

## **Ries - Symphonies 1 & 2 - ClassicsToday Review**

Review by: Victor Carr Jr *Artistic Quality: 8 Sound Quality: 9*

Ferdinand Ries (1784-1838) left his native Bonn to apprentice with Beethoven in Vienna in 1801. After much success (Ries performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 using his own cadenza), he was forced to flee Vienna in 1805, then again in 1809 to avoid being drafted during the Napoleonic war. Ries returned to Bonn, where amid all this turmoil the Symphony No. 1 came into being. Understandably, drama informs much of the work, which begins with a somber slow introduction before launching into an allegro not dissimilar to Beethoven's Fidelio overture. But there's also an unusual harmonic and darkly lyrical bent to the music that identifies Ries apart from his teacher (it also calls to mind Franz Schubert). This characteristic is even more in evidence in the grim March Funebre, but the remaining movements retain strong Beethovenian influences, particularly the finale, which shares much with the master's First Symphony. (It's remarkable how hearing Beethoven's Symphony No. 1 reflected in this manner points up that work's striking originality and progressiveness.)

Ries' contemporaries criticized Symphony No. 2's (1814) first movement for its similarity to the Eroica, and while it does sound constructed from the same rhythmic raw material, Ries uses it in his own way, not going all out for the radical experimentation in the manner of Beethoven. Instead we have a finely wrought, dramatic symphonic allegro. Beethoven is not to be avoided, however, as the scherzo clearly reminds us of the Coriolan overture, and the finale skampers along like the finale of Ludwig's Fourth (except in a minor key). Howard Griffiths, caught up in the same spirit of discovery as was the composer, conducts bracing performances with the Zurich Chamber Orchestra, which plays the music for all it's worth—and it's worth quite a lot! CPO's recording is clear and natural, with plenty of impact.

**Classical-Music dot com - review**

**COMPOSER(S):** Ries **WORKS:** Symphony No. 3; Symphony No. 5

**PERFORMER:** Zurich CO/Howard Griffiths

**LABEL:** CPO **CATALOGUE NUMBER:**999 547-2

**PERFORMANCE:** 5\*/5\* **SOUND:** 4\*/5\*

Ries was immensely prolific and successful in his day. Though profoundly influenced by Beethoven, (his No. 5 opens with a parody of Beethoven's Fifth) these are inventive works, attractive if naive melodically, performed here with energy and passion. George Pratt

**RIES Symphonies: No. 4; No. 6** • Howard Griffiths, cond; Zürich CO. • cpo 999 836-2 ( 64:34)

As I said in an earlier review of Ferdinand Ries's Third and Fifth symphonies, to hear music more reminiscent of Beethoven, you'd have to listen to Beethoven himself. "This is Beethoven without genius," I wrote. "That is, however, not a valid reason for ignoring Ries's pieces." (Ries's pieces? I must have been eating peanut butter and chocolate at the time.) A portrait of Ries even reveals a mild similarity in appearance between the two composers.

Ries, born in Bonn in 1784, was apprenticed to Beethoven himself between 1801 and 1805. A talented pianist, he premiered Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. Then in 1813, Ries went to London, where he gained a modest measure of fame conducting and composing. He stayed in London until 1824, when he returned to Germany. He was not able to achieve the same level of celebrity at home, and he died a largely forgotten musician.

The numbering of Ries's symphonies is confusing. His Fourth (1818) was actually the fifth to be written, and his Sixth (1822, revised in 1826) was the seventh. Both were composed for London's Philharmonic Society. In the Fourth, one can't help but guess which Beethoven symphony Ries had in his ears from one moment to the next as he composed it. One can picture him as a young man scuttling around under Beethoven's workbench with a dustpan and a broom, hoarding scraps for later use. By 1818, Beethoven had completed all but the "Choral" Symphony, and it would not be stretching things to say that Ries, whether he was aware of it or not, incorporated echoes of Beethoven's first eight symphonies into his own London symphonies. This is not plagiarism, mind you; this is homage. Ries must have loved Beethoven so much he couldn't imagine writing any other type of music. (Even Beethoven is supposed to have said, "Ries imitates me too much.")

To be fair, the training wheels are less apparent in the Sixth Symphony, a genial work that proves that Ries was more than just an imitator or a flatterer. He evidently was aware of what Romanticism was contributing to the musical scene in Europe, and he was able to climb aboard that train comfortably. When he revised this work in 1826, he radically altered the slow movement, and incorporated Turkish effects into the finale. The latter is anachronistic indeed, as Turkish music was no longer fashionable in Europe, the finale of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony notwithstanding. Actually, what Ries understood as "Turkish" sounds more like a foreshadowing of Dvořák, no matter how much the triangle rings. All in all, the Sixth represents several steps forward for Ries, although one can still hear his

allegiance to Beethoven, and—in his conservative ideas about form— even to earlier composers.

I criticized the Zürich Chamber Orchestra last time for lacking the last degree of polish, but I don't find that complaint valid now. Apparently a modern-instruments ensemble, they find an authentic sound and style for Ries—bright, and a little nasal. Griffiths's conducting lacks neither enthusiasm nor sympathy. The recording venue puts a warm halo around Ries's climaxes.

### **Raymond Tuttle**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 27:1 (Sept/Oct 2003) of *Fanfare* Magazine.**

### **Ries: Symphonies Nos. 4 & 6 - ClassicalCandor Review by: John J. Puccio**

**Howard Griffiths, Zurich Chamber Orchestra. CPO 999 836-2.**

Sometimes a guy can't win for losing. After Beethoven took the musical world by storm in the early Nineteenth century, critics faulted the works of fellow European composers either for copying the great man's style too closely or for not being similar enough to his charms. What are you going to do? Ferdinand Ries (1784-1838), a friend and colleague of Beethoven, found himself exactly in that position.

One can see why. His *Fourth* and *Sixth Symphonies* represented on this disc do, in fact, resemble some of Beethoven's technique, yet they are not quite innovative enough to have withstood the test of time. Thus, as happened with other composers of Beethoven's time, people soon forgot all about Ries and his musical output. Yet the oversight of the composer in modern times may not be justified, if one can judge from the two of his eight symphonies represented on this 2003 CPO release. The works actually sound pretty interesting and merit a listen.

The *Fourth Symphony* (1818) is probably the lesser of the two pieces musically, though it's still impressive. The opening movement is quite ordinary, I must admit, but it goes on to a lovely, modern-sounding melody in the slow movement and some zippy, dance-like business in the *Scherzo* that will have you thinking of the Beethoven *Seventh*. Unfortunately, the symphony ends in a finale that while festive in temperament is really of little other note. Still, those two middle movements seem more than worth the trouble, especially in the present recording.

The *Sixth Symphony* fares even better. It begins with a solemn *Larghetto* that soon

opens up to a vigorous if somewhat repetitious *Allegro*. This leads into a most original *Minuetto* that gets more and more pastoral as it goes along, followed by a slow movement that brings with it shades of the same in Beethoven's *Sixth* (not coincidentally, the "Pastorale"). The *Finale* bears with it a Turkish influence reminiscent of Haydn's "Military Symphony"--drums, cymbals, and such--that had long gone out of vogue by Ries's time but which he rolls out, anyway, much to our delight.

Conductor Howard Griffiths and the Zurich Chamber Orchestra, about thirty players strong, do probably as much with the music as they possibly can, and CPO engineers present it in sound that is clean and clear. There is perhaps wanting a certain degree of bass warmth, yet there is a realistic sense of orchestral depth present, very little congestion, and strong dynamics. The whole affair, music and sound, is different yet familiar at the same time. It's worth a listen.

Incidentally, although the folks at CPO have discontinued this item as a single disc, you can still find the disc on-line at a very reasonable price. And if you're really interested in Ries, CPO continues to issue Maestro Griffith's recordings of all eight Ries symphonies in a four-disc set.

JJP

**RIES Symphonies: No. 7 in a, op. 181; in B, WoO 30** • Howard Griffiths, cond; Zurich CO. • cpo 999 904-2( 67:16)

This is the fourth and final installment in Howard Griffith's ear-opening traversal of the eight symphonies of Ferdinand Ries (1784-1837) and it brings music no less impressive than that of the first three discs (Nos. 1 and 2 are on 999 716-2, Nos. 3 and 5 on 999 547-2, and Nos. 4 and 6 on 999 836-2). Ries's symphonies were composed very much *sub specie* Beethoven, with a large step towards the ethos of Schubert. Thus, the opening movement of the Seventh Symphony of 1835 (the capital S is important: his seventh symphony was No. 6, and the El. major that accompanies No. 7 here was his sixth—a note appended to Bert Hagel's fine booklet essay explains the chronology) has a spring in its step that's directly evocative of Schubert's late symphonic style, with a stately, no-nonsense demeanor that also recalls the later Beethoven's more formal manner—in, say, *Namensfeier*. Time and again, too, one hears in Ries's brusque gestures pointers to the Beethoven symphonies, here No. 7, there the "Pastoral," here No. 8—it's a tune-spotter's paradise. And once you've noticed Rossini popping his head up in the coda of the finale of No. 7, you won't be surprised to find he was there before,

in the opening chords of the B> Symphony, probably written in 1822, and in the movement that follows, an amalgam of the Beethoven of the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies and Rossini's overture manner. Indeed, Beethoven, whose pupil and secretary Ries was between 1801 and 1804, is said to have observed of him: "He imitates me too much"—though I say if you have to imitate someone, Beethoven's as good as anyone. He can be deceptive, too, can Ries: listen to how he briefly, suddenly, screws the easy-going, Schubertian, operetta-simple melody that opens the *Andante con moto* of WoO 30 into a dark reminiscence of the *Allegretto* of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony; and then the clouds part as swiftly as they had arrived. He can also overstay his welcome, though: the 10-minute finale of WoO 30 tries to make of its material more than it can sustain.

Griffith's performances are adequate without being the last word: more precise rhythmic inflection would have helped give the music more bite, and one can hear that on occasion he is asking more of his violins than they have to give—the string tone, always on the thin side (this is a chamber orchestra, after all), tends to lose the pitch when under pressure. And this SACD sound, which I heard only in stereo, wants transparency: I suspect the engineering was intended to help the ZCO play beyond their weight—which, indeed, they generally do very well. So what warts there are with this release are tiny little ones and can generally be ignored as we discover yet another colorful strand—hitherto overlooked—in the rich tapestry of music history.

**Martin Anderson**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 28:1 (Sept/Oct 2004) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**

**Ferdinand RIES (1784 – 1837) - MusicWeb Review - Symphonies No. 7 & 8**

Symphony No. 7 in A minor Op. 181 (1835)

Symphony No. 8 in E Flat, WoO 30 (1822)

Zurich Chamber Orchestra/Howard Griffiths.

Rec. 2-7 May 2002, Neumunsterkirche, Zurich, Switzerland. DDD

**CPO 999 904-2** [67.16]

This is the last in CPO's series of the symphonies of Ferdinand Ries, the other six being available on three discs available separately at full price. My only wish is that I had come across this composer earlier as I find both these symphonies examples of the genuine article. By that I mean strong themes, well developed, well orchestrated and balanced across the orchestra. This is coupled with a genuine sense of growth and development within the symphonic structure. Indeed if I had heard them many years ago when I was finding out about Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart etc., I am not sure that I wouldn't have rated these works up there with the other masters.

Ries wrote eight symphonies in all, and based upon the evidence of these two, the others should be well worth hunting out. CPO's recording is absolutely first rate and is available in SACD format, which can also be played in normal stereo. It is the latter format I listened to here, and I found that the sound quality, always first class with this company, had a slight additional bloom to the sound. Whether this is to do with the SACD mix down or just the luck of the draw, I am not sure, but there are no shortcomings with respect to the sound quality whatsoever. Most of the other CPO recordings I have heard have been co-productions with various radio organisations, so perhaps the additional enhancement to the sound may also be down to the recording engineers operating in the church, rather than the characteristics of the radio hall(s), normally used by this company.

Symphony No. 7 is the last numbered symphony written by the composer, is in four movements, and to an innocent ear could easily be a long lost work by early Beethoven or late Haydn. That Ries was influenced by these masters is not in question, as his symphonies sometimes shared the podium with works by the other two. For example during the festival at Pentecost 1825 in Aachen, Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony was performed in the company of Ries's E Flat Symphony with its composer as conductor. Critics responded very positively to the new work, singling out the orchestration as "dazzling and highly effective". The work was also described as "This introit is of majestic pomp; it reveals the whole mighty weight of the Mass and through it deeply grips the listener and befriends him with it. It is the glorious rising of the daystar, of the magnificent sun, which illuminates the life of a heavenly bright, delightful May day with its splendour. For truly, the symphony shows us bright, cheery life and activity; one finds oneself in the midst of it all: a festival day begins; mirth and good humour, joy and sheer delight prevail; the young gather together for jubilant games; full glasses tinkle among the old; gaiety appears everywhere and builds the throne for love. Song and dance conclude the celebration, and as the joy had begun, so the crowd goes off in merry spirits."

I would rate this description as a little over the top, but you can see that at the time Ries was highly acceptable to his peers.

I recommend this disc without reservation, and look forward to hearing the others in this superbly played, conducted and recorded series.

***John Phillips***

### **AllMusic Review by James Leonard - 2 1/2\*/5\***

Have you ever wondered what the symphonies of **Haydn**, **Mozart**, **Schubert**, and **Beethoven** would sound like if their composers weren't geniuses? The

symphonies of **Ferdinand Ries** are the answer. **Ries**, an early favored pupil of **Beethoven**, wrote his first symphony in 1809 and his eighth and last in 1835, and although they are obviously well crafted, pleasantly melodic, and attractively scored, **Ries**' symphonies are too obviously in arrears to their illustrious forbearers and contemporaries -- and the enormous debt he owes for purloined gestures, stolen themes, and swiped forms has fatally impoverished **Ries**' imagination. Certainly, one cannot fault the performances of **Howard Griffiths** and the **Zürcher Kammerorchester**. With amazing clarity, astounding accuracy, and astonishing passion, they give everything they've got to give to **Ries**' music. In their hands, the symphonies' colors are as bright, their themes are as strong, and their forms are as dramatic as this second-hand music can sound. While listeners deeply steeped in the works of the Austro-Germanic symphonists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries will surely want to hear these symphonies for the contrast they represent with **Haydn**, **Mozart**, **Schubert**, and **Beethoven**, they may get more pleasure from playing "name the source" than from the music itself. Whether straight digital or super audio digital, CPO's sound is clean, cool, and colorful