

BRUCH Violin Concerto No. 1. Serenade, op. 75. *In Memoriam*, op. 65 • Antje Weithaas (vn); Hermann Bäumer, cond; NDR RPO • CPO 777 846-2 (77:40)

Playing a violin made by Peter Greiner in 2001, Antje Weithaas presents three concerted works for violin by Max Bruch: his popular First Violin Concerto, the less well-known Serenade, and *In Memoriam*. She opens the concerto slowly and moodily—in fact, her tone almost disappears as she exploits, some might say exaggeratedly, her instrument’s dynamic range in that passage. The engineers have come very close to her, almost as close as Isaac Stern’s did to him in his first recording of the work. But Stern produced a tone thick as honey from his Guarneri, a tone that made a considerable contribution to putting across anything he played. The close focus on Weithaas’s Greiner doesn’t, and perhaps can’t, achieve a comparable effect. In fact, many may feel that its slightly astringent timbre and its slightly edgy quality don’t bear such proximity to the microphone nearly so well. Perhaps, too, that’s why individual notes stand out in the passagework, creating almost the impression of cultivated eccentricity. Jascha Heifetz, who arguably spoke Bruch as a native language, may have shed a laser-like analytical light on individual passages and their constituent notes, but he never created a trees-before-forest effect like this one. His slow movement, and Stern’s as well, at times, gave the sense, again, of being non-reflective and highly studied at the same time. Weithaas plays with the care but not the naturalness of either of these older violinists. Nor does she become caught up in the first movement’s climactic passages as did Nathan Milstein. Her playing in the finale sounds sharply etched, but Stern, for example, balanced the sound of the orchestra with an almost equal tonal weight (assisted in this balancing act, of course, by complicit engineers). Hermann Bäumer and the NDR Radiophilharmonie produce such a lush canvas upon which to spread her tone that her slenderness shows to special disadvantage.

The four-movement Serenade, written with Pablo Sarasate in mind, lasts almost 40 minutes and hasn’t been recorded so frequently as has even perhaps the Third Concerto. In the first and third movements, slow, both of them, Bäumer allows listeners to hear the woodwind instruments; and these lend tonal color especially to the third movement, an atmospheric “Notturmo.” If Salvatore Accardo brings greater force of personality to the second movement, he barely matches Weithaas’s luminescent tonal purity in this third one (and CPO’s digital engineering captures the richness of the woodwind timbres); and, in the finale, her dynamism sounds irrepressible. Since in the Serenade she has to contend with fewer competitors, she more easily reaches the benchmarks set by her predecessors. Maxim Fedotov included it on a program with the composer’s *Scottish Fantasy*—Naxos 8.557395, which I reviewed a decade ago in *Fanfare* 28:6; he sounds more

mannered than Weithaas, but neither one plays with Accardo's straightforward vigor.

It's been said that Bruch considered *In Memoriam*, consisting simply of an extended *Adagio*, to be one of the finest of his works. Weithaas and Bäumer play it that way, giving full expression to its grandeur and pathos, although Kurt Masur and Accardo take more time to unfold its emotionally laden musical argument (15:55 in comparison with Weithaas's 14:43).

In summing up, I want to disavow any prejudice I may have suggested about modern violins: Test after test has proved them almost indistinguishable from old masterworks in a number of very well-defined ways (I've participated in some of the recent trials—though they've been going on for a century—and can verify that the judging and analysis weren't biased). Nevertheless, individual violins differ as much as do recording techniques, and in the Bruch's concerto, many may feel that violin and engineer didn't pile strength upon strength. Nevertheless, I'd still recommend Weithaas's version of this blockbuster, although not with the enthusiasm I'd reserve for her performances of the Serenade and *In Memoriam*. These should be essential listening and make the entire release an easy one to recommend with great urgency. **Robert Maxham**

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BRUCH Violin Concerto No. 2. *Scottish Fantasy. Adagio appassionato*, op. 57 • Antje Weithaas (vn); Hermann Bäumer, cond; NDR RP Hannover • CPO 777 833-2 (70:20)

I may have mentioned a long time ago that the second record I ever owned was the LP of Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 2 with Heifetz, Izler Solomon, and the RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra. At that point, I don't think I'd ever even heard *the* Bruch Concerto—you know; the famous one in G Minor. Perhaps it was because I came to know the No. 2 first, and so early in my musical voyage of discovery, that I've always preferred it to the No. 1. The second theme in the first movement is of such heart-throbbing beauty, even as a teenager, it brought tears to my eyes; and Heifetz had a way of playing it that seared the soul.

Why Bruch's Second Concerto isn't at least as popular as his First is a mystery to me, but it isn't. In fact, so great is the distance in popularity between the First and Second concertos that the ratio of recordings is greater than 15 to 1. And of the fewer than a dozen recordings of the Second Concerto listed, not one is less than 20 years old, and most are much older than that—Elman, Heifetz, Rosand, Perlman, and Accardo among them. The most recent version I have is with James Ehnes and the Montréal Symphony Orchestra on a CBC disc recorded in 2002, and it, too, like this new CPO release, is coupled with Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy*. Much of an Ehnes fan as I am, however, I don't hear in his Bruch No. 2 the emotional

intensity or virtuosic electricity of the Heifetz.

Thus, it was with anticipation, but some trepidation, that I looked forward to hearing this brand-new recording by Antje Weithaas. My apprehension was rooted in Weithaas's performances of the Brahms sonatas with pianist Silke Avenhaus on a CAVI CD, reviewed in 32:3, in which I found the violinist's playing a bit understated for my taste. But in all fairness, I was judging Weithaas in a very competitive field—there are very nearly as many versions of the Brahms sonatas to choose from as there are of the Bruch No. 1—and I was aware that a number of my colleagues had found Weithaas most commendable in a variety of repertoire. I must have listened to this new Bruch No. 2 more times than I have just about any other CD when preparing to write a review. Initially, I was very taken with the performance and not just Weithaas's contribution to it. The orchestra is recorded more forward and spotlighted in a way concerto recordings often aren't, which, admittedly, makes Weithaas seem smaller, but the balance is a more realistic one. Moreover, Hermann Bäumer leads the orchestra with a real sense of conviction in the symphonic merits of the score's orchestral parts, resulting in the many beauties of Bruch's writing coming to the fore.

Weithaas plays with equal earnestness and sounds genuinely more emotionally engaged than Ehnes. Her tempos are more deliberate, but when it comes to that second theme in the first movement, she comes very close to Heifetz in wringing the last drop of passion and poignancy out of it. Technically, Weithaas is very secure; her double stops and rapid passagework come out clean, clear, and unforced-sounding, but the tradeoff for precision is the rather slower tempos noted above. There's no risk-taking or throwing caution to the wind, as there is with Heifetz or even Menuhin, whose 1973 recording with Boult and the London Symphony Orchestra I'd forgotten I had on LP, so I listened to it as well. The Heifetz has been transferred to CD, but I don't believe the Menuhin ever has; too bad, because it's amazingly good for Menuhin at that late stage in his career. In fact, I was shocked to discover that his first-movement timing of 10:20 is even faster than Heifetz's of 11:31. But especially disappointing about the Menuhin is the way he plows through that second theme, actually speeding up rather than slowing down, as if he feared sentimentalizing it. Still, you only need compare Heifetz and Menuhin's timings, or even Ehnes's 12:07, to Weithaas's 13:20 to get an idea of just how measured she is.

As I said, I listened to the performance quite a few times, and though I liked it in the beginning, especially for Bäumer's handling of the orchestra, there were a couple of things that began to bother me on repeated hearings. One of them was Weithaas's overuse, in my opinion, of portamento, which lathers Bruch's effusive Romanticism with an extra layer of unnecessary schmaltz. Listening to Heifetz in this respect is instructive. He was not averse to portamento, but he always saved it for where it really counted, where it gave one note to the next that special stab in the heart. Applied as indiscriminately as it is by Weithaas, it has the opposite of its intended effect, becoming cloying. The other issue I have—and it's related to the soloist vs. the orchestra balance alluded to earlier—is that Weithaas is capable of

attenuating her tone on *pps* to barely a whisper; but when she does, because the orchestra is so front and center, her violin becomes virtually inaudible.

In the final analysis, this is not the Bruch No. 2 I'd hoped for, but then neither was the Ehnes when it came out. The Heifetz is still a good bet, and on CD it includes not only the Wieniawski No. 2 with which it was originally coupled on LP, but also the Conus Concerto and Tchaikovsky's *Sérénade mélancolique*. I'm still holding out, though, for a new recording that I can embrace without any caveats.

Third in popularity among Bruch's works for a solo instrument and orchestra, after his Violin Concerto No. 1, is his *Scottish Fantasy*. "What's second?" you ask. Why, his *Kol Nidre*, of course, for cello and orchestra. When it comes to the *Scottish Fantasy*, Heifetz once again looms large with two recordings, one from 1947 with William Steinberg and the RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra, and a later remake in stereo from 1961 with Malcolm Sargent and the New Symphony Orchestra.

Reputedly, it was Heifetz's favorite "concerto," and he did seem to have a special affinity for it, though I'm not aware of any Scottish genes in his ancestry.

In any case, with many more recorded versions of the piece available than there are of Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 2, I wouldn't go so far as to say that Heifetz owns the *Scottish Fantasy*. There's quite a stunning performance by Michael Rabin with Adrian Boult and the Philharmonia, recorded by EMI in 1957, and Itzhak Perlman also proved to be simpatico with the score in his 1986 EMI recording of it with Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic. That CD, by the way, couples Perlman's performance of the Bruch No. 2 noted above. Not to be overlooked either is Oistrakh senior's recording under Jascha Horenstein conducting the London Symphony Orchestra on a 1962 Decca LP, incongruously coupled with Hindemith's Violin Concerto. That recording found its way into my collection on a London label reel-to-reel tape, but it has been digitized and is available on CD. The same matters I took issue with in Weithaas's Bruch No. 2—namely cautious tempos, overuse of portamento, and a recording balance that tends to silence the soloist's subdued dynamics—are also evident in the *Scottish Fantasy*.

Composed as a kind of addendum or afterthought to his Violin Concerto No. 3, Bruch wrote the *Adagio appassionato*, op. 57, in 1901 for his fellow violinist and good friend Joseph Joachim, who was then 70 years old. The very beautiful 11-minute piece is woefully neglected on record, equally as neglected as the composer's Third Violin Concerto. One of the few recordings of the piece will be found, not in Salvatore Accardo's Philips twofer of Bruch's violin concertos, but in another Philips twofer of Bruch's symphonies with Kurt Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, which also includes a number of Bruch's other violin with orchestra works.

Speaking of which, CPO has announced this new Weithaas release as Volume 1 in Bruch's complete works for violin and orchestra, of which there are easily enough to fill another disc. There's the Romance in A Minor, op. 42; *In Memoriam*, op. 65; the Serenade in A Minor, op. 75; and his last work in the medium, the *Konzertstück* in F# Minor, op. 84, written in 1911.

Setting aside Heifetz's exemplary recordings of the Violin Concerto No. 2 and the

Scottish Fantasy, newly recorded performances of these works that can be recommended without reservations are still awaited. Antje Weithaas's efforts are certainly in the very good to excellent category, but they're not exceptional. I think the violinist I'd like to hear in these works is Arabella Steinbacher; her tone and temperament strike me as ideal for this music. **Jerry Dubins**

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BRUCH Violin Concerto No. 3. *Konzertstück* in f#, op 84. *Romance* in a, op. 42
• Antje Weithaas (vn); Hermann Bäumer, cond; North German RPO • CPO 777 847-2 (68:44)

Here is the third, and presumably final, volume in Antje Weithaas's exploration of Bruch's works for violin and orchestra. Volume 1, containing Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy* and, in my opinion, his much underrated Violin Concerto No. 2 in D Minor, received a lukewarm reception from me in 38:3. Volume 2, reviewed by Robert Maxham in 39:3, contained the most popular of the composer's works, the Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, plus the Serenade, op. 75, and *In Memoriam*, op. 65. Maxham was none too positive about Weithaas's performance of the concerto—though one does have to consider the overwhelming competition in this particular work—but he felt that the other pieces on the disc warranted a strong recommendation.

Bruch's third and final violin concerto, given here on the present release, is even more underrated than his second effort in the medium, though in this case, I think the neglect may be deserved. Abandoning the formal novelties of his first two concertos, Bruch set out in 1891 to compose a concerto in the conventional fast-slow-fast layout of movements and came up with an overlong 40-minute score that lacks the spontaneous soaring melodic inspiration of his earlier efforts. Take it for the subjective opinion it is, but personally, my feeling about Bruch's Third Concerto is similar to my feeling about Schumann's Violin Concerto: It may get better, depending on who plays it, but it ain't ever gonna get good.

That said, I have to acknowledge that Antje Weithaas definitely falls into the category of players who seem able to make the piece sound better than it is. Choice is fairly limited at best. ArkivMusic currently lists versions by Chloë Hanslip, Lydia Mordkovich, Andreas Kretcher, Jack Liebeck (on Volume 17 of Hyperion's *Romantic Concerto* series), and of course, the long-in-the-tooth survey of Bruch's works for violin and orchestra by Salvatore Accardo. Not listed for some reason is James Ehnes's recordings of the concertos and *Scottish Fantasy* with the Montréal Symphony Orchestra, but you will find them on Amazon and reviewed in *Fanfare* 32:3.

The entirety of the first movement of the Third Concerto is a real workout for the soloist—almost nonstop running passagework up and down the fingerboard,

double-stopping, and other virtuosic acrobatics—all seemingly in search of a big tune that never quite materializes. In a couple of those runs up the fingerboard, Weithaas doesn't quite land dead center on the top note, but the practically unceasing technical demands sound exhausting, and for all the notes she does toss off flawlessly and with beautiful tone, she deserves a thunderous round of applause. The *Adagio* is a lovely reverie of idyllic beauty, occasionally lapsing into phrases that recall the *Scottish Fantasy*, but there's something shapeless or amorphous about the movement as it persists in its 12 minutes of prettiness without ever really making a point. The finale is the strongest of the three movements, and not least because at nine minutes it's the shortest, but also because it has a well-defined catchy main theme that recurs in various guises throughout in loose rondo-like manner. But as in the first movement, the solo violin has a lot of non-essential noodling and more recollections of the *Scottish Fantasy*. Through it all, Weithaas proves herself a fantastic player.

Bruch's Romance in A Minor and *Konzertstück* in F# Minor are about as popular as his Violin Concerto No. 3, which is to say they've been just as neglected on record, if not more so. In addition to Liebeck, who included the Romance along with the composer's oft-visited G-Minor Concerto (No. 1) on Volume 19 of Hyperion's *Romantic Violin Concerto* survey, there are Accardo's Romance, a 1993 recording of the piece by Aaron Rosand, and three or four others. This is not Bruch's better-known Romance for Viola and Orchestra in a transcription for violin. The violin Romance, op. 42, composed in 1874, was projected to be the first movement of a new violin concerto. Had Bruch not abandoned the project after completing this movement, the shelved work would have become the composer's second concerto instead of the Concerto in D Minor which became No. 2.

Accardo naturally crops up again in the *Konzertstück*, along with a fairly recent recoding by Ulf Wallin, which received a not-to-be-missed recommendation from me in 39:4. If I haven't mentioned Maxim Fedotov, who has also recorded much of Bruch's output for violin and orchestra, it's because I gave his Naxos recording of the composer's Second and Third Concertos a thorough drubbing in 33:2. Here in the *Konzertstück* Weithaas meets serious competition from Wallin. Had Bruch rounded out the two movements of this work with a third, he'd have had another concerto. The manner of writing is similar to that in the Concerto No. 3, but the piece is more tightly structured and more symphonically argued. This performance by Weithaas is thrilling and takes no back seat to Wallin's. The latter's recording, however, mates the *Konzertstück* with Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 2 in a stunning performance I now prefer to all others I've heard, except for the one by Heifetz, which was my introduction to the piece. So, Weithaas's album is going to have to share a place on my shelf right next to Wallin's.

If these works for violin and orchestra by Bruch appeal to you, I can think of no better proponent for them than Antje Weithaas. Strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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Magazine.

Max BRUCH (1838-1920) - MusicWeb Review of Vol. 2

Complete Works for Violin and Orchestra - Vol. 2

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26 (1866, rev, 1867) [24.33]

Serenade for violin and orchestra, Op. 75 (1899) [38.19]

In Memoriam, Adagio, Op. 65 (1893) [14.43]

Antje Weithaas (violin)

NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover/Hermann Bäumer

rec. 2014, NDR Radiophilharmonie im Großen Sendesaal, Hannover, Germany

CPO 777 846-2 [77.40]

Volume 2 of CPO's Bruch survey of the Complete Works for Violin and Orchestra the feature work is the Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor. This headed the Classic FM Hall of Fame top three hundred chart for several years. Now dropping to number fifteen this very beautiful G minor score is still enduringly admired and new recordings keep on coming. The only other Bruch work to come close in esteem is *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra, Op. 47. The Scottish Fantasy for violin and orchestra is still comparatively popular and remains well represented in the catalogue.

Faring rather less well in the recording studio have been Bruch's second and third violin concertos, and his other works for violin and orchestra: *In Memoriam*, *Konzertstück*, *Serenade*, *Adagio appassionato* and *Romanze*. This CPO release also includes the *Serenade*, Op. 75 and *In Memoriam*, Op. 65. Incidentally the first volume in this CPO series comprises the Violin Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 44, *Adagio appassionato*, Op. 57 and *Scottish Fantasy*, Op. 46. Since the release of the set by Salvatore Accardo with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig under Kurt Masur offering Bruch's nine works for violin and orchestra around thirty-five years ago on Philips it has virtually had the field to itself. Recorded in 1977/78 in Leipzig, the stylish Accardo's really excellent analogue survey provides vitality but with an undertow of sadness.

Bruch laboured hard on his Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor and completed it in 1866. After its première in Koblenz by soloist Otto von Königslöw, Bruch revised the score and later eminent violinist Joseph Joachim was soloist at the first performance of the revision in 1868 in Bremen. Selling the work to a publisher for a relatively small one-off fee must have been a source of great regret to Bruch given its subsequent abiding esteem. Throughout Bruch's the concerto the radiant playing of Antje Weithaas settles on an ideal mix of vibrancy and tenderness. Never in fear of becoming sentimental in the central *Adagio* I was struck by Weithaas's lovely phrasing which generates emotional intensity. There is plenty of artistry and commitment and this is especially noticeable in the brilliant virtuoso

passages of the Finale. Hermann Bäumer ensures that the NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover plays with spirit, plenty of weight and with a strong dramatic element. There are a plethora of accounts of the Violin Concerto No.1 and although Accardo on Philips and Antje Weithaas on this new CPO release play quite splendidly I will return most often to the recording by soloist Jaime Laredo who directs the Scottish Chamber Orchestra on IMP Classics (PCD 829). Laredo's special account is warm and extremely characterful, direct in approach and so full of joy. Originally released in 1961 on RCA Victor my Laredo recording is a IMP Classics reissue which subsequently been reissued on Regis (RRC 1152).

Bruch's concluding piece for the violin — his four movement Serenade for violin and orchestra, Op. 75 — was written in 1899. It is dedicated to Pablo de Sarasate who didn't take up the work. In fact it was the Belgian Joseph Débroux who introduced the Serenade in 1901 in Paris. Weithaas clearly relishes this late-romantic music and plays with evident sincerity of purpose. A real highlight is the moving *Notturmo - Andante sostenuto*. Its passion and yearning character is brought out by Weithaas over a seam of melancholy. The final work here is Bruch's 1893 *In Memoriam*, Op. 65 a single movement in the form of an *Adagio*. Bruch described this heartfelt score to Joseph Joachim — its dedicatee — as a lament, a sort of instrumental funeral song. Steadfastly engaging Weithaas demonstrates her innate feeling for Bruch's heart-tugging outpouring of late-romantic passion.

Throughout these Bruch scores German soloist Antje Weithaas, artistic director of the Camerata Bern since 2009, is in stunning form. She demonstrates elevated levels of artistry and expression, pin-point intonation and medium sweet tone on her Peter Greiner violin (2001). Under Hermann Bäumer the NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover contribute sensitive playing with some noteworthy solo contributions especially from the principal horn. Recorded in 2014 at NDR Radiophilharmonie im Großen Sendesaal, Hannover the sound team can be applauded for providing excellent clarity, presence and balance.

Even if the reader has a particular favourite recording of Bruch's G minor Concerto this marvellously played and recorded CPO release featuring such attractive repertoire is hard to dismiss.

Michael Cookson

Max BRUCH (1838-1920) - MusicWeb Review - Vol. 3

Violin Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 58 (1891) [40:01]

Konzertstück in F sharp minor, Op. 84 (1910) [18:15]

Romanze in A minor, Op. 42 (1874) [10:30]

Antje Weithaas (violin)

NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover/Hermann Bäumer

rec. 24/27 February 2015, NDR Radiophilharmonie im Großen Sendesaal, Hannover
CPO 777 847-2 [68:50]

Played by German violinist Antje Weithaas, this is the third and final volume in the CPO cycle of Bruch's complete works for violin and orchestra.

Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor continues to take centre stage. It headed the Classic FM "Hall of Fame" top three hundred chart for several years, and is still enduringly admired on record and as a regular feature in the concert hall. The only other concertante work by Bruch to come anywhere close in esteem is *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra. Still admired is the *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and orchestra, which remains well represented in the catalogue.

Bruch's magnificent pieces for violin and orchestra have been recorded several times. Most notable is the set by Italian virtuoso Salvatore Accardo with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig under Kurt Masur. Recorded in the late 1970s at the Gewandhaus on Philips, Accardo has virtually had the field to himself with his stylish and warmly characterful playing. Now, with these recent recordings on CPO, Accardo has stiff competition from soloist Antje Weithaas and the NDR Radiophilharmonie.

The earliest work on the release is the **Romanze** from 1874, a piece that for some evokes the music of Robert Schumann, especially the *Fantasy* in C major. Bruch had completed the first movement in A minor of a projected second violin concerto. In the event he decided to leave it as a separate single work marked *Andante sostenuto*, known as the A minor *Romanze*. As was his custom, Bruch took advice from the renowned soloist Joseph Joachim on the violin writing, with some polishing from Robert Heckmann to whom the work was dedicated. Bold and assertive, the playing by the assured Weithaas has a compelling intensity. Clearly knowing this virtuoso showpiece inside out, Weithaas ensures no nuance is missed or detail left untouched.

Composed in 1891, almost twenty five years after the famous G minor concerto, the **Violin Concerto No. 3** in D minor is dedicated to Joachim. It was Joachim who persuaded Bruch to expand into a full violin concerto the Concert Allegro in D minor he had recently written. Joachim also premièred the D minor Third Concerto at festival concert in Düsseldorf. It was described as a triumph by the delighted Bruch. Displaying extremes of expression, it feels as if Weithaas is exploring deeply the core of the score. Striking in the *Allegro energico* is the undertow of yearning with which she infuses her playing, together with the aching tenderness of the *Adagio*. In the *Finale: Allegro molto*, the degree of buoyancy Weithaas provides has an infectious charm.

Bruch finished his **Konzertstück** (*Concert Piece*) in 1910, a work he dedicated to soloist Willy Hess. As concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Hess had

performed the A minor *Serenade* to acclaim before moving to Berlin. The *Konzertstück* is cast in two connected movements. It seems that Bruch originally planned it as his fourth violin concerto. The work was premièred the following year by American violinist Maud Powell at the Norfolk Festival in Connecticut, USA. Played with clarity and virtuosic assurance, the opening movement *Allegro appassionato* is laden with dramatic incident. The second movement, an engaging *Adagio ma non troppo lento*, substantially uses the theme from the Irish folk song "The Little Red Lark" and strikes a tone of affecting yearning.

Throughout this release, Weithaas has the advantage of first-class support from conductor and orchestra. Hermann Bäumer paces marvellously well and receives stylishly expressive playing in return. The recording was made at Großer Sendesaal des NDR in Hannover. The engineering team has provided fairly close sound, warm with good clarity and satisfying balance. CPO lives up to its usual high standard of presentation with an extremely helpful and interesting essay.

Antje Weithaas displays her remarkable prowess in these glorious Bruch works with stunning performances that can stand firmly alongside the finest in the catalogue.

Michael Cookson

Max BRUCH (1838-1920) - MusicWeb Review of the 3-CD Box Complete Works for Violin & Orchestra

Violin Concerto No.2 Op.44 (1878) [27:10]

Scottish Fantasy Op.46 (1880) [31:53]

Adagio appassionato Op.57 (1891) [10:51]

Violin Concerto No.1 Op.26 (1868) [24:33]

Serenade Op.75 (1899) [38:19]

"In Memoriam" Adagio Op.65 (1893) [14:43]

Violin Concerto No.3 Op.58 (1891) [40:01]

Konzertstück Op.84 (1903) [18:15]

Romanze Op.42 (1874) [10:30]

Antje Weithaas (violin)

NDR Radiophilharmonie/Hermann Bäumer

rec. 2013-15, Große Sendesaal, NDR Hannover

CPO 555 509-2 [3 CDs: 216:50]

With this three CD set CPO are following their tried and tested format of bringing together earlier releases into a single cardboard slip case and packaging it at a bargain price. So the three discs that cover Max Bruch's "Complete Works for Violin and Orchestra" were recorded and released between June 2013 and February 2015 (**Volume 2 ~ Volume 3**). The jewel-case packaging and the liners

and the recordings are identical so this is a straight question of cost and convenience. In terms of completeness there is little if any competition in the catalogue. Back around 1980 that prince of violinists Salvatore Accardo recorded exactly the same repertoire for Philips with Kurt Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. This set did appear in various incarnations more than thirty years ago and as far as I am aware there has been nothing else comparable since. Accardo is predictably excellent with an intense almost febrile approach and the gleaming technique for which he was famed. But in direct comparison with the CPO set Masur's accompaniments are perfectly good if rather faceless alongside Accardo's brilliance. If pushed, I prefer the complete musical package in better sound with more dynamic and engaged playing from all departments. I see in the catalogue there is a more recent Naxos set played by Maxim Fedotov and the Russian PO. I have not heard that but it should be noted that a couple of the shorter works are missing.

As a young violin student I rather overdosed on the famous Bruch *Violin Concerto No.1 in G minor Op.26*. As a consequence and while considering requesting this set to review I did wonder whether I *really* wanted to hear this work *again*. Well that was a mistake – it is so easy to take 'obvious' or 'popular' pieces of music for granted. From the opening bars of the really excellent performance here by Antje Weithaas, conductor Hermann Bäumer and the alert NDR Radiophilharmonie, I was reminded all over again that this piece is one of the unquestionably great violin concerti. The CPO disc that contains this work was actually Vol.2 of this series – the label cunningly drawing buyers in with rarer repertoire on Vol.1. I must admit to not having heard Weithaas before. A quick glance at the biography included with this set and her discography shows an artist of wide and enduring experience across repertoire and continents. And that is how her playing sounds too – wise, technically very accomplished and at the service of the music. Of course the *Violin Concerto No.1* is Bruch's most famous work regardless of genre, with the *Scottish Fantasy* and the *Cello Kol Nidrei* really the only other pieces to register on the collective listening consciousness. Certainly Bruch's melodic inspiration was running high when he wrote the work with every movement full of beautiful tunes sensitively orchestrated. What I especially like about Weithaas' playing is just how sensitive she is to the musical architecture of the piece. Given the temptation to allow every melody to gush forth, Weithaas beautifully paces the work as well as being willing to play at truly inward quiet dynamics. The CPO engineering places Weithaas slightly forward in the mix but not unnaturally so. There are other aspects of Weithaas' style that I enjoyed very much – she plays with a slightly 'old-school' approach of audible shifts and same finger position changes. Technically she is absolutely razor sharp and accurate but this style of shifting adds an authentic Romantic spirit to the performances.

So much has been written about this concerto and so many fine performances exist that suffice to say this version under consideration is very very good indeed.

However, it is likely that purchasers of this set are more interested in the less familiar repertoire. Interestingly, of the nine works offered here, the famous concerto is in fact one of the shortest of the multi-movement pieces. This disc's main companion work, the *Serenade Op.75* is more than half as long again – running to some thirty eight minutes – and was written thirty three years later. So if the first concerto from the mid 1860's could be called the first genre-defining Romantic violin concerto by 1899 the four movement *Serenade* is a resolutely conservative backward looking piece. But once you accept that caveat, it is a genuinely delightful piece. As the title implies, it is a group of four pieces of clearly differentiated character. The liner – dating back to CPO's earlier preference for densely opaque and poorly translated prose – makes the valid point that this work plays to Bruch's strengths as melodist and scene painter. The work was written in the hope that Pablo de Sarasate, who had been a great advocate of the first concerto and *Scottish Fantasy*, would want to promote the work – he did not. The liner speculates that the popularity of the earlier work already overshadowed anything else Bruch produced and also that the publisher chose a particularly expensive fee for performing the work. Whatever the reason, from a hundred and twenty years later the neglect seems unjust in purely musical terms. Again the players on this disc impress with the combination of technical polish and expressive sensitivity. The third movement *Notturmo* is the undoubted highlight with Weithaas' playing compellingly rapt. The second and fourth movements have elements of the folk music that Bruch often referenced throughout his work. Clearly the technical demands are considerable – presumably gauged to appeal to the virtuoso Sarasate – but of course this then requires a soloist to devote considerable time and effort to learn a work of potentially limited wider appeal. Fortunate then that a player of Weithaas' stature has been willing to rehabilitate this and indeed all the works in this set. Simply put, if you enjoy the famous concerto, you will enjoy this *Serenade*.

The disc is completed by the *In Memoriam Op.65*. This is another substantial single movement running to nearly fifteen minutes. The liner suggests that the choice of title is more a case of mood-painting rather than marking a specific death. The very opening timpani figure and somber bass line instantly evokes a grieving procession with the orchestral strings playing for nearly a minute and a half before the solo violin doubles a simple melodic line. All of Weithaas' strengths of beautifully sustained expressive lines are given opportunities to shine. Again, the appealing warmth and richness of the CPO recording supports the soaring violin line with a richly Romantic bed beneath it. The inescapable conclusion is that this is another piece that would be instantly popular if given more opportunities to be heard. Direct comparison with Accardo again shows that Weithaas has little if nothing to fear from her eminent colleague. I do like the warm Leipzig horn sound but both the accompaniment and the recording is more sophisticated and convincing on the newer CPO disc.

Vol.1 of this series follows a similar formula of familiar big work, lesser-known work and shorter filler. The disc opens with the lesser known *Violin Concerto No.2 in D minor Op.44* written a decade after the first. Bluntly put it does not grab the listener's attention in the way the earlier work did. Bruch decided to open the concerto with a slow movement which he wrote and completed only to decide that it would probably be better as a stand-alone piece which it became as the *Romanze Op.42* included on disc 3. He persisted with the slow movement opening now marked *Adagio ma non troppo* which in turn is followed by a central quite brief *Recitativ – allegro moderato* which leads to the concluding *Finale – allegro molto*. The issue with this form is one of balance. In this performance – which again I cannot fault in terms of technique or musical insight – the first movement occupies nearly half of the work's twenty seven minute playing time. Although the solo part – another Sarasate vehicle – is clearly demanding, it does not instantly impress in the way audiences across the centuries will respond to. The impression is almost of a twenty minute introduction to a nine minute showpiece. The liner points towards another musical scene for the first movement – this time a gloomy battlefield in the aftermath of conflict with dead and dying and the sound of lamenting. Certainly, even without this narrative hook, the sense of a tragic landscape is pretty clear. The NDR Radiophilharmonie heavy brass create a suitably dark and stormy atmosphere and Weithaas plays with doom-laden intensity. Hard not to come to the conclusion that Bruch was struggling reconciling form and content and not wholly succeeding.

This is especially apparent within bars of the opening of the *Scottish Fantasy Op.46*. Written just a couple of years after the problematic *Concerto No.2* this was yet another Sarasate dedication. It is not simply a question of listener familiarity – the work oozes confidence and certainty in a way the concerto does not. The use of Scottish folksongs taps into Bruch's natural preference for this type of lyrical line and the Fantasy form frees him of the structural demands of a concerto. The result is a sense of creative liberation that produced one of Bruch's very finest works. Of course this has been recognised by players and audiences alike over the last 140 years and the catalogue contains many superb performances. But this current version is better than most and the equal of any. The CPO engineering is ideal at picking out the Romantic richness of Bruch's orchestral writing – how effectively the composer adds a bardic harp to the score for example. Sarasate must have been much happier with the solo writing too – this remains Bruch's most successful fusion of display, form and melodic invention. The liner relates the premiere in Liverpool where Bruch had taken on the principal conductor role with the great Joseph Joachim as soloist. *However*, it appears that according to a letter from Bruch to his publisher; “[Joachim played] carelessly, without respect, very nervously and with entirely insufficient technique..” Bruch goes on to detail Joachim's maligning of Sarasate for good measure. Luckily the stature of the work survived such a perilous birth and hard not to imagine Bruch being far happier with

the performance here. Weithaas plays the many lyrical passages with great sensitivity and beauty of tone while in the very demanding *Finale Allegro guerriero* she has an imperious technique. All in all another wholly successful and impressive performance.

One of the things I take from this set, listening to it in quite a concentrated manner, is just how fine the stand-alone shorter works are. From a modern perspective it is tricky to programme a ten minute concertante work into a larger programme but on disc they make perfect fillers. Likewise I could imagine the commercial radio stations being a perfect vehicle for these relatively brief but self-contained works. The *Adagio appassionato Op.57* that completes this disc is a case in point. Clearly Bruch did have a natural aptitude for these 'tone-pictures'. The liner briefly mentions that the work was initially conceived as another concerto vehicle for Sarasate with Bruch – as was his wont – starting with the central *Adagio* movement. But in this instance that was all he wrote so it became a work in its own right. Bruch's fixation on the primacy of the melodic line is again clear. Weithaas captures perfectly the rapt musing spirit over a hushed almost hymn-like accompaniment and as elsewhere in the set her dynamic and tonal range is a genuine joy to hear. Again the CPO engineers achieve a near-ideal balance between soloist and orchestra – a very impressive achievement from all concerned.

Disc three opens with Bruch third, final and most ambitious *Violin Concerto*. Running to just over forty minutes this dwarfs the preceding two efforts. The opening *Allegro energico* alone is longer than the two movement *Konzertstück* which shares the disc. For this final concerto Bruch embraced the traditional fast/slow/fast format and Joachim this time gave a triumphant premiere. As an aside – the CPO liners for this set detail the many and various letters sent to artists publishers and just about anyone who would be targeted with outrage for some aspect of their engagement with him and his music – seemingly a man for whom "a fit of pique" was his default mood! The orchestra has an extended two minute introduction of the movement's main material before the violin enters with some virtuosically rhetorical pages. By now the exemplary playing of Antje Weithaas is to be expected but it is the beauty and poise of her quiet playing that continues to impress. Bruch's orchestration is never mould-breaking or particularly innovative but conversely it is almost always effective and so it proves again here. The extended orchestral tutti in this first movement is grandly Romantic and the NDR Radiophilharmonie play with exactly the right combination of power and precision. Bruch's handling of the soloist/orchestral interchanges is much more traditional than in his other concerti and to be honest the music probably benefits from this approach – as a composer perhaps for all his melodic gifts he simply lacked the skill to redefine a concerto in the way he had previously sought.

The central *Adagio* again allows for an extended orchestral introduction before the

solo violin's song-like entry. This movement is attractively simple with the solo part allowed to focus on long lyrical lines with relatively little virtuosic embellishment. Because the opening movement is very technically demanding, the contrast works well for both listener and soloist and certainly this is another opportunity to relish Weithaas' supreme control and skill. The closing *Allegro molto* allows the soloist immediate opportunities for display – there is a folk-dance lilt here with echoes of the *Scottish Fantasy* that is very engaging [another Bruch letter moans that in a later performance Sarasate played this too fast as if it were the finale of the Mendelssohn Concerto!]. I must admit that I had forgotten what an attractive work this concerto was – its only fault being that it's *not* the Concerto No.1 which audiences and promoters seem to prefer. Hence, the effort for soloists to learn this very demanding work will garner limited returns. Aside from Accardo, I do not know any other performances, but I find it hard to imagine a more compelling advocate than the performers here – a genuine highlight of this set.

Bruch in petulant mood again criticised the great Maud Powell who after a triumphant American premiere of the *Konzertstück Op.84* told the composer she would not be including the work in her Autumn schedule because the two movement fast/slow format (and abbreviated eighteen minute length I imagine) was not conducive to concertising. From a purely commercial perspective you can understand Powell's dilemma but the joy of discs such as this is that it allows the music to be appreciated away from any such concerns. One noticeable fact is that this is the latest/last of Bruch's works for violin and orchestra. 1903 saw the creation of works as diverse as Ravel's *String Quartet*, Zemlinsky's *Die Seejungfrau*, Schoenberg's *Pelleas un Melisande* and Mahler *Symphony No.6* to name a few pieces at random. Bruch was comfortably buried in the mid 19th Century but again this is a wholly enjoyable work when one ignores its essential conservatism. Indeed the closing *Adagio* is one of Bruch's most rapturous creations. The closing pages are a rather moving farewell to the solo violin genre and Weithaas is the ideal artist to capture this poignant envoi.

The disc's closing work is the *Romanze Op.42* that started life as the opening movement of the second concerto. Given the way it works perfectly well as a self-contained work and the fact that it really does not have any concerto-like characteristics it would seem like a sensible choice by Bruch to start again with the concerto. What this work does underline is Bruch's talent for writing extended melodic lines throughout his entire career. His close collaboration – grudging or otherwise – with the great virtuosi of his day – did allow him to understand how to fuse the virtuosic and the lyrical so this music satisfies the listener on both a display and emotional level.

Exactly the same can be said of all the performances across these three well-filled discs. In Artje Weithaas Bruch finds a champion whose own musical and technical strengths seem to be perfectly aligned to this music. Likewise the

accompaniments and engineering of this set is of the very highest order. Even when alternatives versions are already known and enjoyed, this is a set that gives the listener new and impressive insights into a body of work that is consistently enjoyable and attractive. Very warmly recommended.

Nick Barnard