

music

MURRAY PERAHIA

FROM BACH TO BEETHOVEN

The great pianist on his triumphant return to the Romantic repertoire

FREE A superb recording of four complete Haydn Symphonies

115 REVIEWS
PLUS we test Blu-ray audio!
see p84

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15 things we'd rather you didn't do to a piano...



PLUS

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104 superb symphonies... but where to begin? see p44

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THOMAS TALLIS

The composer who survived the bloody Tudors



JULY 2009

USA \$8.75/ CAN \$12.75

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BLU-RAY AUDIO SPECIAL

Widely marketed as the visual successor of DVD, Blu-ray is in fact potentially the latest format for hi-fidelity sound which may replace SACD, as **CHRISTOPHER DINGLE** discovers

Central to the action

CHRISTOPHER DINGLE finds a refreshing aural perspective



DIVERTIMENTI

Works for strings by **Britten, Bacewicz, Bjørklund & Bartók**
Trondheim Soloists
2L 50 SABD (hybrid CD/SACD disc;
plus Blu-ray disc) 69:03 mins (x 2 discs)
BBC Music Direct £19.56

Hold on to your hats. Even if you are well-acquainted with high quality surround sound recordings, this will come as a revelation. The first thing to hit you is the sensational feeling of being enveloped by the music, placed right in the centre of the action, but not claustrophobically so. It is a visceral experience, and it is tempting to wax lyrical about recording matters for the audiophiles. However, that would miss the bigger picture of

a wonderful programme thrillingly played by the Trondheim Soloists.

Rarely has there been such drive to the 'Boisterous Bourrée' and 'Frolicsome Finale' of Britten's *Simple Symphony*, yet there is no lack of emotion in the 'Sentimental Saraband'. Similarly, the Bartók *Divertimento* is incisive yet charming with a suitable whiff of mystery in the *Molto Adagio*. Grazyna Bacewicz's Concerto for String Orchestra from 1948 is a searching work, and the central *Andante* is especially haunting. Though not as distinctive, Terje Bjørklund's semi-minimalist *Carmina* is also a welcome inclusion, and, as elsewhere, the Trondheim Soloists are committed advocates, their energy captured, not produced, by the recording. Nonetheless, if you remain to be convinced about surround sound, try remaining impervious to this exceptionally musical disc.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



EXCEPTIONALLY MUSICAL: Trondheim Soloists fully justify the new format

2L THE NORDIC SOUND
Sampler with works by **Mozart, Carter, Vivaldi, Schoenberg, Haydn, Ives etc**
2L RRI-SABD (hybrid CD/SACD; plus Blu-ray) (x 2 discs)

MOZART • GRIEG
Works for two pianos
Dena Piano Duo
2L 57 SABD 59:28 mins
(x 2 discs)

ÅM
SONaR: Concerto for harp and strings; Concerto for harp and angels etc
Bødtker (harp); Oslo Kammerolister; Grex Vocalis/Carl Høgset
2L 51 SABD 58:11 mins
(x 2 discs)

BERG, FJ
Flute Mystery
Beynon (flute); Philharmonia Orchestra/Vladimir Ashkenazy, Fred Jonny Berg
2L 58 SABD 57:27 mins
(x 2 discs)

IT WAS INEVITABLE that, sooner or later, audio only recordings would start to appear on Blu-ray discs. The rationale is simple: over the coming years, Blu-ray will replace existing DVD and audio players. On current DVD players, audio tends to be sacrificed for picture quality, but this need not be the case with Blu-ray. Therefore, for those wanting the highest quality surround-sound audio, with or without pictures, Blu-ray is a logical step. The only problem is that, while SACD and DVD-A had only limited success in popular music and jazz, numerous classical SACDs are released each month, so there is an established and successful format. In recognition of this, these very smart-looking first five Blu-ray audio-only discs from the enterprising Norwegian label 2L each include an additional hybrid SACD with a conventional CD layer. In other words, unless you still hanker for vinyl, all the bases are covered. Moreover, this makes possible a

direct comparison between the various incarnations, though without a spare £4,500 for Denon's universal player when it appears later this year, this is also an exercise in virtuoso remote control juggling!

The first thing to note is that these recordings sound very good even as compact discs. Listen to them as stereo SACD or Blu-ray recordings and there is more vivid colouring. Put crudely it is the difference between essence of cello on a compact disc, and a cello's actual sound, as heard in Johannes Morten's insightful performance of the *Moderato* from Elliott Carter's sonata on the **NORDIC SOUND** sampler. Important as this is, little will prepare the uninitiated for the added dimensions that come from surround sound, especially in these recordings. While the sense of acoustic space found on most surround recordings is marvellous, 2L take a more inventive approach, often immersing the listener within

the music, rather than reproducing the concert environment. Sceptical? Well a few seconds listening to the Britten's *Simple Symphony* on the *Divertimento* disc (BBC Music Choice above) or the *Allegro* from Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 on the *Nordic Sound* sampler is likely to produce a Damascene conversion. Indeed, while samplers can often be tiresome affairs, this set of 'audiophile reference recordings' will be an excellent starting point for someone curious about the audio capabilities of a Blu-ray player, or anyone wishing to give their SACD player a real work-out. The music ranges from Gregorian chant via Mozart and Vivaldi to absorbing recent works by Norwegian composers such as Knut Nystedt, the audio quality is demonstration class and the performances are never less than engaging.

So, what are the differences between Blu-ray and SACD for the listener? Well, it is not a difference of

quality. Blu-ray is not fundamentally better, or worse, than SACD in terms of sound (though timings of tracks are not displayed as conveniently). Rather it is a matter of emphasis or colour. Morten Lindberg (the founder of 2L) finds that SACD is 'softer and more beautiful [than Blu-ray], but slightly less detailed' and expresses a slight preference for the new format. However, he acknowledges that factors such as microphone placings for the recording, and the listener's speakers are more important, which is as well, as my impressions only partially matched his. On the Dena Piano Duo's inventive selection of works for two pianos by **MOZART** and **GRIEG**, Lindberg's characterisation seems absolutely right. The sense of even greater clarity of Blu-ray being welcome in Grieg's ebullient two piano version of Mozart's C minor sonata – there really is a feeling of 'too many notes' in places, but only the most po-faced would resist the fun.

On the hand, take the disc entitled *SONaR*, which features the harpist Ellen Sejersted Bødtker in three sublimely beautiful works by **MAGNAR ÅM**. It is true that, on SACD, *Det var mjukt* (I awoke), a song for soprano and harp, has a

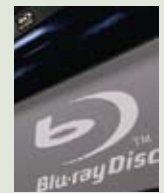
slightly more veiled quality than the Blu-ray disc, but, paradoxically, there is a little more edge to the sound as well. This is more apparent in the exposed sections of the harp concerto, *Vere meininga* (Be the purpose), in the attack of notes being played quietly, whether by Bødtker, or the string players of the Oslo Kammerolister. Whatever the individual impressions of the technology, the mesmerising *Dette blanke no*, a concerto for 'harp and angels', with its sustained vocal lines and filling of acoustic space, underlines the sense of alternate hues. Here, the Blu-ray is marginally warmer in sound, but switching between formats is the audio equivalent of noting the differences in adjacent blocks of a paint colour chart. They are both breathtaking. Like Lindberg, with gun to head, I would marginally favour the Blu-ray versions of these discs, but certainly not at the expense of existing SACDs. Few, if any, would perceive the differences unless experienced side by side, and the more important thing is that, as SACD or Blu-ray, these are stunning performances of hypnotic music.

As if to prove the point in another way, hot of the press comes *Flute Mystery*, which finds Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Philharmonia

in works by **FRED JONNY BERG**, including the title work and his Flute Concerto, written for and performed by Emily Beynon. Sadly, this disc simply proves comprehensively that you can have the most incredible recording system capturing top-class performances, but poor music sounds terrible in any format. These works provide little more than a pedestrian easy-listening pastiche of neo-classicism (go figure), with echoes of Prokofiev, Gershwin, Britten and middle years Stravinsky, but entirely lacking the individuality, wit, vigour, drive and invention of any of them. The 'mystery' is why this is being preserved for posterity. This latest release aside, though, 2L are to be congratulated for their strong advocacy of high resolution recordings on both Blu-ray and SACD. Now will others follow suit?

Christopher Dingle
PERFORMANCE (ÅM) ★★★★★
(THE REST) ★★★★★
RECORDING (ALL DISCS) ★★★★★
BBC Music Direct: £19.56 (each)
All Blu-ray discs were reviewed using the Denon DVD-2500BT Blu-ray player and Denon AVR-3808A AV receiver. For more information on these models and other Denon products please visit www.denon.co.uk. See reviews of Blu-ray equipment, p94

WHAT IS BLU-RAY?



BLU-RAY DISCS, like compact discs, DVDs and SACDs, are five inches in diameter and are read by a laser, which senses

the sequences of microscopic pits etched into the disc. The difference is that the laser in Blu-ray discs uses blue light (hence the name) rather than the red beam used for CD, DVD and SACD. The advantage of this is that a blue laser can focus its beam more accurately than a red one, meaning that the pits can be even smaller, and so about five times more information can be stored on the disc, making it possible to have very high quality video and audio. The format is supported by many big companies, and Blu-ray players will play existing CDs and DVDs (though are variable on recordable formats), but not, as yet, SACD. While a universal player is on the horizon, the question for classical collectors is whether enough machines in coming years will support SACD and what approach record companies will take.