Edvard Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works Vol. I

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This is a beautiful recording. The Cologne orchestra has a gorgeous sound, the engineers convey it perfectly, the conductor loves the music and never rushes thru anything. I was impressed right away by the slow tempos. All four Symphonic Dances are slower than Jarvi in Gothenburg. The first is especially good at this speed. The second—always the most popular— sounds luscious here. My Jarvi recording (DG) has developed irritating “swish” sounds that I cannot remove, so I was glad for a new recording.

The Funeral March is the familiar one for Richard Nordraak. The Peer Gynt Suites (pronounced Pair Jint, by the way) are also among the best I’ve heard. While I was comparing timings to all the other recordings I have, I noticed that this conductor is slower than all—except Beecham, whose Peer Gynt has always been my favorite. Beecham and Mr Aadland take about the same tempos, but both are slower than anyone else—and the music can take it. (Barbirolli was also slow.) Beecham does more of the Peer Gynt music but only one of the Symphonic Dances (No. 2). As with most of what Beecham conducted, he is peerless—but this comes very close. And this has the best sound I’ve ever heard in this music—and that is partly the terrific orchestra. What rich string sound! By the way, there is no singer for Solveig’s Song.

Solveig’s Song comes before Peer’s homecoming in the incidental music, but in Suite 2 here it comes after—it ends the suite. Some conductors do it the other way around—seems logical—but it was Grieg himself who published Suite 2 in this order. He wanted it to end quietly.

Mr Aadland grew up on Grieg as a violinist in the Bergen area; he was also concertmaster of the Bergen Philharmonic for many years. He seems to feel this music like a true Norwegian, and he claims to know all the folk tunes and rhythms from childhood, because his father played Norwegian folk music on a Hardanger fiddle. It seems to me that the main thing operating here is a great love and respect for the music. Too many conductors treat it as something light and forgettable.

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