

**MENDELSSOHN String Symphonies, Volume One: No. 2 in D; No. 3 in E Minor; No. 9 in C; No. 10 in B Minor.** • Lev Márkiz, conductor; Nieuw Sinfonietta Amsterdam. • BIS CD 643 [DDD]; 60:02. Produced by Ingo Petry. (Distributed by Qualiton.)

Of all the miraculous manifestations of early talent in music, there is nothing to compare with Felix Mendelssohn. While there were a great many younger prodigies, particularly in performance, and a number of younger composers, there are no *comparable* composers under twenty. In his late teens he gave the world the overture *Ein Sommernachtstraum* and the Octet for Strings in Eb, opus 20. Between the ages of eleven and fifteen he composed a series of string symphonies, numbering twelve or thirteen depending on who you consult, that are as remarkable for the ages at which they were written. Every loving mother has an idealized image of her son as a sort of omnipotent angel. Mendelssohn's early pieces strongly suggest that he actually was that person.

Not that there is no evidence of growth during the years in which these works were written. In fact the young composer's development was both steady and rapid. On this disc we can hear four works composed between 1821 and 1823. In the earlier two, No. 2 in D and No. 3 in E Minor, the guiding hand of pedagogy can be discerned pretty clearly. The first movement of No. 2 sounds like an exercise and both symphonies show signs of groping and tentativeness. The latter two are another story. In No. 9 in C the opening Grave is powerfully tragic, the Allegro offers a convincing Mozartean theme, the Andante is a beautiful song. The second theme of the Scherzo shows the influence of folk music. The Adagio of No. 10 in B Minor is dark and broody. Even in the later pieces the last movements are unimpressive potboilers but at least they're not didactic-sounding potboilers like the first and last movements of No. 3. This said, it remains amazing how enjoyable and impressive the better movements of No. 9 and No. 10 really are.

There are three complete cycles of these works in the catalog and a few discs that contain performances of one or two of them. I don't find any of those currently available to be entirely satisfactory. There used to be a terrific complete set on Telefunken with Marinus Voorberg conducting the Amsterdams Kamerorkest but unfortunately it is no longer to be found. Now the Nieuw Sinfonietta Amsterdam, an ensemble founded in 1988 and led by veteran Russian conductor Lev Márkiz, has undertaken a complete traversal of these pieces. Judging by this first volume their project is a definite success. They play with admirable vigor and unanimity.

Featured players and sections acquit themselves well, as in the contrabass passage in the Andante of Symphony No. 9.

These performances will soon establish themselves as the best in the catalog. I recommend this disc strongly and look forward to the arrival of volume two in the series.

**Elliott S. Hurwitt**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 17:5 (May/June 1994) of *Fanfare* Magazine.**

**MENDELSSOHN The Complete String Symphonies** • Lev Márkiz, cond; Nieuw Sinfonietta Amsterdam • BIS CD-938/40 (4 CDs, priced as 3: 258:44)

The Mendelssohn String Symphonies are both delightful and astonishing. From the very first movement of the First String Symphony—the work of a 12-year-old—there is an amazing maturity of thought and invention and a constantly impressive technique. There are 12 symphonies in all, plus a 13th for which Mendelssohn wrote only the opening movement. The Eighth, perhaps the best known, exists in two versions, one for full orchestra; both versions are included here, as well as the final, one-movement work.

These recordings have been reviewed before on these pages as individual discs (see *Fanfare* 17:5, 18:5, and 20:2). All three reviewers have been enthusiastic, and it would be hard to disagree. The playing is absolutely lovely. There is warmth of tone, beautiful detail, and an exuberance that seems as fresh as that of the youthful composer himself. I might have preferred to have the symphonies arranged on the discs in numerical order, if only because such an arrangement makes it easier to locate an individual work. But this is hardly a serious criticism of such a rewarding set. There is significant competition: Masur on Berlin Classics, Pople on Hyperion, and Ward on Naxos. *Fanfare* critics North and Wiser both express fondness for Masur as well as for Márkiz; Ward's performances are, for the most part, very good (see *Fanfare* 20:6) and are, of course, much less expensive than the others. The BIS set is offered as four discs for the price of three—still costly—but with performances of this caliber, it would be my first choice. **Richard Burke**

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**AllMusic Review by Mike D. Brownell - 4 1/2\*/5\***

Like their previous Mendelssohn release on BIS (The Complete Concertos), the

Amsterdam Sinfonietta under the baton of Lev Markiz returns for another set filled with more than four hours of Mendelssohn's music, this time, the complete string symphonies. Listeners are in for a treat. Mendelssohn's 13 string symphonies were written between the incredibly young ages of 11 and 15. They are an incredibly revealing portrait of Mendelssohn's dramatic and rapid development from compositions reliant on imitation to a voice all his own. The Amsterdam Sinfonietta's performances of these early but by no means juvenile works are impeccably clean and vibrant, creating enough fresh interest from one symphony to the next to keep listeners rapt for the full duration of the album. Sound quality throughout the album is pristinely clear, with every note audible as if you're sitting amongst the musicians as they play.

### **Mendelssohn: String Symphonies SACD - NOTE: SACD ONLY!**

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 10*

BIS offers arguably the finest available performances of Mendelssohn's complete string symphonies (including the full orchestra version of No. 8) on a single SACD lasting more than four hours. This means that the disc is only playable on an SACD player, but if you own one and want this music, you can't possibly do better. The Amsterdam Sinfonietta plays magnificently throughout, while Lev Markiz is particularly adept at maintaining rhythmic and textural interest in the first half-dozen symphonies, the most derivative and least characteristic music. But really, all the performances are superb, and they are extremely well recorded too. There's also a companion disc containing all of Mendelssohn's concertos. It's not as uniformly excellent as this release, but it's also an astonishing bargain, so consider this notice an easy recommendation for both reissues—that is, as I said, if you're technically equipped to play them. [1/30/2008]

### **Felix MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809–1847) - NOTE: SACD ONLY!**

***The Complete String Symphonies*** (1821–1823): No. 1 in C major [11:24]; No. 2 in D major [10:55]; No. 3 in E minor [8:38]; No. 4 in C minor [8:57]; No. 5 in B flat major [11:20]; No. 6 in E flat major [12:26]; No. 7 in D minor [23:58]; No. 8 in D major (version for strings) [30:29]; No. 9 in C major [29:04]; No. 10 in B minor [10:04]; No. 11 in F major [38:12]; No. 12 in G minor [21:28]; No. 13 in C minor [7:22]; No. 8 in D major (version with winds) [29:28]

Amsterdam Sinfonietta/Lev Markiz

rec. August 1993 (2, 3, 9, 10); April 1994 (13); July 1994 (1, 5, 6, 7, 12); May 1995 (4); July 1995 (11); October 1995 (8), Concertgebouw, Haarlem, Holland; March 1996 (No. 8 with winds), Waalse Kerk, Amsterdam, Holland

**BIS BIS-SACD-1738** [4:15:55]

Let me start with a technical explanation. Readers may wonder if there isn't something wrong in the header. All this music should occupy 4 CDs, shouldn't it? Of course, the maximum playing time of a CD is 80 minutes, or maybe a few seconds more than that. But this is a SACD, which has much storage capacity, since there is normally a surround mix and a stereo mix. In this case there is no surround mix, so the entire capacity can be used for the stereo content – and thus so much more playing time can be housed (note that these recordings were originally released on CD: BISCD938-40).

There is only one catch: so-called Hybrid-SACDs can be played on any CD player, since they contain a CD layer. To play back the present disc one needs an SACD player. I first found out this a little over a year ago when I found a box containing Bach's complete organ works at an incredibly low price. More than 20 hours' playing time on 5 SACDs for the price of 2! I couldn't resist it of course and they were superb. If I had bought Hans Fagius's complete set on conventional CDs (18 discs) I would have paid so much more that it would have been more profitable to buy this SACD box *and* a SACD player.

This is short of a miracle of course. Another miracle is the music on this Mendelssohn disc, which unbelievably was composed during a two-year-period when he was between 12 and 14 years of age. Of course we know of other precocious composers: Mozart for one, but as Stig Jacobsson points out in his notes, not even he was so assured and mature at the same age. That he was enormously proficient and knew the craft is without doubt but he was still deeply indebted to his predecessors, not least J.C. Bach. To be honest Mendelssohn also shows influences from Haydn and Mozart, even Bach and Handel – he was still a student with Carl Zelter at the time so these symphonies could be seen as apprentice work – but when listening to them chronologically one can hear how he very quickly finds a voice all of his own and in the later works there is no doubt that here is a personal composer, enormously gifted, writing in an idiom that has its roots in the previous era but distilled and refined in his own laboratory.

The break comes between the symphonies 7 and 8. The first seven were all composed in 1821 and the eighth is dated 27 November 1822 while the remaining ones were completed in March, May, July and September. The thirteenth was never completed. What we have here is the first movement, which was completed in December 1823 but then he abandoned the project and started working on what was to become his first numbered symphony, the one in C minor Op. 11 from 1824. Of String Symphony No. 10 only a first movement remains and we don't know anything about the other movements. Felix Mendelssohn himself after some time regarded these symphonies 'with increasing contempt' and hadn't it been for his sister Fanny they would probably have been weeded out. It is possible that he realized that there was too many echoes of the Haydn, Mozart *ed all* and too little

Mendelssohn. Now, almost 200 years later, we have to be grateful that they have been preserved since they give us insight in his development during these years but, even more important, they also have an intrinsic value musical creations of their own and few listeners hearing them for the first time would, I think, believe that these are works by a boy in his earliest teens, even younger than that.

The first six string symphonies are all fairly short, the longest of them just over twelve minutes. Maybe *Sinfonietta* would be a more appropriate word for them. They are in three movements with an allegro first movement and an allegro or presto finale with an andante in the middle. The one that stands out is No. 4 in C minor, which has a slow introduction, marked *Grave* – something that became the norm in his full-length later works, inspired no doubt by Joseph Haydn's late symphonies. No. 6 also has a minuet as middle movement, very Viennese in fact.

For a young boy it is remarkable that not only are six of the symphonies in minor keys but also that they are far from unconcerned. The outer movements are lively and vital but also often agitated and dramatic and there are dark strands in many of them. The slow movement of No. 1 has a brooding quality and the whirling finale is energetic – but also with shadows.

What is also obvious is his unconventional approach. There are rhythmical irregularities in many places – for example No. 1 – and the andante of No. 4 is hypnotically repetitive, while the finale of No. 5 has sudden stops.

From No. 7 the compositions become more large-scale with four movements – even five in No. 11 – and the playing time exceeds twenty minutes; No. 8 and 9 are around 30 minutes and No. 11 no less than 38! The musical contents and the development of it is also on a higher level and while the vitality of the music is just as uplifting as in the earlier works the serious elements are also even deeper in feeling. Most apparent of all is how skilled he is in counterpoint. As early as in No. 4 the finale is a fugal construction and in No. 7 and No. 8 the finales are fully developed fugues and so is the *allegro molto* of No. 11. This symphony is also interesting for its scherzo, a Swiss folk-song, where he also adds percussion: tambourine, triangle and timpani. In the first movement of the last of the complete symphonies, the three movement No. 12, he even, after the slow introduction, revels in a double fugue à la Bach, which of course reminds us that a decade later Mendelssohn was the one who more or less started the Bach revival.

As a 'filler' we get No. 8 in his transcription for full orchestra which, miraculously was completed only three days after the string version. This was his first attempt at using the complete orchestral pallet and one marvels at the surefootedness. Especially the slow movement is colourful in the way that points forward to his mature symphonies.

It is music by a twelve-to-fourteen-year-old these symphonies are far from the immature apprentice works that the composer himself obviously regarded them as, and everyone who loves Mendelssohn or music of the period in general or just music for string orchestra should give it a try. The performances of the virtuoso Amsterdam Sinfonietta are both vital and sensitive and the sound is up to BIS's normal high standards: well defined, well integrated, believable acoustics and the dynamics well caught. My only comparisons are the last four symphonies that constitute volume 3 of the Naxos set, recorded about the same time as the BIS set. Nicholas Ward and the Northern Chamber Orchestra play very well indeed, tempos and some other details may differ but those are also highly attractive readings. For sheer virtuosity and homogeneity of the playing I would place the Amsterdam Sinfonietta a notch above. The price is about the same but it is no doubt convenient to have all the symphonies on one disc and a further plus with the BIS set is the inclusion of the orchestral version of No. 8. But remember: You need an SACD player to listen to the disc!

***Göran Forsling***

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