



Playback

music & movies that matter

August 2008
Issue 11

33 MUSIC REVIEWS

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RANDY NEWMAN

Many Lives, Many Voices

Divertimenti
BRITTEN: *Simple Symphony*
BACEWICZ: Concerto for String Orchestra
BJØRKLUND: *Carmina*
BARTÓK: Divertimento for Strings



Genre: Classical
Players: Trondheim Soloists
Producers: Morten Lindberg; Hans Peter L'Orange, engineer
Label: 2L 2L50SABD
Format: Music-only Blu-ray disc and SACD
Key Tracks: Bacewicz:Vivo; Britten:"Frolicsome Finale"

PERFORMANCE ●●●●○
SOUND ●●●●●

Further Listening: Shostakovich: Chamber Symphony (Orbelian) (SACD);
 Bacewicz: String Quartet No. 4 (Szymanowski Quartet) (SACD)

PB says: *Divertimenti* represents a new breed of music software, an audio-only Blu-ray disc, which takes advantage of the high-resolution audio specifications of the new video format but forgoes video images and pictures, other than a menu to pick tracks and audio version. The sound is spectacular. Wonderful playing, too, from the crack Norwegian chamber orchestra. Here are well-known pieces by Britten and Bartók in addition to works by the underappreciated twentieth century Polish composer Grazyna Bacewicz and contemporary Norwegian Terje Bjørklund, whose *Carmina* is a soulful gem.



Trondheim Soloists

LISTENING GUIDE: From an obscure Norwegian label comes the first music-only Blu-ray disc. It's a development that could prove monumental to audiophiles. Unlike SACD, of little interest to the vast majority of non-classical music listeners, Blu-ray isn't a niche product. Best of all, the unchallenged DVD successor boasts specifications that allow it to serve as a high-end music carrier.

2L—Lindberg Lyd AS, founded by audio engineer Morten Lindberg—is a Norwegian concern operating since 1996. The company has provided technical services to other labels including Naxos, EMI, Hyperion, and Linn, and also produced its own CDs and SACDs. *Divertimenti* was recorded with DXD (Digital eXtreme Defini-

tion) at 32-bit/352.8 kHz, four times the data density of DSD. Using the DXD master file, 2L produced no fewer than eight versions of the program. On the Blu-ray disc are DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1, Dolby TrueHD 5.1, Linear PCM 5.1, and PCM stereo, all at 24-bit, 192 kHz resolution. There's also Dolby Digital Plus. And, presumably for comparison purposes, 2L includes a hybrid multichannel SACD that provides that format's standard trio of aural iterations.

The sound with every one of the high-resolution options is stunning—open and utterly grainless, with extraordinarily life-like instrumental signatures. The multichannel mix does, as the liner notes comment, “put the listener in the thick of the



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music rather than in a seat at one end of the hall.” This may not be a realistic perspective for anyone but an orchestral musician, but the experience is remarkably involving, bringing one into intimate contact with the structure and emotional core of the music. Surround sound partisans will love it; if it’s too much, you can always opt for a stereo version.) The DTS-HD Master Audio program sounded *marginally* clearer and more extended than the Dolby TrueHD. SACD was as good—though no better—than either.

The Trondheim Soloists are a versatile Norwegian chamber orchestra, and the very ensemble vocalist Anne Sophie Mutter chose to accompany her second recording of *The Four Seasons* a few years ago. For a conductorless group, they manifest remarkable unanimity of attack, tone production, and dynamic nuance; their readings have terrific thrust and dramatic shape.

The program includes two staples of the string orchestra repertoire, Benjamin Britten’s youthful and masterfully crafted *Simple Symphony*, played here with enormous panache, and Béla Bartók’s Divertimento for Strings, two fast movements brimming with the composer’s characteristic nervous energy flanking a quiet, troubled *Molto Adagio*. The three economical movements of the Polish violinist and composer Grazyna Bacewicz’s Concerto for String Orchestra were written in 1948 with an advanced tonal language. Her immediately engaging music offers rich, yet transparent string textures. Last is *Carmina*, a 13-minute composition by the living Norwegian composer Terje Bjørklund that will bring to mind for many Barber’s Adagio for Strings, with touches of minimalism thrown in.

All said, a mandatory acquisition for any high-res multichannel pioneer.
 —Andrew Quint