

the highly intelligent hands of Thomas Rajna this music—a lot of which I had not heard before—is most enjoyable. His style is not at all percussive, which perhaps reduces the audacity of the *Circus Polka*, but the three-movement Sonata is revealed as a remarkably considered piece and the four-movement *Serenade* not as lightweight as it sounds. Its cool “Cadenza finale” seems to me quite beautifully judged. The programme is completed by the *Four Studies, Piano-Rag Music* (rhythmically sound but perhaps should have more acerbity of articulation) and *Tango*, which is aptly fanciful here. The 1968 sound is natural although not specially vivid, so I must give this a qualified recommendation, the more so since the playing time is short (Ⓞ EC3392-2: 48 minutes: ADD).

Two other well regarded Saga releases must also be mentioned: the pioneering coupling of Liszt's *Missa choralis* and *Via crucis* by the BBC Northern Singers under Gordon Thorne (Ⓞ EC3399-2: 68 minutes: ADD) and the recording that established Thea King's reputation as a clarinetist—the Mozart Clarinet Quintet (Ⓞ EC3387-2: 51 minutes: ADD). The Liszt still makes a striking impression, with dramatic choral singing and a strong contribution from Francis Jackson in the very important organ interludes of the *Via crucis*. The sound, however, is rather studio-ish and has been superseded by a superb mid-price pairing of the same two works by Vocal Audita Nova de Paris directed by Jean Sourisse, with Marie-Claire Alain the organist. These performances are quite riveting and the recording is superbly atmospheric. I have recommended this disc before in an earlier “Collectors' corner” (10/92).

Thea King's account of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet remains among the most beautiful available; she is admirably supported by the Aeolian Quartet and the recording is naturally balanced and truthful. The coupling is a bright-and-breezy version of the *Divertimento* in D major, K136, in its string quartet version. This does not have quite enough ballast to balance the Quintet, so Saga should have found an additional work to round off the reissue.

Ketèlby, Sheppard and Tallis

Turning now to Classics for Pleasure, let me enthusiastically draw readers' attention to a captivating and quite indispensable budget-price Ketèlby collection from John Lanchbery and the Philharmonia Orchestra, the latter playing with great style and hugely enjoying themselves. The Ambrosian Singers provide additional atmosphere in *A Monastery Garden*, *A Persian Market*, *A Chinese Temple Garden* and *The Mystic Land of Egypt*, and ensure the sentimental opulence of *Sanctuary of the Heart*. Ketèlby programmes don't come any better than this. To make the reissue even more enticing, CIP have added the superb 1958 RPO/Anatole Fistoulari recording of Luigi's *Ballet égyptien*. Like the Ketèlby pieces it is a tuneful suite and has been in and out of the catalogue seemingly since the dawn of time, but has certainly never been better played (Ⓞ TC-CFP4637; Ⓞ CD-CFP4637: 69 minutes: ADD). This CD also benefits from exceptionally informative notes by Peter Gammond.

The music of the Elizabethan composers Thomas Tallis and the much less well known John Sheppard could hardly be more different from Ketèlby. In fact some readers might be horrified at the thought of mentioning them in the same breath. It is good that Classics for Pleasure have decided to juxtapose motets by both in a reissue of performances recorded in 1973-4 by the excellent Clerkes of Oxenford under David Wulstan. The singing is polished and certainly not short on spirit or fervour. Wulstan keeps things moving and is especially powerful and involving in Sheppard's glorious *Gaude, gaude, gaude Maria* and *Verbum caro*. Perhaps some of the serenity is lost in certain of the Tallis pieces (although I greatly liked the surge of *Loquebantur variis linguis*), yet they are all thoroughly alive, notably the famous 40-part motet *Spem in alium*. Good transfers, although the Tallis items, made in Merton College Chapel, Oxford are not quite as cleanly focused as the

Sheppard, recorded in St Mary Magdalene, Paddington in West London (Ⓞ TC-CFP4638; Ⓞ CD-CFP4638: 69 minutes: ADD).

Classikon Mendelssohn and Wagner

Two more reissues on DG's new bargain label Classikon seem to me not only particularly enticing to the novice—at whom this series is clearly aimed—but also of interest to the general collector. Leonard Bernstein's 1978 Israel Philharmonic recording of Mendelssohn's *Italian* Symphony (No. 4) seems to me to show the great American conductor at his most charismatic. Tempos are fast but never sound rushed—one is simply exhilarated by the outer movements—while the *Andante* and *Minuet* are stylishly and warmly done. His *Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave)* of a year later is unashamedly, romantically evocative, yet also vital, and both performances reflect the spontaneity of the live concerts at which they were recorded. The Tel Aviv sound, too, is admirably balanced and it is even better in the *Overture*, “*Scherzo*”, “*Nocturne*” and “*Wedding March*” from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These are recorded by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra under Rafael Kubelik rather more than a decade earlier in the Hercules-saal in Munich. Again, polished and very responsive orchestral playing. This is a first-rate Mendelssohn concert (Ⓞ 439 411-2GCL: 67 minutes: ADD).

First-rate, too, is the very cleverly selected compilation of highlights from the Karajan recording of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. When last issued this compilation comprised less music and, more importantly, ended in mid air after Siegfried's Funeral March; now the *Götterdämmerung* selection ends with the closing nine minutes of the opera preceded by Helga Dernesch's magnificent Immolation scene. There are many other fine things, not least Sieglinde's soliloquy, “*Der Männer Sippe*” from Act 1 of *Die Walküre* and a brilliant and thrilling Ride of the Valkyries. However, finest of all is the complete 14-minute scene comprising Wotan's Farewell (Thomas Stewart quite splendid) and the Magic Fire Music, where the playing of the Berlin Philharmonic is overwhelming. I sat through the whole 77 minutes late one evening, the nape of my neck tingling! The transfers are a shade over-bright (compared with the LP originals), but the impact is undeniable. Surely anyone who buys this exceptional bargain will be tempted to explore Wagner further and perhaps visit the opera house too—if their budget permits it (Ⓞ 439 423-2GCL: 77 minutes: ADD).

A new mid-price digital label from Denon brings affectionate accounts of three famous named Haydn string quartets, including the *Fifths* and *Emperor*, Op. 76 Nos. 2 and 3. The Berlin Philharmonia Quartet are at their best in the famous slow movement of the *Emperor*, which they play with considerable warmth. They are equally successful in the work now attributed to Hoffstetter, previously known as Haydn's Op. 3 No. 5, with its famous ‘serenade’ slow movement, which they present rather elegantly. Altogether the playing is polished and well blended, helped by a full, realistically balanced recording. There is, it is true, an element of blandness in this music-making; none the less the disc represents fair value (Ⓞ DC8122: 56 minutes: DDD).

EMI Studio Plus

Among a trio of Studio Plus mid-price reissues from EMI one stands out: Riccardo Muti's 1981 Kingsway Hall, London recording of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony*; a truly epic reading and thrilling sonically (especially at the climaxes of the outer movements). It is a clear first choice among mid-price versions—not forgetting Maazel's fine Decca account (11/93)—for it has an onward sweep and vigour which do not prevent the memorable lyrical tunes at the centre of the *Scherzo* (especially) and in the *Andante*, blossoming fully. The Philharmonia play superbly. This is one of Muti's very finest records (Ⓞ CDM7 64872-2: 59 minutes: DDD).

Admirers of David Oistrakh can hear this great violinist at his most elegantly polished and charismatic in a generous Mozart programme which not only includes the Violin Concertos Nos. 4 in D,

K218 and 5 in A, K219 (*Turkish*), but the two *Rondos*, K269 and K273, plus the meltingly played *Adagio* in E major, K261. Oistrakh's gracefully urbane (not using this adjective in any pejorative way) phrasing and timbre are matched by his crisp rhythmic sense and genuine feeling for Mozartian lyrical style: the slow movement and finale of K219 are a joy. The slight drawback is that the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (which Oistrakh directs himself) is on the opulent side (especially in the *Adagio*, K261). Although the bright remastering of the analogue recording (from the early 1970s) makes the orchestral contribution seem for the most part fresh and clear, some listeners might want more transparent, less weighty orchestral textures to match the scale of the music (Ⓞ CDM7 64868-2: 77 minutes: ADD).

A digital coupling from Simon Rattle of Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* and Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony is potentially enticing but, while the CBSO performance of the Britten has fine thrust and seemingly spontaneous emotional tension, the Philharmonia's playing in the Shostakovich is much less taut in the long first movement, which at Rattle's spacious tempo—bringing a playing time of 26 minutes—fails to maintain a consistent grip. There are bursts of passion, it is true, but then the tension drops. The *Scherzo* is riveting, the finale has plenty of vitality, but overall this is one of Rattle's less compelling readings. Although the sound is bright and clear, and quite full, it is less impressive than in the Britten (Ⓞ CDM7 64870-2: 78 minutes: DDD).

Sony Classical Essential Classics

Rudolf Serkin's 1966 recording of the Brahms Second Piano Concerto was the third he made in the LP era and undoubtedly the finest. He established a strong partnership with Szell and his excellent Cleveland Orchestra to produce a reading which combines weight and lyrical intensity (notably in the slow movement) with a rhythmic animation in the finale. The recording is not entirely flattering to the pianist, but the image is bold and clear and the orchestra benefit from Cleveland's Severance Hall ambience. The coupling on this mid-price disc, Richard Strauss's underrated *Burleske*, finds an equally impressive partnership between Serkin and Eugene Ormandy, but here the microphones seem to be closer still. The piano tone is very bright, approaching brittleness, while the orchestra never sound sumptuous, as we know the Philadelphia do when heard live. Nevertheless, this is a performance of some distinction, combining brilliance with a ready understanding of the work's lyrical ideas, uncharacteristic but melodically insinuating. Serkin admirers willing to make allowances for the sound need not hesitate (Ⓞ SBT53262; Ⓞ SBK53262: 67 minutes: ADD).

In my January “Collectors' corner” I gave high praise to a DG Classikon coupling of Debussy's *La mer* and *Nocturnes* from Daniel Barenboim and the Orchestre de Paris. Now Sony Classical offer the same pairing from Ormandy and the Philadelphia, where the orchestral playing is even finer—indeed, it is quite superlative. The *Nocturnes* (recorded in 1964) show almost unlimited subtlety of nuance and dynamics (if, perhaps inevitably, the chorus in “*Sirènes*” is a shade too robust) and *La mer* is electrifying in its virtuosity, particularly in the two final sections. Following the delicate tracery and effortless bravura of “*Jeux de vagues*” the work's close (“*Dialogue du vent et de la mer*”) is marked *Animé et tumultueux* and that is exactly what the brilliant Philadelphia convey. Earlier there is some wonderfully sustained piano playing (track 3, at 4'40”), followed by the violins' ecstatic climax (6'05”). Ormandy's dynamic shading also comes through impressively, in spite of the quite early (1959) stereo sound.

The other two pieces included are the *Danse* (brilliant in its deft lightness of touch) and a sensuous yet refined *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, with William Kincaid playing the flute solo most beautifully. Any minor reservations about the recording are forgotten in one's admiration for this magnificent orchestra at the peak of the Ormandy regime (Ⓞ SBT53256; Ⓞ SBK53256: 65 minutes: ADD).