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*Espansiva. Carl Nielsen: Works For 4 Hand Piano.* Rikke Sandberg and Kristoffer Hyldig. OUR Recordings 8.226923.

Nielsen for piano four hands. Who knew? Probably only those associated with the Complete Edition, who had had occasion read its Prefaces, or who had played through *Saul and David* from the vocal score.

The opera contains two orchestral sections that Nielsen himself arranged for piano duet: the Prelude to Act 4 and the Battle Music played with the curtain down. Both extracts are remarkably effective, at least as heard here on two pianos rather than one, and in performances that capture the music's irresistible drive so vividly.

But the main event is the *Sinfonia espansiva*. Convinced that he had composed a symphony that could give him a breakthrough in Germany and elsewhere, Nielsen produced a duet version that he or his friends could demonstrate to conduc-

tors – which he did with some success (who knows how his reputation might have taken off in Germany and elsewhere had the First World War not intervened?). It seems that the only surviving copy is a manuscript in Copenhagen's Royal Library, which Kristoffer Hyldig took the initiative of digging out and transcribing.

Hyldig and Sandberg take the 'expansive' first movement at full tilt, and the result is thrilling. Apart from ensuring optimum clarity and ensemble, they have a sure instinct for the pillars and supporting arches of the structure. They broaden fractionally as if to accommodate the refulgence of Nielsen's orchestral tutti, and they bring just the right amount of affection to lyrical contrasts. Understandably, they do not try to work in the slow movement's vocal solos, but Nielsen's Arcadian pandiatonic E flat major makes its full trance-like effect. Just as perceptive is the exploratory testing-out character of the third movement and the celebratory tone of the finale; the octave doubling of the theme at the opening is less effective, but here I'm not sure if my quarrel is with the pianists or with Nielsen's arrangement.

The choice of a Steinway for the upper voices and Fazioli for the lower ones is a curious one, but in practice it works remarkably well. Occasionally themes in the mid-texture fail to penetrate as one might hope, but overall the effect is entirely convincing.

A delightful bonus is the Johann Strauss-like *Højby Rifle Club March*, a joint

effort of Nielsen and his father, the original four-hands sketch of which was recently discovered in the archives of the Tivoli Amusement Park.

Airy recording quality, well-regulated instruments and first-rate booklet notes by Niels Bo Foltmann help to make this an exceptionally rewarding – and for Nielsen-lovers indispensable – disc.

*David Fanning*