

Orchestral

Carter

'Late Works'
Dialogues^a. Dialogues II^b. Epigrams^b. Instances^c.
Interventions^d. Soundings^d. Two Controversies
and a Conversation^e

^aIsabelle Faust *vn* ^bJean-Guihen Queyras *vc*
^{abd}Pierre-Laurent Aimard *pf* ^eColin Currie *perc*
^{ac}Birmingham Contemporary Music Group;
^{cd}BBC Symphony Orchestra / Oliver Knussen
Online © ODE1296-2 (75' • DDD)



The late works of Elliott Carter (1908-2012) are so numerous as to

constitute an output on their own. Just where the composer's 'late period' begins is itself a matter of conjecture, yet no one hearing the pieces on this disc is likely to doubt their technical finesse or expressive refinement: qualities that go a long way towards the defining of 'lateness' in artistic terms.

Not that finesse or refinement equates to lack of ambition – witness the relatively expansive design of *Interventions* (2007), where piano and orchestra undercut each other in unexpected ways such that the outcome is a free-flowing fantasia as varied in content as it is cumulative in impact. *Dialogues* (2003) is more evidently a series of deftly interrelated vignettes, piano eliding between various soloists and ensembles with a poise that recalls the character sketches in Carter's string quartets; a procedure fined-down in the brief though vital 'introduction and allegro' of *Dialogues II* (2010). *Soundings* (2005) is different again, an ingenious solution to the problem of the pianist also being a conductor; here the soloist's laconic gestures bookend a central section containing some of the most explosive music from Carter's last two decades.

Nor is humour at a premium. *Two Controversies and a Conversation* (2011) finds the piano at first mediating between ensemble and percussion, Colin Currie switching deftly between marimba and woodblocks, before a more balanced and equable discourse ensues. Carter's earliest mentor, Charles Ives, would have been as impressed by this as by the interplay of dynamism and stasis in *Instances*

(2012), whose ending yields an exquisite uneventfulness. *Epigrams* (2012) consists of 12 refractory miniatures, their salient gestures constantly recurring so that diversity is not at the expense of unity – however hard-won. Isabelle Faust and Jean-Guihen Queyras join purposefully with Pierre-Laurent Aimard for this teasingly gnomic swansong.

Aimard's credentials in Carter were established with a highly impressive account of *Night Fantasies* (Warner Classics, 9/05) and he tackles this always demanding pianism with alacrity and perception. He brings a more varied timbre to *Dialogues* than the excellent Nicolas Hodges and enjoys better coordination than the New Music Concerts Ensemble. Daniel Barenboim's premiere of *Dialogues II* is audibly a 'first night' affair, with that of *Instances* by the Seattle SO just a little rough-edged. But then, the playing of both BCMG and the BBC SO benefits greatly from the guidance of Oliver Knussen, whose accounts of the *Concerto for Orchestra* (Virgin/Erato, 7/92) and *Symphonia* (DG, 1/00) are staples of the Carter discography. Finely recorded, with authoritative notes by John Link, this new disc is sure to occupy no less significant a place. There are unlikely to be any better discs of contemporary music this year. **Richard Whitehouse (17)**

Dialogues – selected comparisons:

Hodges, *London Sinfonietta*, Knussen (4/06) (BRID) BRIDGE9184

New Music Concerts Ens, Aitkin (2/09) (NAXO) 8 559614

Dialogues II – comparative version:

Barenboim, *Staatskapelle Berlin*, Mehta (DG) DVD 073 4990GH

Mendelssohn

Complete Symphonies

Karina Gauvin, Regula Mühlemann *sops*

Daniel Behle *ten* RIAS Chamber Choir; Chamber Orchestra of Europe / Yannick Nézet-Séguin

DG (M) © 479 7337GH3 (3h 20' • DDD • T/T)

Recorded live at the Philharmonie de Paris,

February 2016



Mendelssohn's five numbered symphonies make a motley collection: a piece of precocious juvenilia, three 'named'

symphonies, only one of which (the *Scottish*) the composer deemed worthy of publication, and the *Lobgesang*, a 'symphony-cantata' that found its way into the canon as No 2. Once criticised for being a pale simulacrum of Beethoven's Ninth, the *Lobgesang*, like the *Reformation*, has benefited from a younger generation of conductors set on stripping the music of Victorian complacency and grandiloquence. Andrew Litton (BIS, 9/09) and Thomas Fey (Hänssler, 6/10) did just that. In their new Mendelssohn cycle, recorded at concerts in Paris, Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the brilliant Chamber Orchestra of Europe follow suit, marrying sinew, clarity and point of detail and – a hallmark of their performances throughout these discs – unerring control of tension. With a subtle fluidity of pulse, Nézet-Séguin minimises the dangers of rhythmic squareness in the first movement. I don't hear Mendelssohn's prescribed *poco agitato* in the *Allegretto* second movement, though it beguiles with its caressing delicacy. Here and elsewhere the COE woodwind are superlative, individually and in consort. And the *Adagio religioso* (lovely veiled strings at the opening), shorn of ponderousness, emerges with an essentially Mendelssohnian quality of innocence.

Conductor and orchestra show the same vitality and care for instrumental colour and balancing in the choral sections, from the murmuring idyll of 'Sagt es, die ihr erlöset seid' to the exultancy of 'Die Nacht ist vergangen', euphorically launched by Karina Gauvin. Once over a slightly squally first entry, Gauvin impresses with her full, warm tone and verbal sensitivity, while tenor Daniel Behle matches Litton's Christoph Prégardien in the anxious questioning of 'Ist die Nacht bald hin?' and surpasses him in lyrical allure. My only real caveat is that the impact of the excellent RIAS chorus is rather muted in the resonant acoustic.

Like the *Lobgesang*, the once-derided (including by the composer) *Reformation* is hard to meld into a satisfying structural entity. Nézet-Séguin, persuasively to my ears, prioritises lyricism and grace, without short-changing the first movement's *con fuoco* marking. Here and in the finale his gift for building tension over long spans ensures that the music never merely