Edvard Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works Vol. I

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Gramophone (Mike Ashman - 01.10.2011)

GRAMOPHONE Editor's choice

The launch of a big new survey of Grieg's orchestral music in the last decade, following Bjarte Engeset's for Naxos and Ole Kristian Ruud's for BIS, starts here (the first volume of a promised five) with the most obvious popular items. But any sense of mere repetition of well-known repertoire in (perhaps) improved recorded sound is challenged immediately by the idea of starting with the four 1898 Symphonic Dances. No 2 aside, the Allegretto grazioso that has become quite a Proms lollipop (and, of course, a Beecham speciality), these are meaty pieces of real orchestral (if not quite symphonic) substance which deserve to be better known. All were orchestrated by Grieg from piano originals, an adventure probably encouraged by the composer's guest appearances with the Leipzig Gewandhaus and Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics. This tempting of the miniaturist into full orchestral dress – a process also represented here by the Peer Gynt Suites – is especially effective in No 4, the darkest and longest piece.

The young maestro Eivind Aadland is a native of Grieg's Bergen, steeped through his family in the Norwegian folk-music tradition. An ex-concertmaster of the Bergen Philharmonic, he turned to conducting with appointments with the European Community Chamber Orchestra and the Trondheim Symphony. To the WDR players he has communicated a lightness of touch and a fine Grieg balance in which the winds sing out almost like concertante soloists. But such an approach is not so featherlight that it cannot challenge the famous Beecham/RPO recording (and its stunning viola line) in "Ingrid's Lament" from Peer Gynt and its ingenious take-over of the pain of the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. Then, in contrast to the more string-dominated music that precedes it, the Funeral March for Rikard Nordraak at the end of the release has the bracing feel of an open-air band performance. With recording matching the scale of the music-making, Aadland's new cycle – which, in these works, is more alive than Ruud's and better played than Engeset's – has hit the ground running.

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