

Carl NIELSEN (1865-1931) - MusicWeb International

Prelude to Act II *Saul and David* [5.35]

Rhapsody Overture FS123 *A fantasy voyage to the Faeroes* [9.31]

The Mother FS94 - Prelude Scene 7 [4.00]

Little Suite for Strings Op. 1 FS6 [16.30]

Pan and Syrinx - pastorale Op. 49 FS87 [8.36]

En Sagadrøm FS46 [8.44]

Maskerade: Overture; Prelude to Act II; *Dance of the Cockerels* [14.08]

Odense Symphony Orchestra/Tamás Vetö

rec. Feb-May 1988, Odense Concert Hall, Carl Nielsen Salen. DDD

REGIS RRC1166 [67:38]

NOTE: This is a reissue on the Alto label

The lighter Nielsen is presented in a collection first issued on Big Ben and now rescued from deletion perdition through a licence direct to Regis from the Odense Orchestra.

This is Regis's third Nielsen foray. Not so very long ago [I reviewed](#) and welcomed an ex-Unicorn reissue from the same forces. Regis also have what remains one of the most attractive bargains in the catalogue, the Ole Schmidt/LSO analogue recordings ([RRC 3002](#)) of the six Nielsen symphonies (previously on Unicorn LPs circa 1974 and then reissued in the late 1980s on Unicorn Souvenir CDs).

After a rather stolid *Saul and David* Prelude orchestra and conductor get into their stride with a very strong and singable *Little Suite*. It is like a cousin to Sibelius's *Rakastava*, Grieg's *Holberg* and Ireland's *Downland*. If you are at all attracted to twentieth century tonal string music do try this.

If the *Saul and David* prelude carries resonances from the first two symphonies, the *Rhapsody Overture* from almost three decades later is more up-to-date at least in some details. The Faeroese folksong rings warmly with Wagnerian sincerity but the wind figures that decorate this anthem are wholly late Nielsen. The second part of the overture romps explosively along with some anarchic energy at 6.31. The overture is not the most convincing of Nielsen's works seeming to peter out rather than arriving at a rounded conclusion.

The Prelude to the seventh scene of *The Mother* (properly translated as *The Motherland*) is earnestly lyrical, rather Brahmsian with only the odd 'skirl' declaring Nielsen as the creator. The rounded hymnal rings out like as national anthem much as the first section of the *Rhapsody Overture* in tr. 2.

Pan and Syrinx is mature and very strong Nielsen. It dates from 1918 and tells of Pan's passionate animalistic pursuit of the nymph Syrinx and of her transformation into a reed. This is music of a similar vintage to the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies. As for the subject matter, there is a plethora of Greek classical (or at least Mediterranean) subjects which have inspired Scandinavian composers. Sibelius's *Oceanides* and *The Nymph*, Peterson-Berger's Second Symphony (you must hear *that* work!) and Nystroem's *Sinfonia del Mare* was inspired by the Mediterranean rather than the Baltic or Arctic oceans. Nielsen's own best known tone poem, *Helios*, was concerned with the Greek sun. Vetö and his orchestra neatly catch the dissonant fantastical visions especially the wild chase coloured in by terrific woodwind playing. There is even a touch of Delius's *Paradise Garden* in the writing for flute at 7.20.

After warmer climes and classical legend Nielsen returns to Scandinavian legend for *Saga-Drøm*. This is earlier although still a mature work. This tells of Gunnar of Hlidarende being taken by longship into exile in Norway. He dreams. The music takes on that warm anthemic tone we find in *The Mother* and in the *Rhapsody Overture*. A chaffing subject recalls Bruckner's *Romantic Symphony*. The fanfares are very well caught. This dream vision returns into the silence from which it emerged.

Lastly there are three 'bleeding chunks' from the light opera *Maskarade*. The overture is dashed off with the sort of uproarious exuberance found in the *Four Temperaments*. The orchestra play with world class unanimity. This music is a successor to Smetana's *Bartered Bride*. This same spirit is carried over into later works such as Rosenberg's *Orpheus in Town*. The Prelude to Act II is a delicious invocation to which the solo French horn lends distinctive honeyed character. The *Dance of the Cockerels* recalls the Bohemian bonhomie of Smetana's *Bride* and Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* but updated with a coarsened edge and a hiccuping grace

It would be wonderful if Regis and whoever now controls the Goldsmith Unicorn catalogue could agree on licensing their 1970s tapes of both Nielsen operas - *Maskarade* and *Saul and David*. Of course, much more modern recordings already exist on Decca and Chandos (Ulf Schirmer) and historic recordings of the two operas are on a Danacord set but those Unicorn sets were well worth hearing even if there were problems with the lead in *Saul and David*.

Until then you can relish this recommendable collection which concentrates on the lighter and more concise Nielsen (five of the nine tracks are theatre music). This is a vividly characterised and easily recommendable anthology and the *Little Suite* receives one of its most winning recordings ever.

Rob Barnett

NIELSEN Piano Trio in G.¹ *Serenata in vano*. Wind Quintet, op. 43.² *Fantasy Piece for Clarinet and Piano in g.*² *Fantasy Pieces*, op. 2.² *Canto serioso.*² *From "Moderen"*³ • Trio Ondine;¹ DiamantEnsemble; Jens Elvekjær (pn);² Nina Kathrin Schlemme (hp)³ • da capo 8.226064 (65:04)

The music of Carl Nielsen (1865–1931) is one of the great revival stories of the late 20th century. While not quite the household word that Grieg or Sibelius is, he composed music heard fairly often in concert. Apart from one or two pieces, however, he is mostly known for his symphonic work. Yet, there is a considerable amount of chamber music and a great many songs that ought to be heard outside Scandinavia. Here is the beginning of a project to bring more of that music to wider attention.

Curiously, the fine notes by Knud Ketting vouchsafe us nary a word about the first piece, the Piano Trio in G from 1883, written when Nielsen was 18 years old and before he began studies at the conservatory in Copenhagen. This brief piece owes something to the quirkiness of Haydn, whose string quartets he played with local friends in Odense: a forthright attention-getting chord is quickly supplanted by a simple, almost banal, melody that, despite attempts by the chord to assert its prominence, is given a series of charming variations. The remaining two movements are more conventional, but full of good spirits. The piano part is quite flashy, which is odd considering that Nielsen was not a particularly good pianist; having started out on the cornet and the trombone, he became a violinist, which is what he went to Copenhagen to study. The relatively young Trio Ondine plays the piece with panache and a good sense of its innate humor.

The main work on this recording, the late Wind Quintet (1922), came at the same time as Nielsen's buoyant celebration of spring, *Fynsk Foraar* ("Springtime on Funen"), and his rather restrained Fifth Symphony, a time when he was also busy helping with a new school songbook. Though the immediate inspiration for it was a rehearsal of Mozart's *Sinfonia concertante* (K Anh 9 (297b), currently out of favor as authentically by Mozart), it was an instrumental combination just then becoming popular, along with works by Hindemith, Schoenberg, and Hans Eisler. Though Nielsen's music is always tonal, he often plays with tonality, pushing it, even disguising it, and nowhere is this clearer than in the quintet. The piece explodes with wit, and the ensemble here plays it with exuberance. About this time, Nielsen wrote to the Swedish composer, Vilhelm Stenhammar, that he did not agree with the idea of art for art's sake unless it meant that each art should be permitted to go to the limits of itself. This ideal he found most clearly expressed in the music of Mozart, who, here and elsewhere serves as a sort of *genius loci*. There is no hint of the coming war in the *Serenata in vano* (1914). Indeed, parts of it could almost have come from the cabaret stage. Nielsen himself described it as

"a joke." The *Fantasy Piece for Clarinet and Piano* (c. 1881) is the earliest piece on this disc and is, as one might expect from a 16-year old, in an older style, but interesting to compare with the slightly later two *Fantasy Pieces* for oboe, from 1889. The latter date from after Nielsen's conservatory years and show a much more complex structure. The *Canto serioso* (1913) was written as the competition piece for the vacancy of fourth horn in the orchestra Nielsen conducted, and emphasizes the low notes needed by that player. The three pieces from Helge Rode's patriotic play *Moderen* (1920, "The Mother") are simply mood-pieces for harp, flute, and viola, the first of which, "The fog is lifting," became popular in an orchestral arrangement.

DiamantEnsemble plays the serenade and the quintet wonderfully. This may be the best recording of it yet. The Trio Ondine have great fun in the trio, and the whole recording makes me look forward to the rest of the series. It is high time to explore the breadth of Nielsen's chamber music, and this is a good place to start.

Alan Swanson

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