

acoustic. Jos van Immerseel chose to have the bells played as piano chords on his *Anima Eterna* disc, on the flimsy basis that Berlioz once conducted a performance this way in St Petersburg. Marc Minkowski's *Les Musiciens du Louvre* now sound pallid (DG). Interestingly, only Gardiner and Immerseel include the obbligato cornet à pistons in the Ball.

Roger Norrington and the London Classical Players have long been my HIP benchmark, a peppery reading, but Roth and *Les Siècles* surpass them for colour and characterisation. Indeed, this is not just my favourite 'historically authentic' recording. I strongly believe this is the finest account of the *Fantastique* to emerge from France since Charles Munch and the newly formed *Orchestre de Paris* in 1967 ... and it probably trumps that too. **Mark Pullinger**

Symphonic fantastique – selected comparisons:

London Classical Physx, Norrington

(4/89*) (VIRG/ERAT) 363286-2 or 628579-2

ORR, Gardiner (6/93) (PHIL) 434 402-2PH

Musiciens du Louvre, Mabler CO, Minkowski

(10/03) (DG) 474 209-2GH

Anima Eterna, Immerseel (5/10) (ZZT) ZZZT100101

Siècles, Roth (ACTE) ASM02

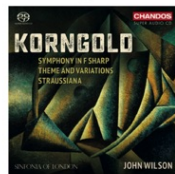
Korngold

Straussiana. Symphony, Op 40.

Theme and Variations, Op 42

Sinfonia of London / John Wilson

Chandos ④ CHSA5220 (59' • DDD/DSD)



Rumours have been circling for a while of a hush-hush project from John Wilson; of a new super-orchestra hand-picked from the cream of the UK's orchestral players. Now here it is: a radiant new recording of Korngold's orchestral music with an all-new *Sinfonia of London*, led by Andrew Haveron.

And? Well, for starters, put aside any expectation of the Technicolor studio sound that Wilson draws from his other orchestra (the one that carries his name). Wilson has always been clear that he's interested primarily in the appropriate colour for any given repertoire, and for this Austrian-American exile symphony he evokes a great post-war US orchestra – the weighty, satin string tone, the skyscraping brass and questioning woodwinds that you might find on a 1950s Chicago or Philadelphia disc, though Chandos captures a much mellower general ambience.

And then Wilson runs with it, in one of the most athletic performances of this

symphony on record – closer in spirit to Kempe than Previn, but considerably faster than either (even without Kempe's cuts). Rhythms are springy and purposeful; the great *Adagio* really strives, as well as sings, and I've rarely heard it probe deeper. Every phrase speaks; textures are translucent and detailed (even at the dizzying speed of the Scherzo), and the string sound glows from within, with portamento very much at the service of expression. Wilson clearly sees Korngold's Symphony (rightly) as part of the Viennese classical tradition.

The result is both gripping and sincerely moving; and the two short, sad-sweet late works that follow the symphony – written by Korngold for amateur orchestras – receive the same whole-hearted commitment and loving care for colour and style. Stirring, thought-provoking and superbly played, this disc is a tonic. Let's hope it's not a one-off.

Richard Bratby

Symphony – selected comparisons:

Munich PO, Kempe (8/74, 6/92) (VARE) VSD5346*

LSO, Previn (8/97) (DG) 453 436-2GH

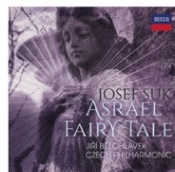
Suk

Asrael, Op 27. Fairy Tale (Pohádka), Op 16

Czech Philharmonic Orchestra / Jiří Bělohlávek

Decca ④ (two discs for the price of one)

483 4781DH2 (88' • DDD)



How gratifying that Jiří Bělohlávek was able to re-record Suk's *Asrael* in his

second tenure at the helm of the Czech Philharmonic. His first version had no lack of eloquence or fervour, but also a tendency to hold back during climactic passages; something later redressed in his live reading with the BBC Symphony, with its passing flaws in ensemble and vagaries of balance.

Neither of these is an issue here, as witness a first movement that emerges purposefully from its sombre introduction into an *allegro* of trenchant resolve, maintained throughout an impulsive development and culminating in an anguished apotheosis. The *Intermezzo* wears its Mahlerian overtones discreetly, not least that mesmeric passage where the funeral-march theme dissolves into overlapping pizzicatos, while the Scherzo compensates for an initial (and marginal) lack of impetus with its raptly expressive Trio then coursing surge towards an implacable close. Nor is the slow movement unduly over-weighted – so enabling its episodes of bittersweet

evocation to register as fully as the wearied resignation into which it subsides. The finale duly caps this performance with a visceral onward drive (as in the central fugato) that leads inexorably to a powerful culmination, then an epilogue whose relative expanse is justified through its arrival at a benediction the more enduring for having been so methodically and affectingly achieved.

Bělohlávek's association with *Fairy Tale* goes back even further. He recorded it with the Prague Symphony near the outset of his career (8/80), while his second account had a greater sophistication but less character. This new version brings an inspired synthesis with its ravishing love music (Jiří Vodička's violin solos effortless in their pathos), succeeded by a playful *Intermezzo* and plangent *Funeral Music*, then the finale strives heroically toward its ultimate transcendence.

The Czech Philharmonic give their collective all; with the best sound Decca has yet achieved at the Rudolfinum, this can be placed next to Charles Mackerras as the finest modern *Asrael*. If these are indeed Bělohlávek's last studio recordings, a plea for the commercial release of the Barbican performance of Dvořák's Requiem, which was also his final concert appearance. **Richard Whitehouse**

Selected comparison – coupled as above:

Czech PO, Bělohlávek (5/92) (CHAN) CHAN9640

Asrael – selected comparisons:

Czech PO, Mackerras (6/11) (SUPR) SU4043-2

BBCSO, Bělohlávek (10/12) (SUPR) SU4095-2

Tchaikovsky

Symphony No 6, 'Pathétique', Op 74

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra / Kirill Petrenko

Berliner Philharmoniker ④ BPHR190261

(44' • DDD/DSD)

Recorded live at the Philharmonie, Berlin,

March 22 & 23, 2017



Pierre Boulez – no conductor of Tchaikovsky – used to give performances that rendered a pocket score redundant. There was no need to peer into the texture for hard-to-hear or often-overlooked details. There they all were, especially in the Stravinsky/Diaghilev ballets, registered not for the sake of score-bound pedantry or picaresque charm or virtuoso baton-twirling but because they made telling contributions to the story.

So it is with this *Pathétique*, the first preserved fruit of the Berlin Philharmonic's relationship with its new music director.