



Power and confidence: Hannu Lintu and his Finnish orchestra have set down one of the finest Sibelius discs of recent years, for Ondine

marks a terrific debut on the Harmonia Mundi label.

We don't know what the orchestral sound was like at its 1912 Paris premiere...but many listeners will be familiar with the 1959 LSO recording by the original conductor, Pierre Monteux, long a treasure of the Decca catalogue. Comparisons are instructive. Les Siècles' French-built woodwind and brass instruments from the early 20th century (documented in the booklet) provide greater tonal sweetness, especially the Selmer trumpets, which don't dominate textures as much as the incisive LSO brass. Lean gut strings achieve feathery lightness. The 'Danse guerrière' is terrific, particularly the sinuous clarinet, juicy contrabassoon and dusky alto flute. In the famous 'Lever du jour', the key clatter of the woodwinds among the chirruping detracts a touch from the magic, the close recording possibly trying to negate the acoustical differences between the venues. Marion Ralincourt, playing a Louis Lot flute with less vibrato than her LSO counterpart, beguiles in the 'Danse de Lycéion' and is both seductive and coquettish in the Syrinx Pantomime episode.

François-Xavier Roth teases a much more expansive opening than Monteux, a slow burn leading to an ecstatic first choral entry. He is often more languorous, the performance nearly four minutes slower than the Decca account. However,

Roth attacks the 'Danse guerrière' with more vim and also whips up a faster bacchanalian finale. With fine choral contributions from the Ensemble Aedes, this new recording is highly recommended.

Mark Pullinger

Selected comparison:

LSO, Monteux (12/59⁸, 9/96⁸) (DECCA) 475 7525DOR

Sibelius

Tapiola, Op 112. En saga, Op 9.

Eight Songs (orch Sallinen)^a

^aAnne Sofie von Otter *mez* Finnish Radio

Symphony Orchestra / Hannu Lintu

Ondine (P) ODE1289-5 (55' • DDD/DSD • T/I)



I haven't seen the ancient forests of Northern Finland but I still think I do a pretty convincing *Tapiola*', Hannu Lintu told me for a *Gramophone* reflection on the Sibelius anniversary two years ago (8/15). Well, after a metropolitan-feeling opening, Lintu's *Tapiola* does indeed settle into one of the finest performances on record, reconciling the obvious with the mysterious, casting everything in various shades of darkness until it snaps or roars outwards, and, in the culminating shift to the major, equalling Leif Segerstam's magical flooding of the soundscape with glistening, sideways forest light.

En saga stands as a partner piece to *Tapiola* at the other end of Sibelius's orchestral career, an early but unmistakable sign that the composer was capable of reaching deep into the Finnish nature psyche with wholly original technical and figurative tools. Again, this is a superb performance: rich down below, perky up top, full of delectable solos, with a sense of momentum that has a seismic effect on the musical argument from the string incantations at 6'54" onwards. Lintu invests the work with the sort of downward declamation we are now used to hearing in its contemporaneous *Kullervo*. The string ensemble at 12'06" is extraordinary and the power and confidence mustered after that delicate hesitance is awesome, not least as it recedes into nothingness.

Next we hear new orchestrations by Aulis Sallinen of eight Sibelius songs to Swedish texts, sung by native Swede Anne Sofie von Otter. There are no blockbusters among the selection but they work beautifully together, from the elusive to the guardedly grand and the mildly enchanted. Von Otter's voice may have lost some brightness but it has gained storytelling capabilities with age, best demonstrated in 'Under strandens granar'. Sallinen's orchestrations only occasionally draw attention to themselves and sometimes Sibelius lurks unobtrusively behind them (notably in Sallinen's deployment of the timpani). One of the most striking Sibelius discs for years. **Andrew Mellor (11/17)**