

## Edvard Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works

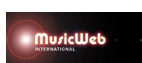
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EAN: 4022143214393



www.musicweb-international.com (Nick Barnard - 01.01.1970)

Quelle: <http://www.musicweb-international.com/cl...>



Over a period of roughly five years from 2009 – 2014, Audite recorded five discs which they describe as "Edvard Grieg – Complete Symphonic Works" with Eivind Aadland conducting the WDR Sinfonieorchester. Now, in 2019, they have been brought together in a box – slightly lazily, the liner booklet from each of the volumes is retained, thereby duplicating all the orchestral and biographical detail but retaining the adapted Edvard Munch painting from the original release. There is some saving to be had by buying the box – roughly speaking, a five-for-the-price-of-four ratio in the UK.

The key for many collectors will rest on how complete is "complete". This set is one of four currently available professing varying degrees of totality. First up was Neeme Järvi on DG in Gothenburg recorded back between 1986 – 93. He needs six generously-filled discs. Then from Bergen on BIS came Ole Kristian Ruud in excellent SACD sound in 2002 – 08 needing eight discs (and winning a Diapason d'Or for his trouble). Lastly, Bjarte Engeset on Naxos, either in Malmo or with the RSO from 2003 – 13, also requiring eight discs. Rather entertainingly, none of these sets can agree on which works should constitute part of the complete orchestral canon or not. Clearly, the set under consideration has the fewest number of discs and the least number of works. The main work "missing" here but included in the other three sets is the complete incidental music to Peer Gynt. Aadland chooses to include just the two standard orchestral suites plus a couple of extra songs and excerpts, which I find a little arbitrary and odd. In the same way Aadland does include some vocal works – the Six Orchestral Songs and The Mountain Thrall but not Bergliot or Before a Southern Convent. If there is a logic to that it eludes me. Järvi and Aadland do not include the opera excerpts Olav Trygvason or the cantata Landkjenning which Engeset and Ruud do. Engeset uniquely adds some orchestrations of piano works by other composers which I enjoy a lot – the Slåtter and the Ballade. Of course, the 'core' works are present in all the sets and for many that may be more than enough. Personally, if the word complete is going to be bandied around I want it to be really complete.

So to consider the discs in order: certain characteristics are clear across the set. Audite provide a very dynamic, quite closely detailed recording. I listened to the stereo SACD layer – perhaps the surround sound tempers the degree of closeness. Certainly the playing of the WDR Sinfonieorchester can stand such forensic inspection. Aadland's style is founded on contrast and drama. This works well across all of Volume 1 which consists of the Four Symphonic Dances Op.64, the two Peer Gynt Suites and the Funeral March for Rikard Nordraak. The latter in Grieg's own



version for wind band – Järvi uses this version too, the other two sets preferring Halvorsen's orchestration.

The Symphonic Dances are thrilling. Aadland's approach makes them miniature tone poems with the wide dynamic range of the orchestra very well caught. Even this early into hearing the set, there is a sense that Aadland 'pushes' the music rarely letting it relax let alone smile. Make no mistake, this is a very exciting interpretation but one that never 'lilts'. This stylistic limitation becomes more of an issue in the reflective more sensuous movements of Peer Gynt. Neither Anitra's Dance nor the Arabian Dance has any degree of seductive sway. It is no surprise that In the Hall of the Mountain King and Peer Gynt's Homecoming both respond well to this approach, but conversely The death of Åse loses any kind of fragile or touching intimacy as Aadland seems determined to create saturated walls of symphonic string sound. Technically its very impressive – musically it seems misguided to me.

If Volume 1 could be considered a mixed interpretative bag, Volume 2 dedicated to the famous string works seems a complete failure. The fault for this is wholly Aadland's, who again seems to strive for the epic rather than the intimate. If this were Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings, I would applaud the style. That is a work that really needs a large symphonic-sized string section with muscular dynamic playing. These Grieg works do not require this approach. Last Spring epitomises for me the wrongness of Aadland's approach. He seems intent on building an epic Mahlerian tragedy with overly mannered phrasing and a fuller vibrato from the orchestra. Listen to Ruud who takes almost exactly the same amount of time but there is a version that breathes simplicity and unaffected beauty. Played in that manner, this is one of Grieg's most affecting and heart-stoppingly beautiful works – Aadland makes it into over-heated melodrama. The same is true of his Holberg Suite too. This music should bubble along with directness of utterance and lack of mannerisms. It really is one of the most joyful string pieces to play precisely because it is unaffected and simple. With Aadland it creaks under the weight of its alleged importance. Time and again he seems fixated on the heavy-handed pointing of an accent rather than letting them serve a function of rhythmic impetus. Interestingly, the liner makes repeated significance of Aadland's affinity with the music and the insights this affords. Before becoming a conductor, he was an international-calibre violinist and lived and worked near Grieg's birthplace in Bergen. The liner notes occasions where Aadland seeks a folklorish 'authenticity' by avoiding vibrato or marking off-beat accents. This is all true and no doubt carefully considered but it does seem that somewhere along the creative process the open-sky essence of this music has been lost. Here the Audite sound, so effective on the first disc, adds more burden of up-front dynamism and inflated sound. I am not sure when I have enjoyed this music less despite the easy excellence of the actual playing. Perhaps it is worth noting that although this is nominally Volume 2, it was the first disc to be recorded and the only volume to be recorded in the Klaus-von-Bismarck-Saal Cologne as opposed to the more generous (forgiving?) acoustic of the Philharmonie.

The 'house' style of sharp contrasts, dynamic performances with forceful accentuation allied to close and detailed recording continues into the third volume. Whereas in the string-dominated volume 2 this proved to be a mixed blessing, the return to the full orchestra brings better results. Indeed, in many ways the opening work In Autumn could have been written for just such an approach. Surgingly powerful, wide dynamic range, virtuosic playing all contribute to the impact of the work which on occasion can sound just a tad generic. As the piece continued – and indeed this disc – I did begin to wonder whether this approach was in the "sonic spectacular" school of performance/production which is certainly a label you would not expect to associate with Grieg. The Lyric Suite that follows is more of a mixed

bag again. It is important to remember that this suite consists of orchestrations of a small selection of the many Lyric Pieces that Grieg wrote for solo piano. This was music intended for the salon and I find Aadland's striving for maximum 'effect' too often undermines the brilliant simplicity of the music. So while No.1 Shepherd Boy starts beautifully – lovely lyrical [pardon the pun] string playing - Aadland then overplays the climax. Likewise, I still do not enjoy his penchant for strongly marked accents as in the second movement Norwegian Rustic March. That said the third movement Notturmo is delightful. The closing March of the Dwarves [Trolls] is played with all the energy and flair one could wish for – at almost exactly the identical tempo to Engeset in Malmo but here the effect is spoilt by the over-large soundscape from the Audite engineers. The percussion – never the subtlest or most imaginative part of Grieg's scoring – is allowed to dominate in a rather unappealing way. It was a good idea to include the elusive, distinctly impressionistic Bell-ringing as a quasi-appendix to the published work – all the other 'complete' sets do as well, although Engeset's is rather perversely a single track on a different disc.

The Old Norwegian Romance with Variations gets a strong performance with – no surprise – the variations well contrasted. Relatively speaking, I do not find this to be one of Grieg's most compelling works; it is lacking in the variety and evocation of colour that say Dvořák finds in his Symphonic Variations. Aadland's approach is to maximise contrast whereas Engeset or Ruud seek continuity with less sharply contrasted variations – Ruud is a full two and a half minutes slower as well. Certainly Ruud does not feel slow with Aadland in contrast seeming occasionally impatient. The disc ends with the 'standard' suite of three excerpts from Grieg's incidental to Sigurd Jorsalfar. Contrary to developing expectations, Aadland conducts a beautifully reflective central Borghild's Dream although that is followed by as bombastic a Hommage March as you are ever likely to hear with bass drum and cymbals again overly prominent in Audite's vibrant mix. Aadland plays these three excerpts running to just shy of seventeen minutes. Järvi and Ruud provide an eight-movement synopsis which roughly doubles the amount of music to be heard and it is good Grieg to boot. Certainly it gives a greater range of mood and scene-painting than the three-movement standard work allows. Across the five-disc set there is room to include this music and its omission is serious in any set claiming "completeness".

Volume 4 contains just two works: the early Symphony and the ubiquitous Piano Concerto. The symphony was written when Grieg was just twenty-one and such were his concerns over its quality and value that he wrote "never to be performed" on the score by the time it came to be deposited in the Bergen City Archive. This sanction was obediently followed until 1980 when a photocopy, sent to the Soviet Union "for research purposes", was used to generate a set of parts and the work was performed. Since then the embargo has been lifted and this work features in every 'complete' survey of Grieg's music. The impetus for its composition came from the Danish composer Gade, who told Grieg to go home and "write something valuable". Grieg wrote the symphony at some speed but one can only imagine that on reflection he felt it lacked the value of being distinctively Nordic or Grieg-ish. For sure, the shadow of the German Conservatoires lies over the work and there is little of the characteristically folk-inflected idiom that Grieg was to make his own, but surely he was too harsh a self-critic. Not only as a marker of his development but in its own right this is a very enjoyable and substantial. Aadland gives it an excellent performance with his penchant for energy and brightly sprung tempi finding a perfect platform in this youthful work. Curiously – and it had me leafing through the liner – for this disc the Audite engineering is not quite as close or consciously wide in its dynamic range as the preceding three discs. Given that it is exactly the same technical team of producer and engineer I do not know why this should be. Suffice to say the music benefits substantially from this approach. On disc – once it became

known – this symphony has fared well. This is a well-crafted but not profound piece so it responds to a direct, unfussy approach and it is no surprise that this finds Neeme Järvi in good form – and in fact Järvi's timings are very close to Aadland. It has to be said that the Järvi set on DG still sounds very good and of course his Gothenburg Orchestra are very fine. Away from the 'complete' surveys, I rather enjoy Dmitri Kitajenko's performance with the Bergen PO which is a more measured, weightier affair. Indeed, the more one listens to this work the more its century of solitary confinement seems absurd.

The coupling of the Piano Concerto in A minor makes sense when you realise they are the only two extended, multi-movement orchestral works Grieg wrote. In his own lifetime, as much as the symphony was ignored the concerto became his calling card. Reviewing another performance, I wrote how this work's sheer ubiquity and popularity can easily mask just how unusual and sophisticated it is. The pianist here is Herbert Schuch and it must be said that this is a very impressive and intelligent performance. Schuch's is a considered and poetic account, favouring the lyrical and reflective over bombast or display. That said, he is technically in total control and is very well accompanied by Aadland and his Cologne orchestra. He phrases sensitively and effectively, allowing just the right amount of lyrical ebb and flow in the music without it falling into sentimentality or empty gesture. I would say this is one of the more wholly successful volumes in this series. That said, in a highly competitive field neither would supplant pre-existing favourites individually or as part of a series or set.

The fifth and final volume has something of a bitty, odds-and-ends feeling to it, pulling together pieces that did not quite fit onto earlier discs. This is evidenced by the range of recording dates which implies these works were put in the can at the same time as the other pieces they are linked to but then not included on earlier discs in the series. Possibly a little more careful planning of the repertoire could have avoided the frustration of having to swap discs to listen – say – to all of Aadland's Peer Gynt excerpts. Instead, you need to refer to volume 1 for the two standard suites and then swap to volume 5 here for another – slightly arbitrary – two, additional orchestral excerpts: At the Wedding and the sinuous Dance of the Mountain King's daughter. The liner note makes a case for this pair as being more 'modernist' than the simple lyricism of Morning Mood or Anitra's Dance. I would accept that as true – but rather than hearing 'just' these additional two excerpts surely that reinforces the case for the full incidental music which covers a very broad musical and theatrical canvas. Aadland is good in both these excerpts and the skill of his Cologne players is again never in doubt.

The Six songs with Orchestra were drawn together by Grieg to showcase his considerable skill as a songwriter. There is no particular continuity through the six, with the first two again excerpted from Peer Gynt. Soprano Camilla Tilling has a suitably attractive light soprano but with enough heft to make the most of the latter songs in the set which are more overtly dramatic. Possibly Marita Solberg for Ruud and Barbara Bonney for Järvi find an even greater degree of simple radiance but in its own right Tilling's approach is very beautiful. I still find Aadland's over-heated approach to the sung version of Last Spring to undermine the essential directness of the song as it did in the string transcription. But the final song in the set – Henrik Wergeland – responds to this almost operatic approach, which makes the omission of Landkjenning or Olav Trygvasson all the more baffling. Another head-scratcher is why no texts are included in the booklet. Generally across the whole set the German/English liner notes are very well written and full of useful information. The absence of texts of songs sung in Norwegian is an error. A couple more orchestrated Lyric Pieces – characterful wind playing again – and another vocal piece, the

six-minute Mountain Thral add to the piece-meal feel of this disc. The latter is sung by baritone Tom Erik Lie. He has a lighter voice than Palle Knudsen for Engeset and is less overtly dramatic than the great Håkan Hagegård for Ruud. Again, in isolation, Lie is perfectly good but with luxury of choice, his would not be a first one.

The set closes as it opened, with a suite of orchestral dances; here it's the Norwegian Dances Op.35. As with the Symphonic Dances, this music very much plays to Aadland's strengths of strong contrasts in dynamics and tempi as well as showcasing the brilliance of the Cologne orchestra. This is a strong performance of a delightful set of four contrasting dances, three of which were interpolated into the complete Peer Gynt score for some editions of the work. Again, I do not quite follow the logic of this set since – for all the delights of this music – the orchestrations are not Grieg's own, thereby contradicting Audite's own description of the music included on the five discs.

So, this set proves to be something of a mixed bag. The playing is uniformly very good indeed, with the exception of the string orchestra disc, the performances are all good and some better than that. However, not a single performance I would not prefer above any other. The final nail in the coffin for me has to be the omission of so much music of real substance, interest and quality. For those in the market for a single purchase of Grieg's orchestral music including the operatic excerpts, the complete Peer Gynt plus other vocal works all recorded in SACD sound and idiomatically performed by Grieg's "own" orchestra in Bergen there really is no need to look further than the set on BIS. This is currently available in the UK where you can get this 8-disc survey for around £10 cheaper than the 5-disc Audite set under consideration here. If the SACD format is not a priority but cost is, I would still choose either Engeset – £15.00 cheaper, or Järvi – a full £25.00 cheaper over Aadland.



**Edvard GRIEG (1843-1907)**  
**Complete Symphonic Works**  
Herbert Schuch (soprano)  
Camilla Tilling (soprano)  
Tom Erik Lø (baritone)  
WDR Sinfonieorchester/Eivind Aadland  
rec.: 2009-14, Philharmonie & Klau-von-Bismarck-Saal,  
Cologne

**AUDITE 11.439 SACD** [5 discs: 327:16]

Over a period of roughly five years from 2009 – 2014, Audite recorded five discs which they describe as "Edvard Grieg - Complete Symphonic Works" with Eivind Aadland conducting the WDR Sinfonieorchester. Now, in 2015, they have been brought together in a box – slightly lavishly, the liner booklet from each of the volumes is reprinted, thereby duplicating all the orchestral and biographical detail but retaining the adapted track listing according to the original releases. There is some saving to be had by buying the box – roughly speaking, a fourth the price of four sets in the UK.

The key for many collectors will rest on how complete is "complete". This set is one of four currently available professing varying degrees of totality. First up was Renee Järvi on DG in Götterburg recorded back between 1986 – 93.

He needs no generally effusive, then from Bergen on BIS came Ole Kristian Ruud in excellent SACD sound in 2002-08 needing eight discs (and winning a Diapason d'Or for his trouble). Lastly, Bartle Engestrøm on Naxos, again in Mainz or with the RSOO from 2003 – 13 also requiring eight discs. Rather entertainingly, none of these sets can agree on which works should constitute part of the complete orchestral canon or not. Clearly, the set under consideration has the fewest number of discs and the least number of works. The main work "missing" here but included in the other three sets is the complete incidental music to Peer Gynt. Aadland chooses to include just the two standard orchestral suites plus a couple of extra songs and excerpts, which I find a little arbitrary and odd. In the same way Aadland does include some vocal works – the *Die Götterdämmerung* songs and *The Mountain Thral* but not *Bargiel* or *Before a Southern Convent*. If there is a logic to that it eludes me. Järvi and Aadland do not include the opera excerpts *Clav*, *Tryggvassn* or the cantata *Landplanning* which Engestrøm and Ruud do. Engestrøm uniquely adds some orchestrations of piano works by other composers which I enjoy a bit – the *Silfver* and the *Baldere*. Of course, the "core" works are present in all the sets and for many that may be more than enough. Personally, if the word complete is going to be bandied around I want it to be really complete.

So to consider the discs in order: certain characteristics are clear across the set. Audite provide a very dynamic, quite closely detailed recording. I listened to the stereo SACD layer – perhaps the surround sound tempers the degree of closeness. Certainly the playing of the WDR Sinfonieorchester can stand such forensic inspection. Aadland's style is founded on contrast and drama. This works well across all of Volume 1 which consists of the *Four Symphonic Dances Op.4r*, the two *Peer Gynt* Suites and the *Funeral March* for Rikard Nordraak. The latter in Grieg's own version for wind band – Järvi uses this version too, the other two sets preferring Mahlerian orchestration.

The *Symphonic Dances* are thrilling. Aadland's approach makes them miniature tone poems with the wide dynamic range of the orchestra very well caught. Even this early into hearing the set, there is a sense that Aadland "pushes" the music really letting it make its alone smile. Make no mistake, this is a very exciting interpretation but one that never "lives". This stylistic inclination becomes more of an issue in the reflective more sensitive movements of *Peer Gynt*. Neither *Anten's Dance* nor the *Araban Dance* has any degree of seductive sway. It is no surprise that in the *Hall of the Mountain King* and *Peer Gynt's* accompanying both respond well to this approach, but conversely the *Death of Lee* loses any kind of tragic or touching intimacy as Aadland seems determined to create saturated walls of symphonic string sound. Technically its very impressive – musically it seems misguided to me.

If Volume 1 could be considered a mixed interpretation bag, Volume 2 dedicated to the famous string duo does seem a complete failure. The fault for this is totally Aadland's, who again seems to strive for the epic rather than the intimate. If this were Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, I would applaud the style. That is a work that needs a large symphonic string section with "moderate" dynamic phrasing. These Grieg works do not require this approach. Last *Spring* epitomises for me the wrongness of Aadland's approach. He seems intent on building an epic rather than a lovely, sweetly measured phrasing and a fuller vibrato from the orchestra. Listen to Ruud who takes almost exactly the same amount of time but his approach that breaks simplicity and style. In that manner this is one of Grieg's most affecting and heart-stoppingly beautiful works – Aadland makes it into over-heated melodrama. The same is true of his *Wedding March*. The music is lovely bubble along with directness of utterance and lack of mannerisms. It really is one of the most joyful string pieces to play precisely because it is unaffected and simple. With Aadland it creeps under the weight of his alleged importance. Time and again he seems flustered on the heavy-handed pointing of an accent rather than letting them serve a function of rhythmic impetus. Interestingly Aadland makes repeated attempts of Aadland's affinity with the music and the insights this affords. Before becoming a conductor, he was an international-calibre violinist and lived and worked near Grieg's birthplace in Bergen. The liner notes occasions where Aadland seeks a forthright "authenticity" by avoiding vibrato or marking off-beat accents. This is all true and no doubt carefully considered but it does seem to me somewhere along the creative process the open-sky essence of the music has been lost. Here the Audite sound, so effective on the first disc, adds more burden of up-front dynamism and inflated sound. I am not sure when I have enjoyed this music, less despite the very excellence of the actual playing. Perhaps it is worth noting that although this is nominally Volume 2, it was the first disc to be recorded (the only volume to be recorded in the Klau-von-Bismarck-Saal Cologne as opposed to the more generous (forgiving?) acoustic of the Philharmonie).

The "house" style of sharp contrasts, dynamic performances with forceful accentuation allied to close and detailed recording continues into the third volume. Whereas in the string-dominated volume 2 this proved to be a mixed blessing, the return to the full orchestra brings better results. Indeed, in many ways the opening work in Autumn could have been written for just such an approach. Surprisingly powerful, wide dynamic range, vigorous playing all contribute to the impact of the work which on occasion can sound just a tad generic. As the piece continued – and indeed this disc – I did begin to wonder whether this approach was in the "tactic spectacular" school of performance/production which is certainly a label you would not expect to associate with Grieg. The *Lyric Suite* that follows is more of a mixed bag again. It is important to remember that this suite consists of orchestrations of a small selection of the many *Lyric Pieces* that Grieg wrote for solo piano. This was music intended for the salon and I find Aadland's striving for maximum "effect" too often undermines the brilliant simplicity of the music. So while his *Elizabeth's Boy* starts beautifully – lovely lyrical (pardon the pun) string playing – Aadland then overplays the climax. Likewise, I still do not enjoy his penchant for strongly marked accents as in the second movement *Norwegian Rustic March*. That said the third movement *Aspidochelone* is delightful. The closing *Horn of the Ocean* (Truly) is played with all the energy and fire one could wish for – at almost exactly the identical tempo to Engestrøm in Mainz but here the effect is lost by the over-loud sound coming from the Audite engineers. The percussion – never the subtlest or most imaginative part of Grieg's scoring – is allowed to dominate in a rather unappealing way. It was a good idea to include the elusive, distinctly impressionistic *Ball-playing* as a quasi-appendix to the published work – all the other composer sets do as well, although Engestrøm is rather perverse to single track on a different disc.

The *Old Norwegian Romance* with *Variations* is a strong performance with no surprise – the variations well contrasted. Subtlety speaking, I do not find this to be one of Grieg's most compelling music – it is lacking in the variety and evocation of other sets by Grocke first and then by Engestrøm. The latter's approach is to maximise contrast whereas Engestrøm or Ruud seek continuity with less sharply contrasted sounds. As it is for and a half minutes longer than his. Certainly Ruud does not tell us with Aadland in contrast seeming occasionally impatient. The disc ends with the "standing" suite of three excerpts from Grieg's incidental *Die Sigurd's Funeral* to developing excitement. Aadland conducts a beautifully reflective cantata *Borgh's Dream* although that is followed by as bombastic a *Nonnagen March* as you are ever likely to hear with less drum and cymbal again in any premiere than the Audite vibrant mix. Aadland plays these three excerpts running to just shy of seventeen minutes. Järvi and Ruud provide an eight-minute symphony which roughly doubles the amount of music to be heard and it is good Grieg to boot. Certainly it gives a greater range of mood and scene-painting than the three-movement standard work alone. Across the five-disc set there is room to include this music and its omission is serious in any set claiming "completeness".

Volume 4 contains just two works: the early *Symphony* and the ubiquitous *Plan Concerto*. The symphony was written when Grieg was just twenty-one and such were his concerns over its quality and quality that he wrote "never to be performed" on the score by the time it came to be deposited in the Bergen City Archive. This anecdote was cheerfully followed until 1980 when a photograph, sent to the Soviet Union "for research purposes", was used to generate a set of parts and the work was performed. Since then the embargo has been lifted and the work features as every "comprehensive" survey of Grieg's music. The impetus for its composition came from the Danish composer Gade, who told Grieg to go home and "write something valuable". Grieg wrote the symphony at some point but one can only imagine that on reflection he felt it lacked the value of being distinctively Nordic or Grieg-ish. For sure, the shadow of the German Conservatives lies over the work and there is a little of the characteristically folk-inflected idiom that Grieg uses to make his own, but surely he was too harsh a self-critic. Not only as a marker of his development but in its own right this is a very enjoyable and substantial. Aadland gives it an excellent performance with his penchant for energy and brightly sprung tempo finding a perfect platform in this youthful work. Certainly – and it had me laughing through the liner – for this disc the Audite engineering is not quite as good or consistently wide in its dynamic range as the preceding three discs. Given that it is exactly the same technical team of producer and engineer I do not know why this should be. Suffice to say the music benefits substantially from this approach. On disc – once it became known – this symphony has fared well. This is a well-oiled but not profound piece as it responds to a direct, unflashy approach and it is no surprise that this finds flame Järvi in good form – and in fact Järvi's timings are very close to Aadland. It has to be said that the Järvi set on DG still sounds very good and of course his Götterburg Orchestra are very fine. Away from the complete surveys, I rather enjoy Dmitri Klaganov's performance with the Bergen PO which is a more measured, vaguer affair. Indeed, the more one listens to the work the more its century of solitary confinement seems absurd.

The coupling of the *Plan Concerto* at minor makes sense when you realise they are the only two extended, multi-movement orchestral works Grieg wrote. In his own lifetime, as much as the symphony was ignored the concerto became his calling card. Reviewing another performance, I wrote how this work's sheer ubiquity and popularity can easily mask just how unusual and sophisticated it is. The pianist here is Herbert Schuch and he said that this is a very impressive and intelligent performance. Schuch's is a considered and poetic account, favouring the lyrical and reflective over bombast or display. That said, he is technically in total control and a very well accompanied by Aadland and his Cologne orchestra. He phrases sensitively and effectively allowing just the right amount of lyrical ease and flow in the music without it falling into sentimentality or empty pastiche. I would say this is one of the more wholly successful volumes in this series. That said, in a highly competitive field rather would support pre-existing favourites individually or as part of a series or set.

The fifth and final volume has something of a story, odd needs ends feeling to it, pulling together pieces that did not quite fit into wider disc. This is evidenced by the range of recording dates which implies these works were put in the box at the same time as the other pieces were but they are not. They are not included on earlier discs in the series. Possibly a little more careful planning of the repertoire could have avoided the frustration of having to snap discs to listen – say – to all of Aadland's *Peer Gynt* excerpts. Instead, you need to refer to volume 1 for the two standard suites and then snap to volume 5 here for another – slightly arbitrary – but additional orchestral excerpts. All of the *Wedding* and the *Autumn Dance* of the *Mountain King's* daughter. The liner note makes a case for this pair as being more "modernist" than the simple lyrics of *Homage* to *Anten's Dance*. I would accept that as true – but rather than hearing "just" these additional two excerpts surely that reinforces the case for the full incidental music which covers a very broad musical and theatrical canvas. Aadland is good in both these excerpts and the skill of his Cologne players is again never in doubt.

The *Six songs* with Orchestra were drawn together by Grieg to showcase his considerable skill as a songwriter. There is no particular continuity through the six, with the first two again excerpted from *Peer Gynt*. Soprano Camilla Tilling has a suitably attractive light soprano but with enough heft to make the most of the later songs in the set which are more overtly dramatic. Possibly Maria Solberg for Ruud and Barbara Bonney for Järvi find an even greater degree of simple radiance but in its own right Tilling's approach is very beautiful. I still find Aadland's over-heated approach to the song version of *Last Spring* to undermine the essential directness of the song as it did in the string transcription. But the final song in the set – *Nornd* (Bergdand) – responds to this almost operatic approach, which makes the omission of *Landplanning* or *Clav Tryggvassn* all the more baffling. Another head-scratcher is why no texts are included in the booklet. Generally, across the whole set the German/English liner notes are very well written and full of useful information. The absence of texts of songs sung in Norwegian is an error. A couple more orchestrated *Lyric Pieces* – *characterful* (and playful) again – and another vocal piece, the six-minute *Mountain Thral* add to the phenomenal feel of this disc. The latter is sung by baritone Tom Erik Lø. He has a lighter voice than Dale Koudsen for Engestrøm and is less overtly dramatic than the great Hilban Hagegård for Ruud. Again, in isolation, Lø is perfectly good but with luxury of choice, his would not be a first one.

The set closes as it opened, with a suite of orchestral dances: here it's the *Norwegian Dances Op.35*. As with the *Symphonic Dances*, this music very much plays to Aadland's strengths of strong contrasts in dynamics and tempo as well as showcasing the brilliance of the Cologne orchestra. This is a strong performance of a delightful set of four contrasting dances, three of which were interpolated into the complete *Peer Gynt* score for some editions of the work. Again, I do not quite follow the logic of this set piece – for all the delights of this music – the orchestrations are not Grieg's own, thereby contradicting Aadland's own description of the music included on the five discs.

So, this set proves to be something of a mixed bag. The playing is uniformly very good indeed, with the exception of the strong orchestral discs, the performances are all good and some better than that. However, not a single performance I would not prefer above any other. The final nail in the coffin for me has to be the omission of so much music of real substance, interest and quality. For those in the market for a single purchase of Grieg's orchestral music including the operatic excerpts, the complete *Peer Gynt* plus other vocal works all recorded in SACD sound and dramatically performed by Grieg's "own" orchestra in Bergen here really is no need to look further than the set on BIS. This is currently available in the UK where you can get the 8-disc survey for around £10 cheaper than the 10-disc Audite set under consideration here. If the SACD format is not a priority but cost is, I would still choose either Engestrøm – £25.00 cheaper, or Järvi – a full £25.00 cheaper over Aadland.

Nick Barnard

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