *Fanfare Magazine*.