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Orchester, with greater imagination has assembled a more varied fare with assorted dances, ritornellos and instrumental arrangements of vocal arias. Some of the popular choices, such as the extended sequence of dances from *Ariodante* and *Alcina*, have been eschewed in favour of music less frequently performed, such as the aria 'Sprich vor mir ein süßes Wort' (Say a sweet word for me) from the second act of Handel's earliest surviving opera for Hamburg, *Almira*. A ritornello from the first act of the same opera is sadly the only dance from among many in the score to feature here. Seasoned Handelians will at once recognise two pieces from one of the composer's late operas *Imeneo* (1741) in the more familiar context of the contemporaneous Op. Six *Concerti grossi*.

Leader and director Dominik Kiefer's programme falls into three suites. Horns, which play a prominent role in the first, are joined by recorder and flute in the second, while trumpet crowns the third. Stylish playing in a lively acoustic, but I found myself longing to hear a human voice in the arias.

Nicholas Anderson

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Lasse Thoresen

The Sound of the Arctic

Arctic Philharmonic/
Christian Kluxen
2L 2L-169-SABD (CD/SACD/Blu-ray
audio) 64:44 mins



Conductor Christian Kluxen describes Lasse Thoresen's *Lyden av Arktis* (The Sound

of the Arctic) as 'an acoustic atlas' of that vast region of ice, sea and permafrost, so crucial to life in and beyond the unique ecosystems it supports. Subtitled 'La Terra Meravigliosa' (The Land of Marvels), it's part of a broader 'spiritual journey' undertaken by the composer, encompassing several other pieces – and is itself several works in one.

Thoresen (b1949) is perhaps best known for his exploration of folk and indigenous musics originating in his native Norway and wider Scandinavia. *Lyden av Arktis* effectively evokes them through, in essence, a series of linked, atmospheric tone poems variously

scored for full orchestra, string orchestra and large ensemble. Its six discrete sections and short coda, he says, 'could be played separately or be fused into a single entity' as they are here with verve and enthusiasm by the Arctic Philharmonic players.

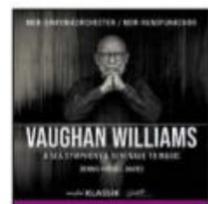
It's an ambitious work, most successful in its framing of joiks and other song-derived material within a context of elemental extremes from the wild to the surprisingly gentle. The opening 'Only White' throws down the gauntlet with an evocation of winds howling across ice-scapes that take shape in the second section 'Looming Glacier' before morphing into depictions of birds, soul journeys, 'Fiddle Feasts' and more, coming starkly to a halt with a warning of environmental 'Collapse'. *Steph Power*

PERFORMANCE ★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Vaughan Williams

A Sea Symphony (Symphony No. 1)*; Serenade to Music

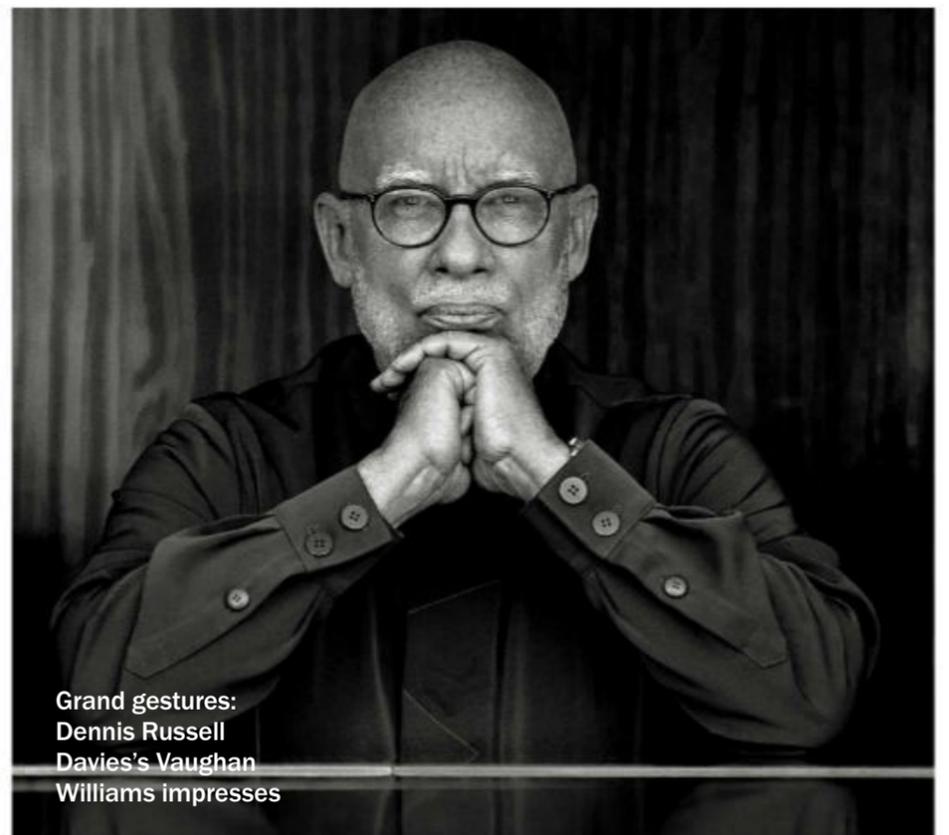
*Eleanor Lyons, Joanne Marie D'Mello (soprano), Michelle Neupert (alto), Yongkeun Kim (tenor), *Christopher Maltman (baritone), Alexander Knight (bass); MDR Symphony Orchestra; MDR Radio Choir/Dennis Russell Davies
Solo Musica SM415 86:58 mins (2 discs)



The Leipzig-based MDR-Sinfonieorchester has recorded Vaughan Williams's *A Sea*

Symphony before, a live performance from 2007. This new version is also live, and is thrillingly responsive to VW's epic Whitman setting.

The gleaming brass fanfare at the symphony's opening is boldly arresting, announcing a swirlingly evocative account of the imposing opening paragraph. Conductor Dennis Russell Davies favours a generally broad approach to the movement, emphasising the grandeur of VW's conception without de-energising the music. The Leipzig choir is excellent, and its articulate response to Whitman's poetry betokens careful preparation under the young English chorus master Harry Bradford. 'On the beach at night alone' benefits from Christopher Maltman's seasoned baritone, his probing introspection occasionally compromised by wide vibrato. Russell Davies again impresses, eliciting appropriately



Grand gestures:
Dennis Russell
Davies's Vaughan
Williams impresses

dark-hued playing from the strings in particular. Some odd balances slightly skew the sound – an arching cello line obtrudes at one point, and VW's *misterioso* choral writing is a touch recessive. The *Scherzo* ('The Waves') is excitingly spray-tossed without becoming frantic, enabling the choir to sustain clarity of diction. In 'The Explorers' finale, Russell Davies is daringly expansive, catching impressively the visionary quality of Whitman's words and Vaughan Williams's movingly empathetic music.

A warmly affectionate studio recording of *Serenade to Music*, in the version for choir and four soloists, is included on a bonus disc. But it's Russell Davies's distinctive, richly enjoyable *Sea Symphony* that truly demands attention. It is rewardingly insightful, and VW enthusiasts will want to hear it. *Terry Blain*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Classics of American Romanticism

Bristow: Symphony No. 4, 'Arcadian'; Fry: Niagara Symphony

The Orchestra Now/Leon Botstein
Bridge BRIDGE9572 54:57 mins



In George Frederic Bristow's wagon train, going by the journey described in his

Fourth Symphony of 1872, nothing threatening ever happens, even in

the movement featuring an Indian attack. Everything ends in rustic joy, dancing round the new homestead. Bristow sprinkles a few kinks into his handling of European sonata form, but his generally emollient musical material isn't individual enough to fully sustain a symphonic structure of 42 minutes. Still, striking moments often arrive (the first movement's viola solos, the slow movement's closing nightscape), each of them relished by the passionate precision of the international student musicians bonded together by Leon Botstein in his Orchestra Now. It's the symphony's first complete recording.

William Henry Fry's immediately ear-grabbing *Niagara Symphony* of 1854 was written for a 'Monster Concert' organised by that refined showman PT Barnum, but seemingly never performed until its 1999 Naxos recording. You get 12 glorious minutes of rushing arpeggios, hammered *fortissimo* chords, and trembling rolls of questionable tonality from four timpani players – all conceived by a pugnacious composer never afraid of tossing aside rules of good taste for the joys of the blatantly picturesque. More tone poem than symphony, the music follows a conventional ABA structure, though the underpinning disappears under the grandeur and force of Fry's amazing sound portrait of Niagara Falls. *Geoff Brown*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★