
CARL NIELSEN STUDIES

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REVIEWS ¹

Recordings of Nielsen's major works have continued to flow in plentiful measure over recent years. Two stand out, however, for their interest as sources.



Carl Nielsen, The Symphonies. The Royal Danish Orchestra. Recordings 1965–2022. Various conductors, Naxos 8574650–53.

Fifty years ago, braving power cuts and a largely unheated London church, the London Symphony Orchestra under Ole Schmidt gave us the first integral recording of Nielsen's symphonies (on the long-

since defunct Unicorn-Kanchana label). Ten years on, Danacord transferred Danish recordings from the 1950s by the Royal Danish Orchestra under three conductors well acquainted with the tradition of Nielsen's own performance. In 1988, the San Francisco SO and Herbert Blomstedt offered unimpeachable playing, first-rate Decca recording quality and comprehensive musical understanding, all of which combined to make theirs a reference set from that day to this. Most recently, the now Danish National Symphony, under its present chief conductor, Fabio Luisi, re-entered the field, with accounts for Deutsche Grammophon that have been justly well received and in the case of Symphonies 3, 4 and 6 rival the all-time best for quality of execution, conception and recording quality. All the above are reference sets that no Nielsen enthusiast (or conductor) should pass over. Meanwhile a dozen or more estimable complete sets have helped put Nielsen on the map in a way that would have seemed inconceivable back in 1974.

In 2024 Naxos – or someone pitching the idea to them – had the brilliant notion of following the Danacord precedent through to the present day, featuring the orchestra that knows Nielsen's

¹ The following are revised versions of reviews that originally appeared in *Gramophone* magazine, August 2024 and Awards issue 2024, reprinted by permission.

music best (and in which he himself was a violinist for 16 years) with six principal or guest conductors from 1965 to 2022. Irrespective of the quality of performances, the documentary value of the set is high, not least thanks to the essays on the music and the performances by Andrew Mellor and an eyewitness account by orchestral violinist Troels Svendsen of Bernstein's 1965 visit to conduct the *Sinfonia espansiva* in Copenhagen, which had been timed to coincide with the centenary of the composer's birth.

It would be unwise to read too much into the evolution of the orchestra itself from these recordings. Certainly, woodwind solos have become more refined over the years, with little or no loss of character. On the other hand, the slight thinness of the string sound, which might be held against the 1950s performances, still resurfaces from time to time – it doesn't all in the latest Luisi set, but it does to a degree on the 2022 Naxos version of the First Symphony. Thomas Søndergård (formerly a timpanist in the orchestra) offers a reading that is forthright yet human, dramatic yet poetic. His Andante is on the slow side, but still not as lethargic as Luisi's (a rare blot on the latter's interpretations) and amply redeemed by the empathy and sense of wonder it radiates. Each movement offers delicious profiling of phrasing and articulation, and the enthusiasm which propels the finale to its conclusion is almost palpable.

Alexander Vedernikov's *Four Temperaments*, recorded in August 2020, three months before his death from Covid, is rather hit-and-miss. Launched with terrific vigour, the Choleric first movement sags whenever Nielsen specifies *tranquillo* (recordings under conductors who knew the composer indicate that he understood this as character rather than tempo marking), while the second movement is more soporific than Phlegmatic, and the actual slow movement – the Melancholic – also drags. The Sanguine finale is boisterous enough, but topped off by an unconvincingly precipitous and gratuitous stretto, as if trying to emulate what Bernstein had done so brilliantly, if controversially, 55 years previously in the finale of the *Espansiva*.

Pace Troels Svendsen's booklet note, it was Bernstein's incandescent CBS recording of the Fifth Symphony that put Nielsen on the international map. That in turn occasioned the award of the Sonning Prize and the invitation to Copenhagen. Coming to Bernstein's 1965 *Espansiva* – a reissue from the CBS original – in order of composition rather than performance, you can almost feel the musicians moving to the front of their seats, strapping in and preparing for a newly invigorating take on the music. As the booklet explains, in rehearsal Bernstein was in effect learning the piece from the orchestra. But in performance his own creative personality took over. He would not have needed to lecture the players about the *Espansiva*'s embodiment of the Life

Force, because he himself embodied it, as we can see as well as hear in the video of the public performance of the symphony, which followed the day after the studio recording and is now viewable on YouTube. True, the soprano soloist is not the most mellifluous or the best tuned. As frequently been noted, Bernstein's finale may be a too regal for the music's own good (perhaps Bernstein intuited that it was originally marked *pomposo* in the manuscript score?). But I had forgotten how much love there is behind it.

Most startling, perhaps, is Rattle's electrifying account of *The Inextinguishable* from 2013, the occasion of his receipt of the Sonning Prize. This is a good deal more 'incendiary' (Mellor's apt description) than his EMI studio version with the CBSO, which itself was pretty impressive. The first movement has an irresistible forward momentum, and although ensemble wobbles at the beginning of the third movement, that's no more than a heat-of-the-moment thing. The finale is nothing short of sensational, in the best sense. Luisi is terrific here too, by the way, as he is in the *Espansiva*.

Michael Boder's sluggish account of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, recorded for Naxos in 2024, is a disappointment. His second movement is back on track, but that's small compensation. Unfortunately, Luisi's second movement is also uncharacteristically circumspect, which leaves many others preferable and the classic 1962 Bernstein still unsurpassed.

Berglund's 1989 *Sinfonia semplice*, originally for RCA, and the only other reissue besides Bernstein's *Espansiva*, is remarkably straight and objective: rich in detail but a little short on character compared to, say, Blomstedt or Luisi. What's interesting is how much of the symphony's complex psychology nevertheless survives this rather severe treatment.

On the 'bonus disc' the Clarinet Concerto certainly earns its place. The accompaniment is beautifully balanced and as sharply profiled as the moments of calculated ungainliness in John Kruse's superb solo playing. Michael Schönwandt's *Maskarade* Overture might seem an odd choice to follow, not least because the opera house acoustic is unsympathetic, and the performance, initially a little scrappy, is of the truncated version leading into the first scene of the opera, rather than Nielsen's rip-roaring concert version. Still, the spirit of the thing is spot-on; it is taken at a terrific lick, and heart-warming where it needs to be.

In sum, then, this is an issue as attractive as it is instructive. No individual set can possibly say all there is to say about Nielsen's symphonies. But to experience this one, as with those listed in my opening paragraph – is to fall in love with them all over again.

David Fanning