big name is Claudio Abbado, whose later years are producing such a variety of outstanding music-making. Yet the vast majority of this has been in music from Mozart onwards: Abbado conducting Baroque repertoire is certainly unusual, although as the booklet notes remind us, he recorded the Brandenburg Concertos for LP with the orchestra of La Scala (issued by Dischi Ricordi) and he also performed them much more recently at the 2003 Lucerne Festival.

This new DVD is a treat. It presents a concert given in the Teatro Municipale at Reggio Emilia in April 2007. The instrumentalists – members of the Orchestra Mozart – are led by the outstanding Baroque violinist Giuliano Carmignola, and the other players here include Michala Petri on recorder. The whole ensemble (essentially a large chamber group, quite often playing one or two or a pair) is of stunning quality and boasts some superb period stylists. Abbado is happy to trust these players to deliver thrilling Brandenburges, and so they do – he actually does very little beyond gently coaxing them to give of their considerable best: several movements, including the whole of No, 6, are not conducted at all. The joyous spirit of everything about this concert is really uplifting: the camera shows us the players at full stretch and they are clearly enjoying every second – the two viola players in No. 6, for example, seem to radiate delight as well as playing with immense verve. Speeds throughout the six concertos are lively and the style is always historically informed, even though some of the instruments are modern. Baroque bows ensure superbly animated and energetic articulation in a movement like the finale of No. 3, which incidentally has a nifty harpsichord cadenza before the two chords that are all Bach wrote down of the slow movement. The harpsichord is played magnificently throughout by Ottavio Dantone, who is also the soloist in No. 5. Reinhold Friedrich is the sparkling trumpet player in No. 2.

This immensely enjoyable one-off occasion, led by one of the most distinguished conductors currently active, but in the most unobtrusive way, has very much the feeling of an evening of spontaneous chamber music presided over by a benign and inspiring coach. The concertos are played in the order 1, 3, 5, 6, 4, 2 (the last movement of No. 2 is encored). There is at least one other very good set of the Brandenburges on DVD (by the Freiburger Barockorchester), but don’t miss this lovely disc: I don’t know of another version of these concertos on film that provides quite such high levels of commitment, stylish virtuosity and pure pleasure. The sound is very clear (I used the default PCM stereo setting; the other options are Dolby Digital 5.1 and DTS 5.1) and the camerawork is sensitive. Recommended with great enthusiasm.

Nigel Simeone

**Orchestral**

I hadn’t come across Grazyna Baciewicz before, but she seems to have been one of the few female composers of her generation in Poland to have achieved recognition outside her country. Her Concerto for String Orchestra of 1948 may occasionally bring to mind Lutosławski and Szymanowski but there’s a spare, haunting lyrical impulse (particularly in the clouded skies that hover over the slow movement) which marks out a distinctive if slender voice, beautifully drawn out by the players here. Terje Bjorklund’s Carmina, originally written for the Chilingirian String Quartet, was specially transcribed for the larger forces of the Trondheim Soloists for this recording. It was apparently inspired by ‘The Pindar Odes which were written for winners of the Olympiad in ancient Greece’. However, despite some climactic passages (one or two reminiscent of phrases in Britten’s Simple Symphony) the music doesn’t strike me as particularly heroic; rather, it conveys a moving sense of emptiness, enough to put one in mind of Anita Brookner’s resonant phrase in Hotel du Lac … ‘vibrant with absence’.

Bartók’s Divertimento for Strings of 1939 is given a satisfyingly muscular performance (bar a few rough edges from the violins in the outbursts of the first movement), with its centre of gravity firmly located in the darkly ruminating central Adagio. The Trondheim Soloists have more of interest to say about Britten’s Simple Symphony, allowing melancholy overtones and a slight edge to creep into this normally sunny, untrodden work to gripping effect. The boisterous theme of the opening ‘Bourrée’ verges on the nervy, rather, it conveys a moving sense of emptiness, enough to put one in mind of Anita Brookner’s resonant phrase in Hotel du Lac … ‘vibrant with absence’.

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**Divertimenti**

**Bartók Divertimento for Strings, Sz113.**

**Baciewicz Concerto for String Orchestra.**

**Bjorklund Carmina.**

**Britten Simple Symphony, Op. 4.**

**Trondheim Soloists/Oyvind Gimse (violin).**

2L 2L505ABD (full price, one SACD, one Blu-ray Audio, 1 hour 9 minutes). Website www.2L.no.

Producer/Engineer Morten Lindberg, Engineer Hans Peter L’Orange. Date November 2007.

At first glance this programme appears to have a curious assemblage. Although the title of the recording is ‘Divertimenti’ only one of the pieces is actually so titled, and the bringing together of Britten (1913–76), Baciewicz (1909–69) and Bartók (1881–1945) is obvious only in that they all begin with a ‘B’. That as it may, once you begin to listen to the music all doubts evaporate. The Trondheim Soloists are a string orchestra who bring a very particular kind of sound to all they touch – cool crystalline transparency – and without sacrificing the individuality of the composers here they manage to make the transitions in style seem utterly natural, compelling even.

Part of the secret of the ‘Trondheim sound’ here is that the recording venue has been carefully chosen to suit the repertory – the luminous acoustic of Selbu Church in Norway. The enthusiastic and experimental team which runs the young 2L label have brought an ideal balance, tonal colour and spatial sense to the music-making, which it has made available to us in an array of high-definition formats. As a keen audiophile myself I was thrilled to have the option of mix-down (the only video image is a menu selection screen).

This is not the place to start discussing the relative merits of CD and SACD versus Blu-ray sound, but I will just say that the sonic results from the Blu-ray disc were electrifying. The sheer punch, dynamic range and sense of atmosphere and acoustic space were hard to credit coming from a simple Sony Blu-ray player, which, just a few days ago, had cost me a modest £300 – small wonder, given the sonic results from both the Blu-ray and DVD Blu-ray formats too). There could be exciting times ahead for affordable high-definition sound if more companies embrace the notion of Blu-ray Audio. Yet with the current credit crunch and a host of competing formats out there I’m not going to hold my breath. Intriguing though.

**Simon Heighes**

**London Philharmonic Orchestra**

**Festival Hall, London on December 8th, 2007.**

**Producer/Engineer Morten Lindberg, Engineer Hans Peter L’Orange. Date November 2007.**

**Website www.lpo.org.uk.**

**Comparisons:**

**Bax:**

BBC PO/Handley (Chandos) CHAN11225 (five discs)

**Rachmaninov:**

LSOPrevin (EMI Classic) 7 64530-2

(London Philharmonic Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä.

**LP0 0036 (medium price, 53 minutes). Website www.lpo.org.uk. Producer Andrew Walton. Engineer Phil Rowlands. Date Live performances at the Royal Festival Hall, London on December 8th, 2007.**

**London Philharmonic Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä.**

**Bax Tintagel.**

**Rachmaninov Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44.**

**London Philharmonic Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä.**

**LP0 0036 (medium price, 53 minutes). Website www.lpo.org.uk. Producer Andrew Walton. Engineer Phil Rowlands. Date Live performances at the Royal Festival Hall, London on December 8th, 2007.**

**London Philharmonic Orchestra**

**New Bax Tintagel.**

**Rachmaninov Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44.**

**London Philharmonic Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä.**

**LPO 0036 (medium price, 53 minutes). Website www.lpo.org.uk. Producer Andrew Walton. Engineer Phil Rowlands. Date Live performances at the Royal Festival Hall, London on December 8th, 2007.**

**Comparisons:**

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**Rachmaninov:**

LSOPrevin (EMI Classic) 7 64530-2

(1976, three discs)

National PO/Stokowski (EMI Classic) 5 66759-2 (1975)
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