

ancient Indian verse. These seemingly dissimilar sources have in common a compelling lyrical imagery to which composer responds with great imagination and sensitivity. O'Regan works with an advanced, tonally based harmonic language that sometimes evokes another great British vocal composer, Benjamin Britten. Textures vary continually; a soloist or two is frequently set against the larger ensemble. And the string accompaniments for several of the works add another musical dimension. For example, a driving orchestral setting underlies the expansive vocal lines of "Threnody," from 2005's *Triptych*.

The recording originates from the famed Troy Savings Bank. Accordingly, the sound floats in exquisite delicacy in the air, completely detached from your speakers. Magic.

Mussorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition. Night on Bald Mountain.*

Prelude to Khovanshchina. Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Paavo Järvi, conductor. Telarc 60705 (hybrid multichannel SACD).

In his seven years as Cincinnati's Music Director, Paavo Järvi has shown himself to be a master of extracting orchestral color. And there's no more colorful music than these Mussorgsky works as refurbished by the two most celebrated orchestrators of all time, Rimsky-Korsakov (*Night on Bald Mountain* and the *Khovanshchina* Prelude) and Ravel (*Pictures at an Exhibition*). The Cincinnati band is the perfect instrument for Järvi's sound paintings. In *Pictures*' "Catacombs," the burnished blend and power of the brass section rivals that of Chicago or Amsterdam; the *Lobengrin*-like purity of the beginning of *Khovanshchina* is miraculous; the bone-weary closing pages of *Night on Bald Mountain* have never seemed more ingenious.

Michael Bishop's recording delivers delectable detail and a pleasing rendering

of the CSO's wonderful ensemble sonority. Bass drum impact in the best Telarc tradition.

Nordheim: *Four works.*

Cikada Duo.

2L 39 (hybrid multichannel SACD).

The back cover of this album contains a warning: "Extreme Surround Sound!" And it is. But in a good way.

The *Cikada Duo* is Kenneth Karlsson (piano and synthesizer) and Bjørn Rabben (percussion). The twosome is joined for this program of music by Norwegian composer Arne Nordheim (b. 1931) by Ake Parmerud performing on "electronics" and, for two pieces, soprano Elisabeth Holmhertz. Three of the works—*Colorazione*, *Fem Kryptofonier*, and *Link*—are abstracted sound sculptures, exquisitely crafted creations in which every man- or machine-made sound seems to matter immensely. The final work, *Den første sommerfugl* (The First Butterfly), is brief, unexpectedly tonal, and accompanied by deep yet gentle harp-like sonorities—think Andreas Vollenweider.

Sonically, this is a total immersion experience. The soundstage is vast, seemingly infinite. And real percussion

instruments—drums, gongs, chimes, xylophone, vibraphone, etc—are reproduced with exceptional detail while the electronica is lavishly beautiful.

Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde.*

Stuart Skelton, tenor; Thomas Hampson, baritone. San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor. SFS Media 821936-0019 (hybrid multichannel SACD).

Michael Tilson Thomas' Mahler cycle, which includes the major works for voice and orchestra as well as the symphonies, is approaching its conclusion. Only the mighty *Eighth* (and, one assumes, the torso of the *Tenth*) are yet to be released. And it's been apparent for some time that Tilson Thomas' is the finest Mahler to come from an American conductor since Leonard Bernstein's pioneering 1960s recordings. This *Das Lied von der Erde*, recorded in concert at Davies Hall in September of 2007, is another musical and sonic triumph.

Tilson Thomas understands that *Das Lied* is no "song cycle" but, rather, a symphony with singing. The balances achieved by engineer Peter Laenger and producer/editor Andreas Neubronner sublimely reflect that truth. Interestingly, the multichannel is 4.0. Only Symphony No. 6, the first release in the series, had previously eschewed the center channel. The surround version provides air without seeming the least bit diffuse; imaging is exceptionally natural and the recording tonally resplendent.

Stuart Skelton is fully up to the heldentenor demands of his movements; he gets things off to a rousing start with "The Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow." But the star of the show, along with the conductor, is Thomas Hampson, who performed and recorded Mahler with Bernstein in his youth. The baritone's tonal beauty and subtle timbral shadings, so crucial to the texts, is extraordinary. Together with Tilson Thomas and the best-in-the-U.S. San Francisco Symphony, the final ten minutes of "Der Abschied" have cinematic clarity. **TAS**

